
WHAT DO WE RETAIN FROM THE SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS?



For months on end we have been hearing about the Summit of the Americas. Will all that remain be the sensational of the occasion? The security measures? The parallel People's Summit? The fantastic cost involved? The intervention of the Archbishop of Québec? The Québec-Ottawa disagreements? Will we learn more about the globalization phenomenon? Will we be able to make connections with the Church's social doctrine? Will we learn how to situate ourselves as Christians, at the heart of what is at stake? I would like to offer you a few points for reflection based on the Declaration of the Canadian Bishops, Archbishop Couture's press conference, and observations made by Mrs. Françoise O'Leary.

A STRANGE SILENCE

The media have made much of the Summit of the Americas by stressing the sensationalist aspect of security measures taken, and speculating on possible troubles, while the essential aspect of the Summit was hardly mentioned, a reflection of the silence around the negotiations regarding the creation of the Free Trade Zone of the Americas (FTZA). In Québec, the aim of the 34 heads of state of the American continent (Cuba being excluded from the Summit) was to take stock of negotiations in progress. Many questions remain: the disparity between countries, dominance of the economy over every other consideration, the state of democracy, etc., all being issues within the shadow of globalization. A parallel summit was held – the People's Summit – by many trade unions and people's grassroots organisations to make their voices heard and to suggest alternatives, at nine forums on as many topics relating to continental consolidation.

GLOBALIZATION

Percy Barnevik, president of the ABB industrial group gives a surprisingly blunt definition of globalization: « I would define globalization as the freedom for my group to invest where it pleases, when it pleases, in order to produce what it wants, by getting supplies and selling wherever it wants, supporting as few constraints as possible regarding workers' rights and social conventions. » While the definition is of the utmost clarity, it leaves one wondering about the place of respect for the common good and the good of our planet.

THE CHURCH IN THE AMERICAS

It is surprising to learn that in Mexico, less than two years ago, the Pope signed a summary document on the mission of the Church in the Americas, several points of which dealt with issues raised by the question of globalization. In other words, the document on the Church in the Americas deals in a number of sections with the socio-economic conditions which weigh heavily on the disenfranchised of North and South America. Let me name the titles of only a few paragraphs in the document: growing respect for human rights, growing urbanization, corruption, ecological concern, the culture of death and a society dominated by the powerful, discrimination against indigenous peoples and Americans of African descent, the phenomenon of globalization, the burden of external debt, the drug problem, the arms race, social sins, and the question of immigrants.

A GREATER AWARENESS

These are serious issues on which the Québec Summit can raise our awareness. The Canadian Bishops' Conference, which had an active role in organising the Synod for the Americas, had to have a certain visibility of its own at the Summit. This was done by representing those concerns which it holds in common with the continent's other bishops' conferences. Its message is based on the document called « The Church in America » and on an open letter called « Let No One Be Excluded! », recently addressed to the Canadian members of Parliament by the Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs.

A POINT OF NO RETURN

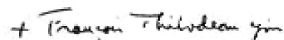
As a simple socio-economic fact of life, globalization is a millennium turning-point, just as industrialization characterised the preceding century: both result from technical "progress" and productivity. However, while we have not yet finished dealing with the excesses of economic liberalism which reigned over the development of major industry, contemporary society – especially in America – is confronted by neo-liberalism, an economic concept which considers profit and the law of supply and demand as absolute parameters, to the detriment of the dignity of and respect due to people and nations. According to the neo-liberal view, everything is merchandise, not only capital and the material goods it produces, but also those vital necessities such as work, health, education, quality of the environment, even drinking water. In a society competitive in the extreme, where commercial warfare ranks above the will to create common riches, the exclusion of the weak is inevitable, whether these people be poorer citizens within the country or poorer nations of the continents.

IS A SHARING OF RICHES EXCLUDED?

In such a context we can rightfully doubt the so-called automatic gains to affect the poor, which the spread of free trade to all the Americas would trigger. Experience has showed us that NAFTA has certainly contributed to economic increase, but it has not succeeded in spreading the wealth. We wonder whether, in the actual multilateral negotiations, the powerful lobby of the great transnational North American companies are not in the process of drowning out the real power of intervention of governments charged with the welfare of their people.

ECOLOGICAL DISASTER

In the last part of their Declaration the Canadian bishops point out several consequences of too great an open market on the real equality of women, protection of the environment, the burden of international debt of poor countries, and respect for human rights. The anguished questioning of the bishops of Central and South America and the Caribbean countries challenges their governments and ours not to surrender their responsibilities before the ecological disaster brought about by the out-of-control quest for immediate profit by industries of all kinds. Continental economical integration would be better served if the agreements seriously guaranteed economic fairness, increased protection for the environment, and equal opportunities for all. This would then be the globalization of solidarity.



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