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## CAN A BISHOP BE INVOLVED IN SOCIAL AFFAIRS? (2)

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Among a bishop's responsibilities as pastor of a diocese, one of the most delicate concerns the promotion of social justice. "The Christian message integrates within man's very attitude towards God man's attitude towards his fellowmen; his response to God's love becomes effective only through love and service to others. Love of neighbour and justice are inseparable. Love is first and foremost the absolute requirement of justice, that is, recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour. If the Christian message of love and justice is not carried out on behalf of world justice, it will hardly appear credible to people today."

### THE CANADIAN BISHOPS

Throughout its history, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops have endeavoured, through difficulties and criticism, to remain faithful to this traditional Church teaching. Numerous pastoral messages expressed their concerns for real justice; one has only to recall the Labour Day Messages on sharing, on violence, and on social inequality. They wrote about *A Society To Rebuild* and *From Words to Deeds*. They showed prophetic audacity. They made important gestures: I note that in 1967 the bishops of Canada created the Catholic Organisation for Development and Peace. In the name of the Gospel which they want to promote unceasingly, they are often at the forefront of social questions in the defense of the most destitute.

### IN SOLIDARITY

"The Church is not the only one responsible for justice in the world; in this field, however, she has a specific and proper responsibility which is identified with her mission to be a witness to the world of the love and the justice found in the Christian message, a witness that she must carry out in her own Church institutions and in the lives of Christians.<sup>1</sup> Organised in 1943, the Canadian Conference of Bishops is composed of all the Catholic bishops of Canada; there are now about 125 bishops. It was for the sake of mutual help that such a conference was established, and it is there especially to help diocesan bishops live their episcopal mission as it is described in the Church documents. With this in mind, the Conference has twelve commissions, among which six are called national commissions and the other six are sector commissions. The national commissions are the commissions on social affairs, inter-rite canon law, relations with associations of priests, religious, and lay people, missions, ecumenism, and theology. The sector commissions - three English and three French - are those on social communications, Christian education, and liturgy.

### A FULL PROGRAMME

The National Commission on Social Affairs has a very full programme. Different questions are grouped under the following themes: links between faith and justice, justice in Canada, and justice in foreign countries. The Commission is ever concerned with make known and better promoting the Church's social teaching. In the recently published *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, there are important passages on the human community, on the communitarian character of the human vocation, on participation in social life, on respect of persons, on universal destiny and ownership of property, on economic and social justice, on love of the poor, and on justice and solidarity among nations.

## PRIORITY QUESTIONS

On several occasions during the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual meeting last October, the question arose regarding the Government of Canada's and several provincial governments' troubling revision and reform taking place in the areas of social and health programmes. The Bishops' Conference even charged the Episcopal Commission on Social Affairs with making this a priority question. My predecessor as chairman of this committee, Bishop Faber MacDonald of Grand Falls, Newfoundland, signed on January 9 a pastoral communiqué regarding the reform of social programmes: "Will the poor have to fear more than others the results of this reform of social programmes?" Last October, I took part with five other bishops in talks with the Edmonton Diocesan Commission on Social Justice regarding cuts in that province's health programmes. We know that several governments are in a bad financial position, just like several other community organisations, but we must more than ever remain most attentive to the lot of the most unprovided for, and set priorities regarding expenses to be made across the board, in government services. So, it is important that for many years to come health insurance be universally available, that it be accessible everywhere and cover health needs as a whole. We shall also have to pay attention to the fiscal question, as well as to the follow-up to be given to the important women's meeting that was held in China last September.

## PASTORAL ATTITUDES

The Commission on Social affairs seeks in no way to play the role of opposition party; it does not want to substitute for any other organisation. The only mission that the Commission has is to help bishops throughout the land discharge their pastoral social justice duties and remain vigilant regarding the way of living the Gospel in the midst of the world today. I ask the Lord Jesus who surrendered his life that all may have life in abundance, to bring to fruition all the tasks carried out for the welfare of our people.

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