

Social Affairs Committee
Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops

For a Better Redistribution of Wealth

The current economic crisis brings to the forefront the urgent need for a better redistribution of wealth. This directly relates to our profound convictions, anchored in the Christian faith, that God entrusted the earth and its resources to humanity for the benefit of all. We cannot forget that Christ himself identified with the poor to the point that he made sharing the goods of the earth the ultimate criterion in evaluating one's humanity: *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, (...) I was naked and you gave me clothing* (Mt 25:35-36).

In fact, during the 1998 Ice Storm didn't we prove that the best way to confront disaster was to roll up our sleeves and change our daily habits?

An economic downturn

It's clear that our economy is going through a serious crisis. The failure of the financial markets caused the meltdown and in its wake exposed not only the economic, but the *underlying* ecological crisis. While we generally refer to *the crisis*, in fact there are three interrelated crises. Because of unhealthy environmental practices, our raw materials have become depleted. One striking example is the collapse of the cod industry. A healthy economy must be *sustainable* and respect its ecological foundation.

*The crisis reveals a number of negative consequences when financial logic, pushed to the extreme, is disconnected from the economy and its only goal is the pursuit of immediate profit. Our societies have been traumatized and as always in such instances, the poorest are the first and most innocent victims.*¹ For several months, thousands of people have seen the businesses that employed them close their doors. Many must now be content with precarious, part-time employment. Fluctuations in food prices and energy costs weigh increasingly heavily on family budgets. Businesses complain that restricted access to credit frustrates their fragile equilibrium and causes serious cash flow problems. Rising debt and the devaluation of pension funds have forced the reconsideration of a great number of legitimate projects and may even affect the survival of thousands of people.

¹ Conseil pour les questions familiales et sociales, The Conference of Bishops of France, *Au Coeur de la crise: faire crédit, faire confiance*, in *La documentation catholique*, Nov. 2, 2008, p. 973.

Financial practices that are disconnected from reality, tax avoidances, the uncontrolled growth of temporary placement agencies² and a transformation of the Employment Insurance dues to a tax on labor combine their actions to strip the poor of their legitimate benefits and redistribute them to the wealthier. Defusing the *I Bomb* (inequality and iniquity) will require great efforts.³ A healthy economy must respect human needs.⁴

The current financial crisis strikingly demonstrates that government *laissez-faire* policies are ineffective and out of date. Our governments are poised to act and provide massive intervention. We salute their efforts, but considering the overwhelming tidal wave of demands from industries and pressure groups, there is the risk of floundering instead of developing effective strategies. For example, is there any advantage to increasing the days that stores can legally be open by adding January 2nd to the list? What contribution does this make to the economy? A great number of people have begun to question the excessive hold that the need to *constantly consume* has on their lives and now observe the Buy-Nothing day.⁵ People are learning to balance work and leisure and include time for friends which strengthen the multiple networks that sustain our society. The movement toward the concept of *Voluntary Simplicity* is gaining ground. The *C Bomb* (consumption) only adds fuel to the crisis. A healthy economy must find ways to limit the ecological footprint of its consumption.⁶

Could the current crisis be forcing us to discover and implement alternative strategies than what has inevitably led us to catastrophe? We believe so. The fact that we are forced to stop, reflect, and ask ourselves in what direction do we want our society to evolve may be an opportunity for new beginnings.

The redistribution of wealth

All wealth, whether individual or collective, is encumbered by a *social mortgage*.⁷ Those who promote this concept state that society must preserve the right to oversee our collective wealth and that it is the State's duty to guarantee that this *mortgage* will be sustained.

What exactly is a *social mortgage*? It springs from the insight of our Christian ancestors of the 4th century that all earthly and cultural goods belong to the people of the world. Thus giving to the poor is not an act of charity, but of justice. St. Ambrose of Milan

² Au Bas de l'échelle, CIAFT, FFO *Rapport sur les pratiques contractuelles de l'industrie du placement temporaire*, 2007. <http://www.aubasdelechelle.ca/images/memoire-mai-2007.pdf>

³ Beauchamp, André, *Environnement et Église*, Montréal, Fides, 2008, pp. 35-38.

⁴ *Sur la notion d'économie des besoins*, refer to the notes from the Foundation Jean-Jaurès *Vers un nouvel équilibre entre besoins et marché*, N° 35, July 2003, also the recommendations from the Comité consultatif de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale: *Les répercussions des hausses tarifaires sur les conditions de vie des personnes à faible revenu*, Québec, Nov. 22, 2007.

⁵ Late November. In *Quebec*: Union des consommateurs : www.consommateur.qc.ca *Once a year is good, once a week is better!* cf.: *Le dimanche, jour de gratuité et de ressourcement*, AECQ, 1992.

⁶ According to A. Beauchamp, op. cit., p. 146: *six hectares par personne, trois fois supérieure à la capacité de support de la planète. Sur la bombe C*: p. 31-35.

⁷ Reference: Ivan du Roy's article: « Crise boursière : dix mesures pour en finir avec le capitalisme prédateur ». *Témoignage chrétien*, April 2008.

affirmed: “When we provide essential necessities for the poor, we are not making personal donations but giving them what is rightly theirs.”⁸ St. Basil of Caesarea stated, “And where do the goods that you possess come from? (...) If you acknowledge that they came to you from God, can you then say why you have received them from our common Lord? Would God not be unjust to have made such an unequal distribution of the goods of this world? Why are you rich and yet your brother is poor? Is it not in order that you would receive the reward of your benevolence and faithful administration (...)?”⁹ The teachings of today’s Church are clear: *The principle of the universal destination of goods is an invitation to develop an economic vision inspired by moral values that permit people not to lose sight of the origin or purpose of these goods, so as to bring about a world of fairness and solidarity.*¹⁰

The desire to establish social justice is the goal of the Charter of Social and Economic Rights which is entrenched in the Québec Charter of Human Rights. It is also found in proposals to pass legislation to reduce poverty in Ontario. In 2002, Québec passed Bill 112, a law to combat poverty and social exclusion and it is our civic duty to remain vigilant. With the support of dozens of thousands of people who signed the petition to build a poverty-free Québec, we urge the National Assembly to guarantee that the State continues to respect the spirit of this law by providing thresholds for a decent minimum wage and services and social safeguards that will truly reflect our acknowledged commitments. Quebeckers are proud to be among the first societies to have adopted such a law, but there remains much to accomplish in order that efforts will produce results and extreme poverty will become a thing of the past. Despite the current crisis, we say: *Eliminate poverty! It can be done and we want it done!*¹¹

How can we redistribute our collective wealth?

The redistribution of wealth can take place on many levels. People discover and develop their **talents**. They progress, due partly to their own efforts, but also because of the family’s *social capital*, the structures and institutions that previous generations have successfully bequeathed to them. These include: small or large businesses, producers’ cooperatives, savings banks, credit co-operatives, unions, theatre and dance troupes, museums and libraries. People are confident that the State will invest in such major undertakings and the multiple educational infrastructures that support health, social housing and measures that facilitate family life. Thankful for their inheritance, people gladly pay installments on this *social mortgage*.

⁸ Cited in Olivier Pety and Bernard Lorenzatio, *Le pauvre, huitième sacrement*, Montréal, Médiaspaul, 2008, pp. 98-99.

⁹ Homily of St. Basil of Caesarea on Lk 12: 8, *I will pull down my barns and build larger ones*. Citation source: L’Abbaye Saint Benoît de Port-Valais: www.abbays-saint-benoit.ch/saints/basile/homelies/002.htm cited also by Gravel, Raymond « Les riches et la récession », *Journal de Montréal*, Dec. 11, 2008, p. 29.

¹⁰ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican, CCCB.2006, N° 174. See also 171-184.

¹¹ Paraphrase of the title of the May 1st 2000 message of the Social Affairs Committee of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops.

On the whole, the majority of citizens use their talents to benefit others **through work**, which is so much more satisfying when it manifests the fundamental solidarity that must exist among people. The types of work and organizations may vary. One example is a **cooperative formula** which has resurfaced among artists and skilled computer workers. Such cooperative ventures have enabled nascent groups to share their talents and establish a niche market. **Unions** continue to be the guarantors of working conditions that ensure, for the most part, a redistribution of the wealth produced by their members' work. Two workers' investment funds, the FTQ and the CSN, inject important resources toward the economic revitalization of their milieus. **Manufacturers** look for new means to address current global realities and retain their employees. Previously deserted **regional areas** compete imaginatively and propose innovative ideas for local development.¹² **Entrepreneurs** may experiment with participatory leadership, or get involved in the *economy of communion*.¹³

On the **social level**, people weave multiple and committed networks throughout their milieus. Whether this consists of buying locally, purchasing from small producers, protected workshops, and community kitchens - in short, people play an active role in the numerous connections that enable wealth to circulate. Immigrants often support families in their countries of origin, surpassing what is shared through official development assistance. Caregivers, mostly female, contribute a great deal to the creation of strong social connections that are *embossed* with care. These people need support to continue this essential contribution.¹⁴ Concerning **community life**, acts such as donations, volunteering, participating in essential tasks and food drives, even if these acts do not take the place of justice, demonstrate a generosity and a capacity to mobilize and openly welcome others.

Concerning our common responsibilities, **income tax** and the various **taxes** that we pay are the standard expressions of our social connections and collaborations. If the public's confidence towards our elected officials appears shaky (only 57.43% participated in the last election), it is always crucial to emphasize that legislators have the responsibility to provide the public with services that ensure fundamental rights.¹⁵ From this perspective, when we question our heavy tax burden, rather than looking for loopholes to pay the least tax possible, should we not be asking ourselves what kind of society do we want to bequeath to future generations?

Few people in society have the option of not paying taxes. Some **wealthier** citizens have made it a point to evade taxes legally using off shore accounts and tax shelters. This practice is not a good fit considering the current crisis situation and is denounced by many associations and governments. Some people have commented on statistics that Quebeckers give less to charity than other provinces. A possible reason is that paying our

¹² www.solidarite-rurale.qc.ca

¹³ Developed by the Focolari Movement: <http://www.edc-online.org/index.php?lang=fr>

¹⁴ On this subject: AFÉAS, *pour les parents et les aidantes/aidants: des mesures incontournables*, Sept. 04.

¹⁵ For an informative document concerning fiscal policy, refer to the MÉPACQ brochure, *La fiscalité, une richesse collective, un outil pour le bien commun*, Montreal, May 2007.

just share of income taxes discretely (Mt 6:4) counts for more than contributing to charitable works and being publicly and socially acknowledged.

Conclusion: A Call to Communion

There was a call from the International Eucharistic Congress held in Québec City in June 2008 to welcome, adore, share, and become God's gift for the life of the world. Experiencing the Eucharist means we, with gratitude and recognition, commit ourselves in sharing gifts and graces. It means we offer ourselves entirely, with our worldly goods, talents, and limitations and follow Christ Jesus for the life of the world. When we contemplate Christ's divinity, we also recognize that his humanity is wounded, since hundreds of millions of our brothers and sisters suffer from famine and an unjust distribution of wealth.¹⁶ It's only through a change in our values and a spirit of universal fraternity will we discover that the redistribution of wealth is an indispensable condition for a better society.

Christian communities, including religious congregations, have long been important places for the redistribution of wealth, particularly during crises. Though these institutions are also feeling the economic downturn, their people share goods and important values in assemblies that gather to hear God's Word, community organizations and kitchens, groups that defend human rights, *Meals on Wheels*, community gardens, etc.

Personally or collectively, no one is excluded from the influence of the Holy Spirit who remains active at the very centre of our consciences. From within the current economic storm, the Holy Spirit continues to inspire us to find *new ways*¹⁷ so that a greater number of our brothers and sisters may live with dignity and participate in society.

Social Affaires Committee

Msgr. Pierre-André Fournier, Msgr. Roger Ébacher, Msgr. Jean Gagnon, M. Pierre Côté, s.j., Mme Andrée Cyr-Desroches, Mme Denise Martel and Mme Lousie Royer.

With the collaboration of the Pastoral and Social Council of the dioceses of Quebec and M. Guy Paiement, s.j.

A publication of: Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Québec

3331, rue Sherbrooke Est

Montréal, QC H1W 1C5

Email: accq@eveques.qc.ca

Web site: <http://www.eveques.qc.ca>

Legal deposit: 2nd trimester 2009

Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

ISBN

(printed version) (PDF) (HTML)

¹⁶ Tagle, Luis Antonio, catechesis of June 19, 2008. See www.cei2008 *The Eucharist: the life of Christ in our lives: spiritual worship and authentic adoration*. p.12. Idolatry makes people blind and deaf to the true God and the poor. (free translation)

¹⁷ Reread Isaiah 43:19 and I Kings 19:12 where Elijah experienced the Divine Presence. See also Acts 2:45 on the sharing of wealth following the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Discussion Questions

(The following points may be used by individuals or groups)

1. An unhealthy economy

How does the current financial crisis affect the people and industries in your region?

- a) What are some of the obvious examples?
- b) What consequences do you foresee for people whom you know?
- c) Some economic decisions *combine their actions to strip the poor of their legitimate benefits and redistribute them to the wealthier*. Does this happen in your area?
- d) In what ways have the **I** and **C Bombs** affected your area? Explain your answer.

2. Redistribution of wealth: *our social investment*

- a) How do you interpret the concept that each of us has a *social mortgage* and not a *lien* on our wealth?
- b) What do you think of St. Ambrose's opinion?
- c) How can a world of justice and solidarity be promoted or, on the contrary, be undermined by various economic policies?
- d) Are you familiar with Bill 112, the law to combat poverty and social exclusion?

3. How can we redistribute wealth? An *open* challenge to the world

We have all seen how wealth is distributed.

- a) List some examples from your neighborhood
- b) List some of the experiences of community groups, pastoral teams, unions, business leaders and CEOs
- c) Do you believe that our taxes enable us to provide services to everyone and guarantee more justice?
- d) Can you name a specific example when Christian communities' participated in the redistribution of wealth?
- e) What different face of the Divine Presence can the current economic crisis enable us to discover?