



Holy Thursday, April 17, 2014

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister,

The following reflections are being written during the week that Jews around the world are celebrating Passover and most Christians prepare to celebrate Easter. Jews and Christians see in their respective celebrations of the Passover and Easter an invitation by God to pass over whatever enslaves us and so enter the “promised land” – where humanity and all creation live in peace and justice. It is thus a moment to give special attention to issues and places where humanity is suffering and at risk, and to share words of blessing to hearten our sisters and brothers. As you know much better than I, our times are filled with serious challenges, including the economy, employment, the environment, the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and personal and national security. These issues have profound impact on our human life and dignity, and are all the more complex by being so intertwined, not only with each other but also with their underlying moral and spiritual dimensions. While articulated and deepened by different faith traditions, they are at times unfortunately misshapen by conflicting values, both religious and secular. Allow me to draw to your attention some of the particular areas of concern that the Catholic Bishops of Canada have recently been discussing.

- **Africa.** Rwanda having just commemorated these past days the 20th anniversary of its genocide and massacres, the international community can only be alarmed by the current situation in the Central African Republic. Already this past February, Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga of Bangui reported signs of what he described as genocide against Muslims, following a period of severe reprisals against Christians. Thousands of citizens have fled their homes in search for security, with more than one million in need of food assistance. Catholic Bishops in that country insist this is not basically a sectarian struggle, as both Muslims and Christians are found on each side of the conflict. Unfortunately, however, differences in religion are used here and elsewhere as an excuse to justify violence, another pertinent example of which currently is in Nigeria. Together with other Bishops around the world, we are concerned about the use of religion as an explanation and pretext for violence in Africa and throughout the Middle East. In Cameroon, to give another recent example, there has been the kidnapping and abduction of Sister Gilberte Bussière, an elderly Canadian

nun and educator who worked in that country for many years. We encourage the concerted efforts of the Department of Foreign Affairs to free Sister Bussièrè and the two Italian priests kidnapped with her, while also urging your government to look for ways that our country can help stabilize civil governments and food security throughout Africa.

- **Asia.** The Catholic Church has focused on the tragic situation in Syria over the past few years, where some 10 million people are now displaced. We congratulate your government for its generous financial assistance to the surrounding countries in that region which shelter Syrian refugees. We greatly appreciate too the role of the federal Office and Ambassador for Religious Freedom in promoting religious freedom and protesting cases of religious discrimination and persecution, particularly in the Middle and the Far East. At the same time as wishing to encourage such efforts, we implore you to find ways to simplify and speed up immigration processes for refugees wishing to come to Canada, and for ensuring health and other benefits for those who have succeeded in getting here. Catholic health-care workers are among those who are alarmed at how recent immigrants and refugees to our country face reduced government support for medical care and health benefits. In addition, a number of our dioceses and parishes, as well as other religious and community groups, have been waiting for months to receive Syrian refugees, but to date the number who succeed in arriving in our country is just a pitiful handful.

- **Latin America.** Pope Francis has been speaking out on two particular concerns in that continent, and these are also shared by the Bishops of Canada. Earlier this month, the Pope urged Venezuelans to put aside their political differences and demonstrate the necessary courage to reach an agreement to avoid greater bloodshed after weeks of violent protests. He appealed to all citizens to recognize that they share common concerns about the economic crisis, violence and criminality, and creating a future for their children and for peace. A similar appeal is also being made to all Canadians in turn by Latin Americans, a concern we now share with you. This second issue the Pope has raised: many South American communities today despair that their natural resources are exploited by foreign interests which fail to respect the environment, Aboriginal Peoples, and the needs of surrounding communities, resorting instead to lawlessness, intimidation and unfair advantages. Bishops from Latin America over past months have told my confreres and me that their criticisms are especially directed against international companies registered in Canada. It seems these “Canadian” interests are dominant players in mineral extraction throughout the continent and in the current deforestation of the Amazon Basin. With Pope Francis, my fellow Bishops and I ask you and your government, first, to encourage Venezuela in the pursuit of dialogue for resolving its problems. Secondly, on the same road of dialogue, together with the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, and other NGOs, we urge that our federal government establish an independent Ombudsman who could hear complaints and help establish stronger accountability standards for companies that are registered in Canada and involved in international resource extraction.

- **Europe.** We thank you for speaking out so firmly about the sovereignty and rights of Ukraine. In a letter earlier this year, I assured the Bishops in that country that Catholics here are united with them in prayer and solidarity, and in pleading “for the guarantee of all rights and liberties in Ukraine, particularly the right to life and dignity, freedom of conscience and religion, and liberty of expression and self-government”. Our prayers and pleas were accompanied by the call of Pope Francis for “diplomacy and dialogue”, in order that “the moral force of law” prevail over the “material force of arms” in order to build “communion amid disagreement”. The Pope went on to recall that 2014 is the centenary of the outbreak of World War I. We are united with him in reminding you and all political leaders that armed conflict always creates more problems than it resolves, a point made so particularly and painfully evident a century ago.

- **Canada.** Your government has recently renewed your funding commitment to provide Indigenous People in our country with equal access to education. In encouraging you and Aboriginal leaders to cooperate in mutual consultation and collaboration, my brother Bishops and I are fully aware of the many difficult challenges that lie ahead. Governments at all levels, as well as civil society and Aboriginal Peoples themselves, must find more effective ways of ensuring respect for Aboriginal cultural traditions, the responsible role of Indigenous Peoples in determining their economic, educational and developmental needs, and in reaffirming their cultures, values, languages and communities. An important part of this evidently involves developing together a sound economic base. Yet even more it demands shared vision and mutual respect. As our Conference said when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began in 2008, our common goal should be to build “relationships that better respect the human person, contribute to justice and peace, and are constructive for our communities,” both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

We also continue to worry about the devaluing of human life that marks our country when we consider both life’s beginning and ending. The way our society cares for those who are waiting to be born and those who await death is a powerful sign of our appreciation for the sanctity of human life itself. The lack of such care can only lead to the denial of the intrinsic dignity of every human being. We need as a country to look again at the directions we have taken and are taking in this regard.

Prime Minister, as I write these words, my mind and heart turn to Calgary, where five young people were senselessly murdered. At the same time the funeral is being held for your colleague and friend, our recent Minister of Finance, the Honourable Jim Flaherty, who died too suddenly and too soon. Such events remind us harshly of the precariousness of human life, and our natural revolt against these is a sign of the deep value of every single human being.

As I convey the prayers and sympathies of the Catholic Bishops of Canada for the loss that all Canadians feel at such a moment, I suggest that all of us, including political leaders, consider the individual human faces behind each of these challenging situations. The political process has

as its final aim the enhancement of the common good, not only that of the citizens of one's own country but that of the whole world. In this special moment of reflection, repentance, renewal and hope that is Holy Week, I assure you of the prayers and respect of my brother Bishops, and welcome any occasion when our mutual concerns can be shared and deepened through dialogue and greater understanding.

Sincerely yours in the peace and hope of Easter,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Paul-André Durocher". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+ Paul-André Durocher
Archbishop of Gatineau
President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops