
A SIGN OF HOPE FOR OUR WORLD (2)



As chairman of the National Episcopal Commission on Social Affairs, I published on October 17 a pastoral letter of the Canadian bishops on the Eradication of Poverty. In order to take on or pursue this struggle, we must identify and recognise the poor in our midst. Our commission did not draw up a complete list of these impoverished people but it calls on all to look more closely into the situation of women, of the aboriginal people, of uprooted people, and of families.

WOMEN

« The National Welfare Council reports that poverty rates for families led by single-parent mothers were incredibly high. The group with the highest poverty rate was single-parent mothers younger than 65 who have children under 8 years of age. Further, in all age groups the poverty rates for women were higher than the rates for men. These figures help explain why, in terms of gender equality, Canada's rating has dropped. While no society treats its women as well as its men, Canadians cannot be complacent in the face of the country's performance. »

« As the Québec Bishops have pointed out, solving the problem of poverty among women is the key to eliminating poverty in Canada. Yet, in almost every country, according to the Fourth World Conference on Women, women work longer hours than men. Over 68 percent of the productive work of women - about \$11 billion - is not tabulated in any system of national accounts. This huge amount represents the non-monetised, "invisible" work of women. Much of women's unremunerated work has great societal value, since it involves caring for and educating the young, as well as preparing meals and maintaining the home. as long as the contribution of women to society is not truly appreciated, such inequality will not be overcome. »

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

« The treatment Canadians have accorded the Original Peoples of this land is one of the most painful experiences in our history. Whereas the registered Indian population of 607 bands is only percent of Canada's population, this group is young and growing at a rate twice that of the population in general. The infant mortality rate is double that of the Canadian population, the unemployment rate is almost triple, and income is less than half. Their life expectancy is almost a decade below that of the rest of the population, while suicide rates are nearly triple. The situation of other groups of aboriginals is also markedly worse than that of the majority of Canadians. »

« The Christian Churches remain committed to working with the aboriginal people in their struggle to overcome the difficulties that still encumber many native communities - such as the loss of land and culture, development on aboriginal lands without their consent, as well as the challenges confronting the growing number of aboriginal people who move to urban areas. »

UPROOTED PERSONS

« Throughout the globe, one in 200 people is a refugee or displaced person. This represents a ninefold increase since 1970. There are now 19.5 million refugees and 30 million internally displaced people worldwide. The loss of human dignity endured by uprooted persons means that many have first-hand experience with profound poverty. »

« Canada has prided itself on being a country historically open to immigrants. Yet, with our present system, it is much easier for a wealthy entrepreneur to enter the country than for others who are struggling to arrive as a means for their families to survive. Although immigrants and refugees bring great economic, social, and cultural richness to Canada, they make incredible sacrifices to arrive and get established here. It is usually a long, hard struggle before they are accepted as full-fledged citizens. The difficulties in adaptation may help explain why the poverty rate for all families headed by immigrants was higher than the comparable rate for families headed by people born in Canada. Poverty levels are "relatively low" for immigrant families who have been established in Canada for a longer period, as opposed to new arrivals. »

FAMILIES

« Catholic social teaching in this century has staunchly defended the economic rights of families as absolutely necessary for the foundation of a just social order. If we want to support families into the third millennium, we must energetically continue to defend and safeguard these fundamental rights. The various rounds of cuts to social programmes that are taking place at both the national and provincial levels across Canada impact directly on parents and therefore on their children. Escalating economic need forces both parents to work longer in order to satisfy their family's basic needs. They then find themselves torn between their responsibilities as spouses, parents and educators and the increasingly onerous demands to be more profitable, more efficient, and more productive in the workplace. Parents find it enormously difficult to balance their home and work responsibilities. It is also clear that the prevailing economic climate, particularly with the cuts to social programmes, has been especially hard on women. »

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.

Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop's Journal » (145) (30 October 1996)