



June 7, 2012

Dear brother Bishops,

News has been emerging over the past months about the growing crisis in West Africa and the Sahel. An estimated 12 million people, including a million children, are at risk because of famine. Seven of the eight governments in this arid zone between the Sahara desert in North Africa and Sudan's Savannas to the south have declared national emergencies. In his address this past February to the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel, Pope Benedict XVI urged "serious action to relieve the extreme poverty of these peoples whose living conditions are deteriorating." That same month, a United Nations meeting described the situation as critical, and called for comprehensive and rapid assistance to the millions of people affected. In March, Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, the President of the worldwide Catholic relief network Caritas Internationalis, said that "if we act now it is not too late to prevent a major humanitarian crisis."

During May, our Conference joined with the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace in a joint emergency fundraising appeal in response to the food shortage and drought in West Africa and the Sahel. I now invite you to consider establishing a timeframe in your respective dioceses for promoting and organizing a collection between now and Sunday, September 16, inclusive. This extended period will allow for summer schedules and other previous pastoral commitments. However spread out the parish collections may be over this summer, the situation in the Sahel is already described as a "disaster in the making". The emergency needs there will only increase as the weeks go by, so it will certainly not be too early or too late over the next three months for our collective efforts to help make a difference.

Development and Peace has special envelopes available for parish collections. Pastors and pastoral workers wishing to order the envelopes can communicate with the CCODP national office in Montreal or with their local Development and Peace animator. As well, Development and Peace will be updating the materials and information on its website throughout the summer. You may wish to encourage the faithful of your dioceses to visit the website for regular updates. Development and Peace is the Canadian member of Caritas Internationalis. Contributions made through CCODP will assist the projects that are being organized in the Sahel by Caritas Internationalis and Caritas members in West Africa.

The Sahel has special significance for Catholics. Almost 30 years ago, in 1984, Blessed Pope John Paul II established the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel, to collaborate with the peoples of Africa in meeting their challenges for development and self-sufficiency, including agriculture and food supplies. The Foundation encourages collaboration among the different faiths in the Sahel, and has become known as an instrument and leaven for interfaith dialogue and human advancement, as well as a practical response to desertification. Caritas Internationalis works closely with the John Paul II Foundation.

The United Nations' World Day to Combat Desertification is observed every year on June 17. This year's slogan reminds us that "Healthy soil sustains your life." In his address earlier this year to the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel, the Holy Father called Africa the "continent of the future". May the prayers and contributions of Canadian Catholics to assist West Africa and the Sahel be an expression of our common commitment to sustaining life and shaping a future of justice, peace and solidarity for all our brothers and sisters.

Fraternally in Our Lord,



+ Richard Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton and
President of the Canadian Conference
of Catholic Bishops

The following webpages provide more information on Catholic efforts to assist the people of the Sahel:

- Development and Peace,
<http://www.devp.org/en/emergencies/west-africa>
- Caritas Internationalis,
<http://www.caritas.org/activities/emergencies/WestAfricaFoodCrisis12.html>
- John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel,
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/corunum_en/fondazioni_en/rc_pc_corunum_doc_20091502_FSHL_generale2005-09_en.html
- Pope Benedict XVI, address to representatives of the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel, February 10, 2012,
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/february/documents/hf_b-en-xvi_spe_20120210_sahel_en.html