

REPORT OF THE
EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS
2007-2008

The role of the Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs is to assist the Bishops in proclaiming the Gospel and applying the Church's social teaching through activities that promote justice and the transformation of society. Example of its concerns are world peace, respect for the integrity of creation, poverty, human rights and other related issues.

Since the 2007 Plenary Assembly, the Commission met four times between October 2007 and June 2008. During its meetings, the Commission focused on a number of national and international issues, the highlights of which are outlined below. Several regional issues were also looked at, namely the effects of the increased costs of living in the Western provinces as a result of the economic boom there, and problems being faced by Western Canadian and Quebec farmers.

Because of its mandate, the Commission also monitors major social justice issues. This does not always lead to specific interventions, but assures their being documented in case an intervention may eventually be necessary. Examples include immigration, economic issues, the responsibilities of Canadian corporations in their overseas activities, Aboriginal rights and the death penalty. A number of these questions are also dealt with by ecumenical coalitions in which the CCCB participates.¹

(1) Pastoral Letter on the Environment

In June 2007, the Commission began working on the document entitled *Our Relationship with the Environment: The Need for Conversion*, eventually published in February 2008. The message essentially is a call to renew the relationship that has been broken with God, nature and our brothers and sisters, and to change our way of life. As well as being distributed in Canadian dioceses as well as by religious media and on the CCCB Web site, the letter was also published in *La Documentation catholique*, no. 2400

(2) War in Afghanistan

The Commission has continued to recall that the nature of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan should be defensive rather than offensive, that is, aimed at protecting the Afghanistan population and the international agencies that are building the infrastructures needed for the country's development and stabilization. As then CCCB President Archbishop André Gaumond noted in his report to the 2007 Plenary Assembly, "there

¹ See for example the 2006 pastoral letter on immigration and the protection of refugees, *We are aliens and transients before the Lord our God*. The issue of Canadian mining companies abroad is also in support of the efforts of Cardinal Rodriguez in Honduras and Bishop Ramazzini in Guatemala.

will not be peace in Afghanistan without a true peace process which involves all the parties. That is what Canada especially needs to promote.”

(3) Poverty

During their past term of office, the members of the Commission also closely monitored the problem of poverty. At its February 2008 meeting, the Commission welcomed Mario Dion from the social ministry office of the Archdiocese of Gatineau. Mr. Dion’s presentation, “*Une loi contre la pauvreté, cinq ans après...Bilan*” (“A law against poverty, five years after... The results”), focused on the problem of poverty in Quebec over a complex process of societal change. Given the Commission’s national character, its members discussed the possibility of exploring the problem of poverty by conducting a comparative study among the provinces. The present members of the Commission hope their successors will continue to address this problem.

(4) Federal Election

In the event of a federal election being called, the Commission has proposed that a pastoral guide for voters be prepared, based on the guide published at the time of the 2004 election. The intention is to produce a concise document focusing on respect for life, ecology and poverty. It is to be published once the election is called.

(5) KAIROS

The ecumenical partnership with KAIROS is an important part of the Commission’s work in the area of social justice. This ecumenical agency is involved in a number of areas and operates in collaboration with its members. The CCCB participation in KAIROS requires financial and human resources which are currently limited. The annual financial contributions of all the members of KAIROS have decreased between eight and ten per cent; the CCCB contribution has been reduced to \$100,000 annually. Financial viability is a real issue for KAIROS and a concern for the future of its activities.

At the same time, given the financial difficulties facing all the Churches, the search by KAIROS for external funding poses a challenge to its identify as a religious agency. This issue was explored at a meeting of the KAIROS Board which was expanded to include other participants, including CCCB Co-Treasurer Bishop James M. Wingle.

Projects of interest to the CCCB include the Carbon Sabbath Initiative, which will involve sending a KAIROS delegation on the question of energy to visit Alberta in May 2009 in order to examine the tar sands issue. The CCCB has agreed to participate, together with local religious leaders who one way or another are affected by this project.

In addition, consideration is also being given to the importance of a French-language Catholic presence in KAIROS and working on issues in common with Quebec; the overlapping of certain activities between KAIROS and the Canadian Council of Churches; and possible Baptist involvement with KAIROS.

The Commission has agreed to continue to monitor the questions being dealt with by KAIROS. At the same time as suggesting there should be reflection on our relationship with KAIROS as well as on new possible approaches, the Commission hopes it will be possible to maintain a strong relationship with its ecumenical partners, in view of a tradition which is so deeply rooted in CCCB history.

(6) CCCB Human Rights Committee

In April 2008, Archbishop Roger Ébacher, in his capacity as Chairman of the CCCB Human Rights Committee, wrote to the President of Guatemala concerning death threats being made against the Bishop of San Marcos, Most Reverend Alvaro Ramazzini.

The Commission has studied the functioning of the Human Rights Committee. Its flexible and rapid process is appreciated, and the Commission recommends maintaining this method of intervention.

(7) Catholic Interventions for the G8 Leaders' Summit

The Executive Committee consulted the Commission regarding CCCB participation in two activities associated with the G8 Leaders' Summit in Japan during July 2008.

The Commission reviewed a draft of a letter prepared by a group representing the Catholic Episcopal Conferences of the G8 nations, which it was proposed be signed by the President of each Conference. After reviewing the letter, the Commission agreed to support it and recommended its being signed by the CCCB President on behalf of the Conference.

In addition, the Canadian Council of Churches participated in an international meeting of interfaith leaders held in parallel with the G8 Summit. Archbishop V. James Weisgerber was invited to attend and travelled to Hokkaido, Japan, as a member of the Canadian delegation. The Commission reviewed a draft declaration and offered suggestions, particularly regarding the promotion of the Millennium Development Goals on poverty.

(8) Office of Justice, Peace and Missions

A new senior advisor, François Poitras, began working in the Office for Justice, Peace and Missions in early June 2008. He holds a Ph.D. and a STD from Saint Paul University, Ottawa, a licentiate in theology from the Dominican University College, Ottawa, and a

bachelor's degree in social sciences from the University of Montreal. He has served as a consultant with the Élisabeth Bruyère Health Centre, Ottawa, and lectured at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Ottawa on palliative care and the relationship of religion and health.

Archbishop Roger Ébacher, Chairman
Archbishop Brendan M. O'Brien
Archbishop Bertrand Blanchet
Archbishop Daniel Bohan

Consultors:

Ms. Élisabeth Garant, Justice and Faith Centre, Montreal
Ms. Mary Durrán, Development and Peace, Montreal

Staff:

Mr. Benoît Bariteau, Associate General Secretary and Commission Secretary
Mr. François Poitras, Senior Advisor, Office of Justice, Peace and Missions
Ms. Tracy Blain, Junior Advisor, Office of Justice, Peace and Missions
Ms. Monique Chabot, Secretary