
REFERENDUM IN QUÉBEC



Because of the daily contacts we have with Québec Province, and because of the major and difficult choice actually placed before Québec society, I offer the following reflection on the subject of the referendum on the future of Québec and this, in solidarity with my fellow Québec bishops.

POSITION OF THE CANADIAN BISHOPS

At the time when Canada was celebrating its Confederation centennial, the Canadian bishops stated, in April, 1967: *"It is impossible to contest the right of the French-Canadian society of Québec to exist, to develop in every order of reality, to have civil and political institutions adapted to its genius and its particular needs, to the autonomy without which its existence, prosperity, and economic and cultural development would not be ensured."* Five years later, in April, 1972, the same bishops asserted that *"All political options respectful of the person and the human condition are free, both at the individual and collective levels. By their very nature, political options are contingent upon and never interpret the Gospel in an absolutely adequate and lasting way. As for us bishops, our aim is to serve the People of God wherever it is and within whatever political, economic, social, and cultural options it has chosen."*

POSITION OF THE QUÉBEC BISHOPS

The same availability and commitment are constantly stated by the Québec bishops: *"As bishops, we remain faithful to the position taken at former constitutional debates. We shall not indicate any particular preference for one or the other constitutional option. Neither one in fact seems to impose itself at the only level of evangelical values, neither one seems to be in radical contradiction with the fundamental requirements of personal and collective life. In itself, this acknowledgement is a call to a certain sense of relativism. As a matter of fact, no political regimen has an absolute character since it remains in the order of means and is ordered [to something else]: to persons and the common good. We therefore respect the legitimate autonomy of democratic institutions and especially the choice which the Québec population shall make. Once the choice has been made, we shall continue to live in solidarity with the people, thanks to our pastoral service."*

REQUIREMENTS FOR AN AUTHENTIC DEMOCRACY

"We cannot deny the people of Québec," the Québec bishops write, *"the responsibility of deciding its own future. Hence, we know that this people is constituted of a francophone majority, and it is from this group that the actual constitutional framework is questioned. Furthermore, several native communities have been inhabiting the Québec territory from time immemorial. By its history, its institutions and its culture, the anglophone community remains deeply rooted in our Québécois milieu. Finally, numerous ethno-cultural groups continue to grow among us, in the Montreal region. It is this entre Québec society that is invited to dialogue together, it behooves this community to decide on the future of Québec. According to evidence, it seems that this decision will be influenced by the growing diversity of the Québécois people, a people representing a great richness as well as a more demanding challenge for our collective life. The decision will also be marked by our recent history: the absence of Québec at the time of the patriation of the Constitution, the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, a new economic reality. It is common*

knowledge that according to the group one identifies with, these facts can be interpreted in appreciably different or divergent ways. One must also try to measure beforehand the practical consequences of the choices we shall make. How therefore do we let our debates clearly express the consequences of our decision?"

IMPORTANT ATTITUDES

The Québec bishops recall certain attitudes which we should firmly adhere to, in the heat of our debates: *"The opportunity is offered to us to respond to the call to tolerance, sent out, this year, by the United Nations. To our mind, tolerance is not limited to avoiding harm. It is also an authentic capacity to listen to the other, a sensitivity to the other's unique way of looking at reality. We cannot forget that our political choices are not always the fruit of strictly rational motives; there is usually mixed a part of intuition and a part of feeling that take up the entire person in the process. It is therefore not easy to correctly hear the arguments of those whose opinion differs from ours. Experience teaches us that the absence of dialogue leads to a representation of the other that gradually becomes a caricature. Such is the case, for example - in the present context - when the option for sovereignty is viewed as a simple turning in on oneself or as a rejection of others, and adherence to the federalist option is regarded as a reflex of fear."*

MASS MEDIA AND THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

The quality of dialogue depends on full information and honest presentation of facts. On this score, the mass media have a determining responsibility: *"In an area where sensitivities and passions are so quickly exacerbated, an exceptional sense of measure must be exercised. Healthy journalistic ethics joined to a true democratic sense will refuse to unreasonably stress a word that on the face of it has gone beyond its author's thought, or to concentrate on some unfortunate slip. What can we gain as a society by setting persons and groups against each other or, in the guise of persuasion, to falsify the presentation of facts? We would reap wounds that would have to be healed, one day."*

Preparing the Future

The following fact must be acknowledged, say the bishops of Québec: Whatever the outcome of the referendum, we will have to keep on rubbing shoulders, walk together, even establish new forms of partnership. Elementary wisdom therefore dictates that links be maintained between persons and communities. The collective reflection we now offer C the bishops continue C bears first and foremost on the constitution framework to be adopted. But we are also led to express our vision of tomorrow's Québec society. Our collective life witnesses to rather concrete gains and values that are sufficiently shared for us to draw a decidedly positive vision of the future. Many among us find within our Christian community a support in their commitments for the establishment of a better world. With so many men and women of good will, we let ourselves be inspired by a beatitude that has never lost its timeliness: "Happy are the peacemakers."¹ May this period prior to the referendum, which is marked by a growing search for justice and truth, peace and freedom, be most beneficial to all.

Have a good week!

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¹ Matthew 5:9