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## CAN A BISHOP BE INVOLVED IN SOCIAL AFFAIRS?

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Last October, when I was asked to join the National Episcopal Commission on Social Affairs and to be its chairman, a number of memories came to mind. I recalled how my predecessors in this Commission had been spoken to harshly regarding this question. "Bishops should not meddle in economic affairs; a bishop shouldn't deal with economic questions; bishops have enough work looking after the religious affairs of their dioceses; bishops should begin by looking after the evangelisation of their people, etc." It was only a question of time before I myself would be the object of these remarks that I heard especially in 1983 when the Social Affairs Commission published a pastoral document on economic ethics. Following fast on the heels of a first letter to the federal government regarding firearms control legislation, I received a few letters condemning participation of the bishops in the debate. I must add that during the fifteen years I occupied an analogous position as director of pastoral social ministry for the diocese of Québec, similar words were addressed to me.

### THE CHURCH IN THE MIDST OF THE WORLD

Still, in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, published thirty years ago by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, we can read the following, in the first paragraph: *"The joy and hope, the grief and anguish, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men, of men who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all men. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history."*

### WOULD YOU...?

At the moment of his episcopal ordination, the bishop-elect is asked whether he wants to proclaim the Gospel of Christ faithfully and constantly, whether he wants to maintain the deposit of faith entire and incorrupt, whether he is resolved to build up the Church as the body of Christ, whether he is resolved as a devoted father to sustain the people of God, and whether he is resolved to show kindness and compassion, in the name of the Lord, to the poor and to strangers and to all who are in need... It is the Church's most ancient rule that in the presence of the people he who is to be made bishop commit himself to uphold the faith and acquit himself of the duties of his charge.

### AN IMPORTANT DIRECTORY

In the *Directory for Bishops in Their Pastoral Ministry*, several chapters are dedicated to the duties of a bishop both within the universal Church and in his diocesan Church. Master within the faith community, pontiff of a worshipping community, father and pastor in the hierarchical community, he is head of the community of love. As such, he must exercise the ministry of love and see to the formation to charity. If he must promote works of charity and of assistance, he must equally promote social justice. *"The fight for justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as being a constitutive facet of proclaiming the Gospel which is the Church's mission for the redemption of humankind and its liberation from every oppressive situation."*

*"The bishop has a special awareness of his duty to form the Church confided to his care to a sense of national and international social justice. The faithful's daily life is like an evangelical leaven at home, at school, at work, in social and civil life, and the specific contribution of Christians to the cause of justice is found in these areas. To this is added the expectations and meanings they can bring to the task. Education must agree with the evangelical principles of personal and social morality expressed in a living Christian witness. The bishop shall therefore hold in high regard, promote, and, if need be, develop economic and social works and institutions, and he shall sincerely collaborate with like public or private already-existing institutions whose aims are social justice, a just distribution of the use and possession of goods, through study and social action, through workers' associations, economic and financial initiatives, etc. All of these make up an immense field of devotedness where lay people are invited to exercise charity by working at justice in solidarity with all people. In his pastoral charity, the bishop, with his clergy, is to make his presence felt by tirelessly inspiring, supporting, and sponsoring his brothers... Keeping in mind the religious and moral character of his social role, he shall see that his actions do not go or seem to go beyond these limits."*

#### **AN AUTHENTIC INSPIRATION**

*"The bishop's and the Christian community's total active charity must shine with integrity, sincerity, and greatness of soul. In this way God's gracious love for man will break forth, the love of God who makes his sun shine on the good and the bad and rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. All works of piety, assistance, and apostolate must shine with true charity; this is the best argument to incite the hearts to glorify our Father in heaven. For this reason, the bishop agrees to join the forces of his diocese with those of others, especially those of our separated Christian brethren, in a spirit of sound ecumenism. From what I have just quoted, it is clear that not only must the bishop be involved in social affairs, he must do so because of his pastoral charge. A later article will point out some ways of doing so. Have a good week!*

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