
PASTORAL PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS



From July 1 to July 4 I had the honour of taking part in Rome in the first World Congress on the Pastoral Promotion of Human Rights, and I want to share this experience with you so that we may always remain most attentive to being respectful for the dignity of every human being.

PROMINENT POINTS

Upon the invitation of the then-Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Cardinal Roger Etcheagaray, the Executive of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops asked me, in my capacity as chairman of the Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs, and Mr. Joe Gunn, co-director of the Social Affairs Office, to attend this important meeting. What follows is a short report of some of the salient features of the event, as well as a listing of some follow-up activities that the CCCB might well be asked to consider, in the future.

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The World Congress was indeed worthy of the name since over 200 representatives from bishops' conferences around the globe attended. The particular content of the meeting rested on the fact that December 10, 1998 will mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted for the United Nations by Canadian John Humphries. All episcopal conferences were asked to reply to a questionnaire sent to them from the Pontifical Council regarding their activities relating to the defense and promotion of human rights, part of the evangelizing mission of the Church to which Pope John Paul II has attached great importance. The Social Affairs Commission of the CCCB, which prepared the Canadian response, looks forward to the publication of the summary of the worldwide Church's efforts in this ministry.

AN EX-PRISONER CHAIRMAN

The Congress was chaired by The Most Reverend Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuân, the recently appointed President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. If any more constant and real reminder of the need for vigilance of human rights was necessary, we would have had only to think of the 13 years that the Archbishop himself spent in Vietnamese prisons. Cardinal Etcheagaray opened the Congress by stressing that the pastoral ministry for the promotion of human rights is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel by our Church that acts as Good Shepherd and Good Samaritan, *Mater et Magistra*, recalling two recently deceased bishops whom he knew personally, the Cardinal mentioned the testimony of Bishops John Joseph of Pakistan and Juan Girardi of Guatemala, who by the gift of their lives defended the defenders of human rights.

DEVASTATING TESTIMONY

During the next two days, delegates were presented with panel discussions on the human rights situations of all regions of the planet. Highlights of the Congress were the testimony we heard from speakers such as

The Most Reverend Fanjo Komarica, Bishop of Banja Luka in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ronalth Ochaeta, Director of the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, as well as speakers from the Justice and Peace Commissions of the Korean and South African Episcopal Conferences. Besides, experts from internationally-renowned human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, the International Red Cross Committee, and the International Federation of the Action of Christians Against Torture, addressed the meeting.

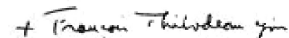
CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

I myself was asked to briefly present a short report to the plenary session, on the present situation of human rights in our own country. I referred to the Canadian bishops' ongoing concern for the situation of poverty throughout the land. Many delegates were surprised to hear that Canada, as the leading country in the U.N.'s Human Development Index for the last three years, still reports an overall poverty rate of 17 % and a child poverty rate of over 20 %. My brief intervention noted that the Canadian bishops are concerned about poverty being clustered around social groupings such as aboriginal peoples, newly-arrived immigrants, and single mothers in Canada. As signs of hope which address situations which can become violations of economic rights, I mentioned the World March of Women in the Year 2000, which is being organized from Montreal, as well as several Jubilee initiatives that the Commission has supported, such as the campaign against sweatshop working conditions, both in Canada and abroad.

"UNIVERSAL AND INDIVISIBLE"

Outside the plenary sessions the participants were divided into workshops on specific themes, during one afternoon. In these workshops the delegates discussed issues ranging from aboriginal rights, economic and social rights in an era of globalization, religious liberty, the dignity of unborn life, and genetic research, to the exploitation of children, the rights of the family, and the right of asylum. No matter what topic, however, the "universal and indivisible character" of human rights informed every discussion, echoing in this way the U.N. Conference on Human Rights that took place in Vienna, five years ago.

Have a good week!



+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop's Journal » (240) (26 August 1998)