



From A Bishop's Journal (765)

The Canadian General Elections (1)

I usually write a pastoral reflection on the topic of our elections whether municipal, provincial or federal, and I do this either on the eve or at the beginning of the campaign, so as to avoid any kind of undue pressure. This year I shall be writing two articles, keeping in mind – in the words of Pope John Paul II – a “preferential option for the poorest in our society.”

A Scandalous Poverty

In these times of globalization, what is most striking is the growing chasm between rich and poor, not only North and South, but in our own country. The structures established or maintained by our government people, whether the Ruling Party or the Opposition, have made it such that for thirty years or so, the poor have been getting poorer, and the rich richer. In their message of December 1, 1977 – *A Society To Be transformed* – their 1984 document, *Ethical Choices and Political Challenges: Ethical Reflections on the Future of Canada's Socio-Economic Order*, and the 1996 pastoral letter, *The Struggle against Poverty: A Sign of hope in Our World*, the Canadian Bishops have ceaselessly drawn the attention of all Canadians to the living conditions of the poor: women, children, native people, and immigrants. Some twelve years ago all the political parties had committed themselves to eliminate poverty among our children. However, we sadly realise today that the situation has just deteriorated, and this is not due to the people who cannot manage their budgets or who do not look for work. Such anti-poverty prejudices cannot hold when we look at the national economy, the rise in prices, the elimination of judicial and cultural programmes, and the precariousness of the 10 to 30 and 55 to 65 year-olds in finding work. Even despite the best intentions, the weekly grocery box is getting smaller and smaller and more and more expensive. When we compare the minimum wage in different provinces with the salaries of some of our professional elite, we see the unjustifiably scandalous imbalance and this, despite arguments to the contrary. The remarks of the Acadian folk heroine *La Sagouine* (“The Washerwoman”) are not to be dismissed lightly: despite different times and places, “there are a lot of people who enrich themselves, while we poor devils don't have enough to live on.” There are beautiful speeches on the state of our country, but is what is happening in our families and regions sufficiently addressed in our parliaments? This is not the business of only one member of parliament: it must be the golden rule of every party, what a late prime minister called the equality of chances for everyone.

An Affront

Poverty is an affront to our Creator whose desire was that we have life, and life to the full. The very first pages of the Bible remind us that in the people of God no one was to be poor. It is not normal that in a town of fewer than twenty thousand, more than two hundred people have to go to the soup kitchen on a daily basis. It is not normal that, in order to make ends meet, especially at month's end, people revert to stealing, cheating, smuggling, and even prostitution. If poverty is an affront to our God and to many of our fellow-citizens, it can cause injustice and violence. Since September 11, 2001, we have heard many news reports of what is happening on our streets, towns, and cities. Fighting criminality often consists in having the political courage to legislate regarding the living and working conditions of the poorest among us: abused children and women, exploited workers on minimum wages, immigrants kept on the margin of society, and employees terminated because of mill closures or lockouts. A preferential option for the poor should be at the source of every political programme, and be supported by appropriate legislation. Pious wishes are not enough to those "who hunger and thirst for justice." Behind the many violent demonstrations we see whenever the leaders of the G-8 meet, there are not only die-hard "activists," there are also people of good will who are looking for "a new earth and a new society."

"Respect Your Commitments"

In preparation for the G-8 Summit that took place July 7 to 9, 2008, in Japan, nine presidents of bishops conferences from those countries that form the G-8 addressed a letter titled to the heads of states and governments concerned. "The global food crisis, which disproportionately devastates poor communities, and the terrible toll of HIV-AIDS, malaria and other diseases, make concerted action even more urgent. We ask you to consider concrete proposals that mitigate the impact of the world food crisis on poor communities, increase health and education spending, and move towards just world trade policies that respect the dignity of the human person in their working life. To ensure long-term success of these measures, the poor must be empowered to be drivers of their own development." The Bishops continued: "As Catholic Bishops, we have a special concern for the impact of climate change on the poor. The poor, who have contributed least to the human activities that aggravate global climate change, are likely to experience a disproportionate share of its harmful effects, including potential conflicts, escalating energy costs, and health problems." God gave us the earth and all its riches, and it belongs to us to manage so that all get their fair share. Behind every private property there is a social "mortgage" that obliges us to be concerned with the collective well-being.

Our Daily Bread

In the last few decades, what were in the Maritimes the sources of our greatest revenue: woods, fishing, and agriculture, have become very precarious commodities. The people remember the great difficulties in the forest, fishing, and even the potato industries. All these problems forced entire families to leave their regions and to search elsewhere for a new land to inhabit. Some even called these departures for the South or West mini deportations. These deportations are costly for those who stay behind as they are

for those who are displaced, once certain illusions have passed. The forced abandonment of our forests and farm lands only impoverish our respective milieus. The exodus of youth and mature people is catastrophic to our milieus and work. Everyone should be able to find at home what is necessary for their livelihood.

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