



From A Bishop's Journal (745)

Justice for Men and Women

The first song I composed was back in the 1970s, an adaptation of a text of St. Basil the Great: “The bread that you store away belongs to the starving, the riches you hoard belong to the destitute, the things that you waste are the needy’s, the coat that you put away belongs to the naked man; liberate the oppressed and give speech to the voiceless. Do works of justice and peace. Justice to man and woman, justice to the peoples of the earth, voice of God, a cry of the heart. Justice to man and woman.” This song is sung by Monique Poirier and Mélanie Leblanc, on my CD “Artisan de Paix,” which appeared in December 2007.

From Word to Action

At the Edmundston Synod (1987-1990), the plenary meeting voted to establish a diocesan office of social affairs in order to respond to new social situations of poverty and injustice. The 2006 Pastoral Orientation Congress noted the urgency of the matter: The Church of Edmundston must establish a diocesan committee for social affairs. Without justifying the delay in implementing this recommendation, I must say that the creation of pastoral zones and pastoral units required more time and energy than we had at first thought, but it was especially the application of the six levels of parish- and family-based catechetics and the establishment of youth ministry that required greater energy and time at all levels, and this, without forgetting the diocesan financial campaign. However, this does not mean that nothing was done in social ministry, during this time: the food banks in our diocese have been very active, volunteer associations have been caring for single mothers, battered women, the handicapped, the unemployed, the homeless, etc. An eventual social ministry committee is not meant to replace already-existing organisations; rather, it is meant to raise the awareness of our Christian communities to new social situations, and especially to give to our region people committed to their faith and who can respond to the dramatic situations experienced here and elsewhere. Our diocese actually has twelve pastoral units that group together our thirty-two parishes: if we had one or two in each pastoral team to more actively attend to the poor and the impoverished, our Christian communities would be all the more energised by justice and charity towards our people and those elsewhere.

Let the Gospel of Peace Break Out!

In the last book I published last December I spoke of the “ministry of human rights,” a ministry that compels us to look closely at how the basic rights of every individual are respected, in our milieu: the right to life, right to employment, right to housing, to food, freedom to move around, etc. I am certain that this first consideration will lead us to solidarity in finding the most appropriate solutions. When in September 1971 Cardinal Maurice Roy of Québec asked me to open the first pastoral ministry office in Canada, the task was colossal: nearly all organisations were in the process of “de-confessionalising”: trade unions, social services, hospitals [until then, all of these were “Catholic”]. New ties had to be forged with these groups that heretofore had had their own chaplains and exhibited strong beliefs. The [Québec] Law 26 on social assistance, which replaced “direct aid” to the poorest, was passed: from now on, beneficiaries of social assistance would nominally have easier access to the different agencies... but this was fooling oneself. Law 65 modified the different structures in health care and created local community services, etc. What would be the link with the many local groups that were springing up everywhere, those concerned with unemployment, tenants, the homeless? Study-action groups were formed, to find concrete solutions. Religious sisters and brothers joined together to found the Maison de Lauberivière for the homeless. Cardinal Roy told us that what caused him the greatest concern was not our many and varied initiatives, but what we had not yet dared start! This was giving us a broad field of action!

A Sound Piece of Advice

In his remarkable encyclical on peace, Pope John XXIII expresses this deep conviction: “[I]f they are to imbue civilization with right ideals and Christian principles, it is not enough to be illumined by the light of faith and to be fired with enthusiasm for a cause; they must involve themselves in the work of these institutions, and strive to influence them effectively from within. But in a culture and civilization like our own, which is so remarkable for its scientific knowledge and its technical discoveries... yet even this must be reckoned insufficient to bring the relationships of daily life into conformity with a more human standard, based, as it must be, on truth, tempered by justice, motivated by mutual love, and holding fast to the practice of freedom.” This is an entire life’s programme, a global plan for an active and vigilant social pastoral ministry.

Not Everything is Solved

In creating a diocesan social justice department, we do not need to set up twenty-five different committees, but rather to help in developing similar groups and creating links between the different Christian communities. This is what Pope Benedict XVI urges us to do: “It is not our proper role to lead the political struggle for a just society. However, the Church cannot and may not stand aside social justice issues. The Church must get involved through rational discussion, and it must kindle the spiritual forces without which justice, which also necessitates self-denial, can neither be held nor developed.”

Good Seeds

Our ancestors were very sensitive to justice issues, and our countrymen are no different. We must be vigilant. As the Prophet Micah said: "Do right and love goodness, and walk humbly with your God." And Jesus himself says: "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice; they shall be satisfied."

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