



TAKING STOCK AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

The judgment scene of St. Matthew's gospel opens our eyes to the fact that Jesus identified closely with the poor:

I was hungry and you gave me food...

I was hungry and you gave me no food...

Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matthew 25: 34 - 43)

If each of us personally faces this judgment, surely as a society we do so as well.

That is why Catholic Social teaching continually keeps before us our responsibility for the common good and for the poor with whom Jesus identified in a preferential way;

That is why elections are conscience moments for people of faith;

And that is why the document offered to you today by the bishops of Ontario carries the title: *Taking Stock: An Examination of Conscience*.

Preface

In 1998, in anticipation of a provincial election, the Catholic Bishops of Ontario released *Choosing a Government*. Four years later, the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops published a pastoral letter entitled *Taking Stock: An Examination of Conscience*. On October 10th, 2007, there will again be a provincial election. In order to emphasize the importance of responsible participation in the political process and the need for wise reflection concerning candidates and the issues, the Catholic Bishops of Ontario have revised and updated this 2002 pastoral letter.

It is we who choose governments and give them power to shape community. We need to pause and consider how fortunate we are. There are still far too many places in the world where this is not true. That fact increases our obligation to take up our democratic responsibilities seriously. All of us must take responsibility for the outcomes, good or bad, of our choices. It is inconceivable that people would consciously decide not to vote.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Section 1915

As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life. The manner of this participation may vary from one country or culture to another. *"One must pay tribute to those nations whose systems permit the largest possible number of citizens to take part in public life in a climate of genuine freedom."* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World 31#3 Documents of Vatican II*)

Before making our next choice, we need then to look carefully around us and decide whether our community is moving closer to a society that is truly just, and that promotes



a social and economic climate in which all of us can become more fully human, or whether it is moving farther away from that goal.

Guiding Principles

In Choosing a Government, we set out eleven principles upon which our society should be based. They are worth repeating here:

- The human dignity of every person is to be respected at all times.
- Respect for human dignity requires a vigorous pursuit of the common good.
- Governments must balance the rights, obligations and opportunities of various segments of society.
- Governments must demonstrate a grasp of the concept of stewardship.
- Governments must support the right to private property but at the same time recognize that that right is not absolute.
- Governments must recognize that human beings derive identity and self-esteem, as well as economic well being, from the use of their God-given talents in useful work and, therefore, they have a right to employment.
- Governments must support the rights of workers to form unions in order to protect the quality of their lives, their safety and their security.
- Governments must protect those who are marginalized in our society, that is, have a preferential option for the poor and voiceless.
- Governments must support life.
- Governments must encourage and facilitate involvement in the process of political decision-making.
- Governments worthy of support must respect the prerogatives of other governments and non-governmental bodies with respect to decision-making.

The Application of Principles: Practical Politics

We would venture to suggest that the majority of people in Ontario would agree, in a general way, with most of the principles we have stated. However, we are also aware that, when asked what those principles mean, and especially how they should be applied to our society, people would supply quite a variety of answers. It is from this diversity of answers that our political system springs.

Many high-minded citizens enter politics because they want to make a contribution to the common good. Their readiness to serve deserves our respect and our support. Thanks to them we have much to be grateful for in our society. Nevertheless, they often do not agree with each other either on goals to be pursued or on the steps to be followed in



shaping our provincial society. In the realm of practical politics, we ultimately have to judge by the outcomes of particular policies that we can see for ourselves in daily life.

The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, # 31 (Vatican II) ... *by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will.*

No political party and no government is perfect. Far from it. All of us are fallible human beings. As a people, we have a responsibility constantly to take stock, to measure our progress against our principles and to choose the people we are convinced will take us in the direction of a just, inclusive and fully human society.

Responsibility in a Democracy

Governments are, then, in power because we, the people, put them there. It is common knowledge that governments constantly monitor public opinion and rarely attempt to implement policies unless there is substantial support somewhere in the community. If they totally ignore the "public will", they do not long survive.

In a very real sense, in these circumstances, we, not "they", are responsible for the direction in which our society is moving with regard to its humanity, its productivity, its adherence to principle and its sense of public honour.

Stock Taking

The Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, #43 (Encyclical by John Paul II) *The Church has no models to present: models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations... For such a task the Church offers her social teaching as an indispensable and ideal orientation, a teaching which...recognizes the positive value of the market and of enterprise, but which at the same time points out that these need to be oriented towards the common good.*

It is now almost ten years since the publication of *Choosing a Government*, and five years since *Taking Stock* was first published. Much has changed; yet much remains the same.

- A powerful social movement in opposition to the prevailing culture of endless expansion (some would say greed) is emerging. A profound dissatisfaction with the status quo is being expressed and focused on opposition to some features of "globalization". A significant number of people is becoming convinced that our world is moving in a wrong direction. This is particularly expressed in the universal concern for our environment, which is God's creation.
- The economic exuberance of the late nineties has faded. Our economy has stumbled. The gap between rich and poor has grown and child poverty, in spite of our rhetoric, has increased instead of being eliminated.



- As a people, we are not quite as confident of being in control. Perhaps we are learning a little humility.

In the light of all of this, we once again ask our fellow Catholics, and all people of good will, to take stock, and to weigh in the balance our actions of the past four years. We ask them to do so in the light of a common good defined in terms of the principles we have listed above.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Section 1906

By common good is to be understood, "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World 26#1 Documents of Vatican II). The common good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority.

We have set out below, in alphabetical order, some of the areas of public policy that affect the common good. You may discern other areas that should be added. We ask you to think about each of these areas carefully in the light of the events of the last four years. Then to ask yourself these questions:

- In the last four years, has our society moved in a direction consistent with the principles listed above, in other words, is our society more human, more just, more caring, more inclusive more committed to the good of all than it was four years ago?
- If it has, what more is needed to refine or re-enforce this progress?
- If it has not, what actions are needed to move us in the required direction?

The Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, # 46 (Encyclical by John Paul II)

The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.

In each case, we should ask what, in our minds, an application of the principles demands. In the accompanying workshop materials, we supply some data and suggest some questions that might be asked.



The Criminal Justice System

The dignity of the human person requires both justice and compassion for all human beings. The restoration of wholeness and dignity to victims is extremely important. Besides this, however, those found guilty of crimes need every opportunity for rehabilitation, and their families should not suffer for circumstances which have been forced upon them. Those who work in law enforcement, corrections and the courts, need our insistence that their working conditions are fair and proper.

The Economy

We develop an economy to provide a decent and dignified life for all of our people. The riches of the earth are provided by God for the good of all. Private ownership of these goods is just but not absolute. We are not permitted to use wealth or possessions in ways which harm or demean others. We have a positive duty to organize our economic life in a manner which ensures that all families and persons can thrive, regardless of where they live.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Section 1938

"Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity as well as social and international peace." (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, # 29 #3 Documents of Vatican II)

Education

Education is a critical element in the provision of a full and fruitful life for the human person. It should be accessible at all levels to all of those who wish to and are able to benefit from it, which in some form or another is everyone. Education must address all of those aspects of our being which make us human: spiritual, cognitive, aesthetic, psychological, physical and social.

Matthew 18: 5-6

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me. If any put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, It would be better for you, if a great millstone were placed around your neck And you drowned in the depth of the sea.

Employment

People are co-creators with God. They have a desire and a need to contribute to the enhancement of their society and of the world in which they live. Generally, they do this by work in one form or another. Work, therefore, needs to be available to all and to be organized so that people can be fulfilled. Within the limits of human ingenuity, work must be safe, creative and meaningful. Work should serve the needs of people, not the other way round. Work must bring an adequate standard of living, with a just wage, so



that everyone's basic necessities of life are met. It is also our duty to ensure the well-being of all who labour in our society, including those without the rights of full citizenship.

The Environment

God has gifted us with a very rich and diverse biosphere. He has also given us stewardship over it. We have a moral duty to preserve it. We need to promote the renewable and sustainable use of resources. Even from the point of view of self-preservation we must ensure that the air we and our children breathe and the water that we drink are as pure as we can make them by our moderation and conscientious care for them. This is a duty that we owe to all inhabitants of our globe. By their very nature, air and water are gifts of creation for all humanity.

Life Ethic

There is nothing we have been given that is more precious than human life. We have a duty to preserve and enhance it at every stage - from conception until natural death. We promote a culture of life.

The Family

The family, constituted by the faithful life-long union of a man and a woman in a covenant of love, with their children, is the basic and indispensable unit of society. It is in the family that we are introduced to spirituality. It is there that we are socialized, learn to share and be fair and begin to take responsibility for ourselves and others. It is a wise society that enhances and protects families, encourages their success, and safeguards their autonomy. The quality of our society will be a reflection of the quality of its family life.

Health Care

Well designed, maintained, and managed health care services make a significant contribution to the quality of the individual life. Since we are all equal in the eyes of God, it follows that health care services must be equally accessible to all. Our people should not be placed in a position of unnecessary anxiety by the apprehension that they are not permitted access to the finite services available. Access to service should not be dictated by wealth, geography or other accidental circumstances.



Housing

Human dignity is hardly possible without a decent place in which to live. Families cannot thrive without a roof over their heads. Homes are one of those social goods in our society, like education and health care, which must somehow be available to all. Affordable housing is a right of every family and an obligation of every government.

Labour Relations

Most of us recognize that relationships are extremely important in our lives. We cherish our families and our friends. Most of us spend more time in the workplace than anywhere else except the home. Relationships in the workplace probably affect our lives more than we realize. As part of the dignity of work and of life, we need to do all that we can to promote healthy relationships in the workplace, both between employers and employees and among employees.

On Human Work, # 20 (Encyclical by John Paul II)

It is always to be hoped that, because of the action of unions, workers can not only "have" more but can above all "be" more, that is, that they will be able to perfect their humanity more fully in every way.

The Poor

When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt to justice. St. Gregory the Great: Rule for Pastoral Care

There are many reasons for being poor in our society: illness, disability, job loss, addiction, insufficient education, poor planning, and a variety of misfortunes in life. In recent years we have learned that no one is exempt from the potentiality for hard times. It is a measure of our humanity and our worth that we can accord to the poor the same dignity that we accord to everyone else. God made the world for all of us.

Taxation

Taxation is the means by which we pay for the services we receive as citizens. Our taxes pay for our health care, education, environmental protection, physical infrastructure like roads and public recreational facilities. We are all familiar with financial audits which tell us how our money was used. We propose that we all need to do a mental social audit as we ponder how much we are willing to pay in taxes in order to have the society we want. There is a balance to be struck here. We need to decide the levels of public benefit we wish to maintain and then decide what we need to contribute to pay for them.



Action

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Section 1798 *A well formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgements according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. All must avail themselves of the means to form their conscience.*

When you have completed this process of discernment, you will be more ready to participate as a responsible citizen of Ontario in the political life of the province. You will probably have questions you want to ask your political representatives immediately. In addition, you will be better prepared to participate thoughtfully in the next provincial election. Be prepared to ask the candidates in your riding the questions that will indicate to you the direction in which they would want to move the province. Be ready to hold them accountable for the answers they give you.

Conclusion

Our ultimate goal is to cast our votes for those who provide the best hope of shaping our society as God would have it be.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Section 1880 *A society is a group of persons bound together organically by a principle of unity that goes beyond each one of them. As an assembly that is at once visible and spiritual, a society endures through time; it gathers up the past and prepares for the future. By means of society, each person is established as an 'heir' and receives certain 'talents' that enrich their identity and whose fruits they must develop. All rightly owe loyalty to the communities of which they are a part and respect to those in authority who have charge of the common good.*

Mark 9: 30

Whoever wants to be first among you must be the last of all and the servant of all.



Workshop Format for *Taking Stock*

Purpose of the Pastoral Letter

The pastoral letter "Taking Stock" is intended to motivate Catholics to examine the conditions currently prevailing in our province in the light of Catholic social teaching.

This Workshop Format

This workshop is intended to provide people with an opportunity to compare their analyses and share ideas about the goals and direction we ought to set, as a people, and the policies which are likely to take us there.

This is a preparation for full and principled participation in a democratic society.

Format

Begin with a prayer for discernment. The workshop is in three parts.

- 1. The Principles**
- 2. The Issues**
- 3. The Policies and Priorities**

These parts could be handled:

- **in one evening, in an abbreviated form**
- **over three evenings**
- **over several evenings in real depth**

1. The Principles

Depending on the time and the size of the group, the following could be tried:

- **Break into small groups and assign several principles to each group. Ask them to apply these principles to a situation in our society and the public policies we have adopted to deal with it so that the meaning of the principle is shown.**

OR

- **The leader briefly takes ideas from the group and applies them to the meaning of each principle in turn.**



OR

- **The leader gives the group(s) a short time (15 minutes) to rank the principles in order of importance to them and then ask them to justify their decisions.**

2. The Issues

- **Ask individuals to choose the area with the most urgent issues and then put them in groups to share and justify their priorities.**

OR

- **Ask groups to choose the single policy area in which our society is most and least successful in the last few years.**

OR

- **Challenge groups to find three important issues totally missed in the pastoral. Why are they important?**

OR

- **Challenge groups to analyze any "bias" they find in the data and questions which follow. Ask them to state where they share the "bias" and where they do not.**

The Criminal Justice System

Do we punish all crimes, so-called white-collar crimes and those of the poor, in an equitable manner? Are we balancing the rights of the community and of the individual citizen in a reasonable manner? We need to ask whether the introduction of "super-prisons" and privately operated prisons contributes to these goals or works against them. (Incarceration rates: Europe - 60 to 90 per 100,000; Canada - 130 per 100,000; U.S. - 529 per 100,000)

The Economy

Is our economy so organized that wealth is justly distributed? Recent data indicate that the depth of poverty is increasing and that the gap between the lowest and highest incomes is growing. Are you aware that the ratio of highest to lowest salaries in North America stands at (Figures for the U.S.: in 1975 the highest to lowest ratio was 46:1, by 1995, it was 190:1) What steps do such situations call upon us to take? Do we take sufficient control of markets to ensure fair dealing? Are we guilty of exploiting people in other lands for our own benefit?



Education

Is our current investment in future generations adequate? Is the new Ontario curriculum achieving the goals we desire? Is it sustaining and enhancing all aspects of the formation of young people? Are we ready to hold our own as a province in an information age? Where does the candidate stand on support and provision for independent religious schools? Are we caring for the challenged and those with special needs in appropriate ways?

Employment

Can all those who want to work in our society find suitable employment? What is the impact on workers of the growth in part-time and contract employment? Does such work provide sufficient security and proper compensation in terms of both salary and benefits? Is it always safe and healthy? Does it respect the dignity of working people? What are the effects on workers of growth in the practice of "contracting out"? Are our working people receiving the training they may need to be up-to-date in the world in which we live? Are we accommodating those with physical, psychological and mental challenges to the degree that we could and ought?

The Environment

In the recent past our province experienced the "wake up call" of Walkerton. Are we taking the measures needed to ensure our drinking water is safe? Has reducing air pollution had the policy and budget priority that the health of our citizens requires? Are we taking the necessary steps to preserve our forests, wetlands and farmlands from exploitation and overuse? Are we taking the necessary steps to leave our children and grandchildren a reasonable environment?

Life Ethic

While much of the legislation regarding abortion, euthanasia and bio-ethical issues belongs to federal jurisdiction, are we in this province trying to support attitudes towards human life, and its sacredness from conception to natural death, that reflect the deep conviction of a very large proportion of the people of the province? Are we ensuring that even the least among us have a quality of life that is worthy of their dignity as children of God? Are we even ensuring that they have life?

The Family

Are we developing laws and services that truly support family life? Do we make sufficient effort to organize our economy in a way that enables parents to support their children and spend time with them? Family and child poverty in Canada stood at 14.9% in 1989 and at 19.8% in 1997. Hunger Count reported (2001) that food bank use grew by 96% between 1989 and 2000. It grew even during a period of strong economic growth, increasing by 9.4% between 1997 and 2000. It has been reported that 41% of the poor are children but children make up only 25% of



the population. Are there steps we should be taking to protect our young people from degrading propaganda in many of our forms of entertainment and leisure activities? What policies does the candidate's party have that support the family?

Health Care

Have you experienced any doubt about our will as a society to preserve the five basic principles of the health care system: accessibility, universality, portability, comprehensiveness and public funding. In your opinion should they be preserved? Do we give life-enhancing care at all stages of human development? Are our efforts in the area of palliative care sufficient and appropriate? Are we making planned and adequate progress in the provision of home health care?

Housing

Does the evidence suggest that the private sector is able to meet our housing needs for low income people, or is there need for a program of social housing construction undertaken or subsidized by government? Are people on social assistance receiving adequate shelter allowances? Are we doing enough to care for the homeless in our larger communities? Has leadership been shown in resolving the grave issue of homelessness?

Labour Relations

Have working conditions improved or deteriorated over the last several years? Has the right of working people to unionize and bargain collectively been adequately protected or has it been eroded in recent times? Have some sectors of our economy been unnecessarily disrupted? Has our provincial legislation promoted harmonious labour-management relations? Have working people at all levels had sufficient security of employment?

The Poor

Do our present provincial policies provide adequately for people on social assistance? Do those policies treat the poor with dignity? Are there sufficient programs available for those who voluntarily seek to enter drug treatment or to improve literacy skills?

Taxation

Taxation is the means by which we pay for the services we receive as citizens. Our taxes pay for our health care, education, environmental protection, physical infrastructure like roads and public recreational facilities. Are we prepared to pay taxes adequate to maintain and even improve such services? Are we willing to give up the services by insisting on tax cuts? What balance would you strike between social and personal financial benefits?



Mark 4: 24

**Pay attention to what you hear:
For the measure you give will be the measure you get;
And still more will be given to you.**

3. The Polices and Priorities

- **Break into groups (or in a small group make each member the new premier). Each group is the cabinet of a new government. Have them set out their agenda for their first 100 days. Justify their decisions. Have them report back and compare agendas.**

OR

- **Break into groups. Each group (or person in a small group) is going to an all candidates meeting at which they will have a chance to ask three questions: What would they be and why?**

Group and Reporting

Much of the work in this outline is based on group or independent thought. It is wise to have a variety of ways of reporting back, for example:

- **A simple report from a recorder,**
- **The group may report on only the most important idea discussed,**
- **A show of hands for issues such as "the most important principle", for example,**
- **A chart to be put on the wall,**
- **An open forum where a few ideas are put out and everyone is allowed to respond.**

End with a prayer of thanks giving for the opportunities we enjoy in this province and this country.