

The importance of the Earth's resources to the common good takes priority over any possible commercial value

A few years ago, a homeless man smashed in the door of a restaurant in Montreal and stole enough food to satisfy his hunger. He was caught by police and appeared in court. After hearing the man's story, the judge decided to dismiss the charges of theft and ordered him to pay the insurance company for damages. Why? The man had not eaten for four days. The judge felt that the individual's survival took precedence over

upholding the business laws that normally govern the exchange of goods.

The laws of the marketplace have not always had priority as they do today. Primitive societies made sure that food resources were distributed to all; food could not be used to make money¹. In the Hebrew tradition, air, water and the Earth belong to God and exist for the growth and development of all citizens, not just the privileged. Up until the 15th century, the selling of food needed to live was unthinkable². Even today, for the Native peoples of Canada, the concept of property titles does not exist because they believe that the Earth belongs to everyone, like air and water.

For a long time, Christians have contended that the ultimate goal of the economy is to serve the common good and not just to profit the sellers and traders of goods.

In stark contrast to these measures of solidarity, neoliberalism is marked by excessive competitiveness, greedy consumption and the pursuit of profits which together are destroying not only the most vital natural resources, but entire societies.

Africa and its mining resources

Let's take the disturbing example of the mining industry in Africa³. By 1996, over 170 Canadian mining companies had interests in 440 mines in 27 different countries of Africa. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a territory of 83,000 square kilometres has been transferred to a mining company. This single company has complete jurisdiction over the entire northeastern region of the country. In 1997, farmers in Ghana were shot at for demonstrating on the hills that the mining company threatened to destroy. The rebellion was quashed and 20,000 people were quietly displaced from the region. Nothing and nobody questioned the company. In a situation like this, can we say that the common good has priority over any commercial value?

"To put it simply, our country is in peril. (...) The attack on the natural world which benefits very few Filipinos is rapidly whittling away at the very base of our living world and endangering its fruitfulness for future generations. (...) Huge plantations and mono-crop agriculture have pitted humans against nature. There are short-term profits for the few and even substantial harvests, but the fertility of the land has suffered and the diversity of the natural world has been depleted."

Pastoral letter by the Bishops of the Philippines

In June 2006, the United Nations Environment Programme declared, however, that "poverty in Africa can be made history if the region's wealth of natural resources is effectively, fairly and sustainably harnessed"⁴, in short, by giving priority to humans rather than profits.

1 - Sahlins, M., *Stone Age Economics*, Chicago, Aldine, 1972.

2 - Polanyi, K., *La grande transformation*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983.

3 - Campbell, B., *Canadian Mining Companies in Africa*, in Relations no 660, May 2000.

4 - UNEP, *Africa Environment Outlook*, June 27, 2006.



Although democratic, a society controlled solely by the laws of commerce nurtures a philosophy that destroys all efforts to contribute to the common good. For well-informed citizens, understanding this means taking on a huge challenge and coming up with alternatives that will certainly help...but will go against the tide.

Re-inventing the world

This movement has already begun. More and more organizations are working to revive the principle of the common good. These men and women have declared that another world is possible and are working, perhaps subconsciously, to re-invent the world.⁵ Hopeful that they can give political structure to their values, Christians have joined in solidarity with those who feel marginalized by market forces and are fostering a spirituality that incorporates the social dimension of their commitments.



Already, their actions are providing hope for a new world of love and justice. This quest for basic democratic values has nothing to do with the pursuit of false illusions. Isn't the smallest action aimed at the well-being of everyone akin to the salvation promised by God?



The Church denounces the destruction of natural resources and gives priority to helping any man, woman or child at risk of isolation, poverty or death. It defines the common good as "the sum total of

"This is why, in Catholic social thought, the common good should be conceived as the sustenance and flourishing of life for all beings and for future generations.

The call for a "new solidarity" should take into consideration not only the economic needs of all people but also environmental protection in order to provide for all."

Pastoral letter by the Social Affairs Commission, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Christian Ecological Imperative October 4, 2003

those conditions of social life which allow people as groups and as individuals to reach their proper fulfillment". The common good is concerned with the life of every person with respect to water, food, clothing, health, work, education, culture, family, security and peace. (Catholic Catechism §1907-1909)

Here we see clear opposition to the ideology that natural resources are products that can be purchased, sold and converted into cash. In Christianity, there is no possible comparison between the right of all persons to live in dignity and the commercial obligation to have to pay to live. In this respect, we can say that the judge's decision regarding a homeless person stealing food is an eminently Christian gesture.

5 - Pichette, J., *Continuons de résister* in Relations no 657, January-February 2000.

This text illustrates one of the six principles that underlie **DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE's** 2006-2011 education program on the just management, control and distribution of the earth's resources. **The texts were written by Lise Baroni, Michel Côté, Anne Marie Dalton, Heather Eaton and Stephen Scharper**, under the supervision of the Theology Committee of **DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE.**

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CANADIAN CATHOLIC ORGANIZATION FOR
Development and Peace

10 St. Mary St., #420
Toronto, ON, M4Y 1P9
Toll free: 1-800-494-1401 Toronto: (416) 922-1592
E-mail: info@devp.org Web site: www.devp.org

