
BRINGING THE GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR



Jesus' mission, today, is the mission of all the baptised, the mission of the entire Church. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us; we have been anointed and set apart. The Lord sends us to bring good news to the poor, proclaim deliverance to prisoners, give sight to the blind, proclaim a year of liberation to the oppressed, and a year of favour from the Lord. We were given a very special mandate, a very special mission, one that would be impossible to carry out, without the power of the Holy Spirit.

BUT WHO ARE THE POOR IN 2005?

It is to them that we are sent first of all. They are not always easy to find, and there are several who are afraid to show their poverty. They have their own pride and dignity. Some are on social assistance, and we wonder how they can make ends meet with their small allowance, how they can feed and clothe themselves, how they can pay their rent, go from place to place, look after their personal needs and emergency situations. Needs are different. Not everyone has the same aptitudes or access to the same resources. Some are on unemployment, and others are paid the minimum salary. Some children do not always have breakfast or lunch. There are over one million poor children in Canada, 23,000 of them in New Brunswick.¹ Poverty among women has historically been higher than among men. This is due to the disadvantages women face in the work force, and their responsibilities as mothers. How can we reach out to these welfare recipients, low wage earners, the unemployed, and the poor?

GIVING THEM FISH, OR SHOWING THEM HOW TO FISH?

Most policies in Canada are founded on the premise that everyone must be given the same thing, that all be treated equally rather than fairly. Giving more would create more needs and greater dependence, while reducing aid would motivate people to work. "Poor people are not interested in helping themselves," we are often told, as if social welfare were a gold mine to them. It is not a privilege, to receive the help necessary to one's subsistence: it is a right. It is a right to life, right to living in dignity, free of certain constraints. Some myths and prejudices minimise the plight of the poor and keep us from identifying with them. I was once in a place where there were over 45,000 people, and generally speaking we were told that half of them were on welfare, which means that over 20,000 would have been receiving welfare allowances. I inquired at the social welfare office, and was told that 2,3000 welfare cheques were mailed out to that population. According to the Committee of 12, at Caraquet, "Prejudice attacks the reputation of others, their dignity, pride, self esteem, and personal integrity. It can hurt, smear, harm, and demolish. It keeps others from joining in, growing, and developing. We condemn because we do not understand. There are four antidotes to poverty: the capacity to affirm oneself, to subsist, to participate, and to organise as a group. What will ensure the autonomy of the poor are economic and social resources, personal ability, and combativeness." Must one give fish, or show how to fish? Very often, both will be needed: we must be aware of periods of transition. Showing how to fish is showing how to take oneself in hand through committed and organised mutual help, so that they be enabled to get the fish themselves. It is helping people find the resources, learn about and defend their rights. It is helping them pool their strengths and efforts.

MISSION OF LIBERATION

It is to the poor, to the poorest in our societies that Jesus brings good news, and he invites us to join him in this. At his first visit to the synagogue at Nazareth, he proclaimed: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery

¹Canadian National Council on Social Welfare statistic.

of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord.” Jesus was also sent to prisoners, the blind, the oppressed. We, too, are sent to them to bring good news. During Lent, this year, our hearts were open wide to our brothers and sisters in south-east Asia, the poorest of the poor. We must, however, show as much concern to the poor among us. Food banks have had serious problems responding to needs. I know that at Christmastime much generosity is shown to the poor among us. What more could we do to change the situation of the neediest, to bring them a little more hope? I would like that in each parish there be serious discussion on this. As long as this material poverty exists it is difficult to talk of other forms of poverty, whether spiritual or intellectual.

LIBERATOR OF THE OPPRESSED

Throughout history God is shown as liberator of the oppressed and defender of the poor. From us, He demands faith in him and justice for our neighbour. Only the person who is just to his fellow man truly knows God. In his action and his message, Christ indivisibly joined together man's relation to God and his relation to others. Christ lived his existence in this world in radical self-giving to God, for humankind. In his message he proclaimed the fatherhood of God, and the intervention of God's justice towards the needy and the oppressed. He showed solidarity with the least of his brothers and sisters, to the extent that he could say: "What you have done to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done to me." "The Church received from Christ the mission of preaching the Gospel message which includes the vocation of conversion from sin to love of the Father, universal fellowship and, through this, the requirement of justice for the world. That is why the Church has the right and the duty to proclaim justice at the social, national, and international levels, and to denounce situations of injustice when man's fundamental rights and salvation itself so require. The Church is not the only one responsible for justice in the world; here, however, she has a specific and proper responsibility which is part of her mission to witness to the world to the requirement of love and justice contained in the Christian message."²

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« From A Bishop's Journal » (597) (15 June 2005)

²Synod on justice.