
A SIGN OF HOPE FOR OUR WORLD (1)



On October 17, in Halifax, I made public the pastoral letter of the Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs. In the next few weeks I would like to share this important document with you; today I would ask you to identify as closely as possible the poor in your milieu: they do not look like those of yesteryear but they are plagued by the same misery.

AN URGENT TASK

« During this International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, the world community highlights in a special way the particular urgency of this task. We, the members of the Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs of the Canadian Catholic Bishops' Conference, invite people of good faith to reflect seriously on the causes and effects of poverty. Our invitation extends to the numerous persons in social movements and political organizations who are already struggling to end poverty. To Christian communities we also wish to suggest some avenues to explore in order to deepen our response to this challenge. The struggle to eradicate poverty constitutes, in our eyes, a sign of the times by which God calls us, as well as a sign of hope for our world. »

SERIOUS MOTIVES

« In the day of our episcopal ordination we made a commitment before the People of God to welcome with love and in the name of our Lord the poor and the displaced of the world and all those in need. This important mission is furthered by the poor themselves who through their cries for help, their hopes and their accomplishments, remind us of God's intention that the good things of the earth be shared by all humankind. It belongs to everyone to ensure that all are accorded here and now their just share. That is the challenge that must be faced together. By collaborating with those who have been so sorely tested by poverty, Canadians can discover new, more equitable solutions. Who better than the poor can teach our society, if only we have ears to hear? »

HOW TO RECOGNISE THE POOR TODAY

« According to the United Nations, in spite of unprecedented in this century, material poverty remains a critical problem. In southern countries, one person in three (in toto, about 1.3 billion people) lives in poverty, and more than 12.5 million children die each year from easily preventable diseases. Primary health care, basic education, safe drinking water and adequate nutrition are available to fewer than one billion human beings. The average income of the wealthiest 20 percent in the world is 150 times greater than that of the poorest fifth. Poverty, which is a complex phenomenon and the source of suffering, ultimately symbolises marginalisation. All that causes the marginalisation and exclusion of others, whether race, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, religion, or employment, can place people in a situation of poverty. Material poverty is not necessarily a permanent situation, nor is it intrinsically negative. It is not a personal problem of certain 'unworthy' individuals. Poverty is sometimes caused by environmental factors or by private or public corruption. Poverty can also be the result of illness, disability, or simply the lack of personal initiative. Most often, poverty appears as a phenomenon that can be acted upon. we can change such processes by making different societal choices. »

POVERTY IN CANADA

« Canadians are confronted with a deteriorating situation. At a time when the international community calls for action for the eradication of poverty, governments are pursuing three objectives: cutting social spending, reducing deficits, and paying off debts. But who raises their voice on behalf of the 4.8 million people (one out of every six Canadians in 1994) living in poverty? Do Canadians realise the human cost of sustaining an overall national poverty of 16.6 percent? There is no doubt that poverty must remain the top priority on the social policy agenda - and not only after the debt or other social ills have been addressed. The existence of poverty in Canada seems to contradict the fact that our country appears at the top of the United Nations Human Development Index. What is important to consider is that poverty strikes some Canadians harder than it does others - families headed by single-parent mothers and people living alone are more likely to be poor. Besides, one study estimated that as many as one in every three Canadians will experience poverty sometime during his or her working life. Our pastoral letter focuses on some of the groups throughout the country that have been most deeply affected by poverty: women, aboriginal people, displaced persons, children and young people in families. »

AN IMPORTANT YEAR

I hope that in the next few weeks there will arise in each parish groups concerned with social justice who will pursue or undertake a project or activity to make the local population aware of the necessity to eradicate poverty. Have a good week.

+ François Thibodeau

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Bishop of Edmundston

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