
OUR HUMAN RIGHTS RESPONSIBILITIES



On December 10, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was a Canadian by the name of John Humphries who drafted the text. Following the long and murderous war years, this Declaration gave the world a sign of hope. While it is important to note the fiftieth anniversary of this declaration, it is also important to look at what we have done with these human rights, since then. Today I would like to point out the importance of education in human rights.

"PACEM IN TERRIS"

In his memorable encyclical *Pacem in terris*, published April 11, 1963, just a few weeks before his death, Pope John XXIII considered the Declaration of Human Rights a sign of the times. *"As man becomes aware of his rights, there arises in him an awareness of corresponding obligations; his own rights are before all expressions of the worth of his dignity, and for others there arises the obligation of recognising and respecting these rights."*

LIKE EVERYONE ELSE!

The link between "rights and duties" is inseparable. I rejoice that on the National Day of the Child, on November 20, this reality was promoted under the title *"Children Have Many Rights and Duties... Like Everyone Else!"* Hence, *"Children have the right to be taken seriously, and... the duty of listening to others; children have a right to good health services, and... the duty of taking care of themselves; children have the right to a good education, and... the duty to respect their teachers; children have the right to be loved and protected from harm, and... the duty to love and look after others; children have the right of association whatever their capacities, and... the duty to respect others, even if they are different; children have the right to be proud of their heritage and beliefs, and... the duty of respecting the culture and beliefs of others; children have the right to a peaceful and comfortable home, and... the duty of keeping it clean and tidy; children have the right to be well fed, and... the duty not to waste food; children have the right to a healthy environment, and... the duty of not polluting it."* For us Christians, the basis for such mutuality is the teaching of Jesus to *"Love your neighbour as yourself."*

SCHOOLS OF PEACE

On a first visit to St. Paul School in Edmundston, I was equally surprised at the importance given there to human rights, especially their desire of being a school of peace. All the children were made aware of the fact that at their own level peacemaking was their responsibility. And there were many posters with messages like, *Let us be responsible and join hands together for a better school; Putting my toys away is a responsibility; I am being responsible, when I help and share; I am responsible, when I don't throw my trash on the floor; Peace is our responsibility; Peacemaking is first of all respecting one another; I learn responsibility when I follow the rule in school and at home; I respect others when I speak kindly to them.* I could keep on, but these examples are sufficient to show that it is possible to educate in human rights from the very first years of school. I am convinced

of this, that each family and every school can and must be the first teachers in teaching respect of human rights. The *Jeunesse du monde* [Youth of the World] group adopted the above objectives in the name of Jesus and the Gospel, in its work of creating fellowship, non-discrimination, and non-violence among youth, and respect for the environment.

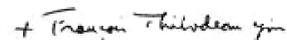
SOCIAL TEACHING

In the midst of the needs and demands of an ever-changing world, human rights occupy a very special place. According to Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, the president of the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, and whom I had the pleasure of meeting last July, *"The Church's social teaching is animated by respect for the human being as created by God in His image; it is a tall tree where we find more and more branches, but whose roots are set deep in the mystery of humankind."* And he added that *"the teachings of the popes have greatly contributed to the enrichment of human conscience in the awareness of its rights and to strengthening it in its resolve to defend them. To many, the thought and action of John Paul II seem to be identified with the defense and promotion of human rights."*

FREE AND EQUAL

May we discover the dignity and the greatness of every human being, child, woman, and man, during this anniversary year. During the holidays that are fast approaching, may we often remember that each one of our brothers and sisters has a right to a truly human life, to education, freedom, work, to a level of life adequate for the maintenance of health and the well-being of oneself and one's family, especially regarding food, clothing, housing, medical care and social services when needed, regarding also respect for one's privacy, truth, respect of one's reputation, due process, rest, and leisure. "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are gifted with reason and conscience, and they must act towards one another in a spirit of fellowship." [Article 1 of the *Declaration*]

Have a good week!



+ François Thibodeau

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