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## I SUPPORT THE WOMEN'S WORLD MARCH

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Today, March 8, 2000 I lend my wholehearted support and am in solidarity with the women of the world in officially promoting the Women's World March for the elimination of violence and injustice done to them. Besides, I urge our people to support this vast undertaking as one of the major events of this Jubilee Year 2000.

### WORLD MARCH

Following the historical Québec Women's March in 1995 and the Canadian March in 1996 - also called the "Bread and Roses March" - several participants of the United Nations Women's Conference in Beijing were challenged by such demonstrations. Hundred of delegates from over 60 countries then met in Québec City to plan a world-wide march which would begin on March 8 of the year 2000 to end at the United Nations October 17, 2000, World Day for the Elimination of Poverty. Last November, there were more than 3000 groups preparing for this, in over 140 countries!

### GOALS OF THE MARCH

The World March is an important time of solidarity and of gathering of the vital forces of social change. What is being claimed is mostly centred on the struggle against poverty and violence. When I was chairman of the Canadian Bishops' Committee for Social Affairs I was constantly challenged, both as a citizen and a bishop. In the pastoral message called *The Struggle against Poverty, A Sign of Hope to the World*, which I signed along with my brother bishops on October 17, 1996, I pointed out how inequality between men and women leads to greater poverty for women, especially single mothers. The under-valuing of domestic work contributes to this impoverishment of women.

### INVISIBLE WORK

The fourth World Conference on Women showed that women work longer hours than men. Hence, over 68% of the worldwide production value of women, estimated at eleven billion dollars, appears in no national accounting system worldwide. These eleven billion dollars are the sum of the "invisible" and unpaid work of women. Still, a vast amount of women's work has very high social value: it comprises, among others, the education of children, meal preparation, and housekeeping. As long as we do not truly appreciate the contribution of women to the welfare of our society, this inequality will remain insurmountable.

### UNBELIEVABLE RATE OF POVERTY

In Canada, in all age groups the rate of poverty is higher among women than men. According to the National Welfare Council, the poverty rate is unbelievably high among women heads of families. The group having the highest rate of poverty is that of single-parent families. The Steering Committee on the Status of Women in New Brunswick reported that in 1996 women working full time earn only 64 % of men's salaries. According to the New Brunswick Committee on the Women's March, the weak economic power of women has negative

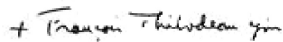
consequences on society in general: a gap in the general revenue, a disparity of pension, the feminisation of poverty, increase of dependency on social programmes, increase in health problems among women, and reduction of the general economic prosperity.

### **STRUGGLE AGAINST VIOLENCE**

According to this committee, the situation of women in New Brunswick is similar to that of their sisters throughout the country. The New Brunswick Court points out that it examined 509 cases of women victims of assaults in 1996. Safe houses for battered women are, alas, still filled to capacity, and youth violence is more and more on the rise. Of 800 New Brunswick adolescents answering a survey, 22 % stated having been victims of psychological or physical abuse while on dates; 19 % state that they were victims of date rape. Half the Canadian women have been the victims of violence at least once since the age of 18. In 1997, victims of family violence represented 17 % of all cases of violence reported by 179 police stations in Canada. Girls represented 79 % of family sexual violence and 55 % of physical violence. Between 1978 and 1997, 1485 women were victims of murder by their spouses.

### **CHALLENGING SITUATIONS**

How can we not be challenged by these cries against injustice and poverty? The Jubilee Year 2000 induces us to show concern for the concrete situation of all our brothers and sisters; I am certain that several among you are taking to heart this *March for Bread and Roses 2000*. As we think about the struggles engaged in our milieus by these women of honour, heart, and faith, we are in solidarity with them these next seven months, as we join in mind and heart with the thousands of women who will take to the streets as pilgrims of peace, justice, and non-violence. With you I heed the voice of Jesus, "Rise up, you the non-violent! Rise up, you who thirst for justice! Rise up, you who suffer from poverty: you are the beloved of God!" I wish you all a good International Women's Day, this March 8<sup>th</sup>. Have a fruitful march, this Jubilee year!



+ François Thibodeau  
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