The Catholic Bishops and Quebec Nationalism

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The massive secularization produced by the Quiet Revolution reduced practising Catholics to a minority in Quebec.[1] The Catholic bishops decided not to react to this situation with resentment. To find new ways of serving the Catholic community, they created, at the end of the 1960s, the Dumont Commission whose task it was to report on the new religious situation and make recommendations for innovative pastoral approaches.[2] Since the Church had been identified with *le peuple canadien* from the beginning, the bishops promised they would continue to walk with this people, share its concerns, and respond from a Catholic perspective to the problems that emerged in its history. The bishops came to respect the pluralistic character of Quebec society and to recognize that they now represented a minority. Still, they will make their contribution to the public debate from a Catholic point of view.

Over the years the Catholic bishops have put their resolution into practice. For decades their pastoral letters have dealt with important public issues discussed in Quebec society. The perspective from which they have looked at these issues was defined by their solidarity with groups that bore the heavier burden in society: workers, the unemployed, welfare recipients — especially women, poor immigrants and refugees. In the language of political science, the bishops' perspective was that of the democratic left.

This shift to the left corresponds to the evolution of Catholic social teaching during the sixties and seventies. The ethical commitment to look upon society from the perspective of its weakest members, the so-called "option for the poor," was first endorsed by the Latin

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American Church; it was later supported by papal teaching, especially John Paul II's *Laborem exercens*, and it became particularly fruitful in the social teaching of the Canadian bishops. Best known among several pastoral letters on social justice is the bishops' statement of 1983, "Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis," which offered an extended ethical critique of contemporary capitalism.[3] The Quebec bishops were active in the caucus of the Canadian bishops, but they also worked among themselves and produced their own pastorals addressed to the Catholics of Quebec.

How, then, did the Quebec bishops respond to the new nationalism generated by the Quiet Revolution? This is the topic of the present essay. I shall not deal with the Church's relation to the conservative, anti-modern, xenophobic nationalism supported by prominent clergymen in Quebec prior to World War II. Nor shall I discuss the response of the bishops to the recent national self-affirmation of the Native peoples. To study the bishops' reaction of contemporary Quebec nationalism I shall examine the pastoral letters written over the last two decades, especially the two most relevant documents, "The Charter of the French Language" (1977), written as response to the White Paper introducing Bill 101, published by the Parti Québécois government, and "The People of Quebec and its Political Future" (1979), issued in anticipation of the Referendum held in 1980.

The People of Quebec

The bishops strongly defend the position that Quebecers constitute "a people" and that as such they have the right to self-determination. Already in 1967, the pastoral statement produced on the occasion of Canada's one hundredth anniversary by the Canadian bishops, who were both anglophone and francophone, clearly acknowledged the peoplehood of French Canadians.[4] At this time

other Christian Churches made short public statements in which they thanked God for the first century of Confederation and asked for God's blessing on the next century. By contrast, the Catholic bishops produced a lengthy letter in which they analysed critically both the strengths and the weaknesses of Canadian Confederation.

According to this document of 1967, "the chief malady of Canadian society" was the growing discontent felt by French Canadians over the many obstacles that hindered them from affirming their identity and developing their culture. To help Canadians understand this situation, the document explains that

> the French-Canadian community is a linguistic and cultural group with roots three centuries old in the soil of Canada, the soil which has served as the "cradle of their life, labour, sorrow and dreams." Here is a people . . . vividly aware that they make up a community enjoying a unity, individuality and spirit of their own, all of which yield them an unshakable right to their own existence and development.[5]

This is the reason, the document continues, why French Quebecers keep referring to themselves as "a nation," even if this vocabulary leads to serious misunderstanding with English-speaking Canadians.

In the pastoral letter, "The People of Quebec and its Political Future,"[6] written prior to the 1980 Referendum, the Quebec bishops strongly defended the right of Quebecers to cultural and political self-determination, giving — as we shall see — a highly nuanced definition of peoplehood. The bishops argued that the evolving moral sense of the world community, especially as expressed at the United Nations, has come to recognize the right of peoples to define their own future in cultural, economic and political terms. The bishops argued that the Christian Churches have endorsed this developing moral sense. This

collective right, they noted, is not a legal assurance laid down in a book of law: rather it is an ethical right that entitles a people to act collectively on behalf of its own future.

At the same time, the bishops insist that it is not their task to tell Quebecers how to shape their political future, whether it be within or without the federal system: the people must choose. The Church has no mandate to influence a political decision of this kind. When after the collapse of the Meech Lake Agreement a parish priest in Montreal put up a sign saying "Vive le Québec libre," the Archbishop of Montreal demanded that it be removed. The priest complied by replacing his sign by another, saying "Vive la Lithuanie libre."

According to the bishops, the Church's task is simply to defend, on ethical grounds, Quebec's right to self-determination and offer ethical principles that should guide such a political venture. While the bishops never mention the word "nationalism," their pastoral statements provide a set of norms to help Catholics discern what kind of nationalism is ethically acceptable.

The first question that calls for an answer is who belongs to the Quebec people? Only French Quebecers? Already in their 1977 pastoral, "The Charter of the French Language," the bishops answer this question in a manner that designates ethnic nationalism as ethically unacceptable.[7] Quebecers, they argue, are the people who live in Quebec: the French majority, of course, but in addition to them also the Native peoples with roots in the distant past, the English-speaking community long established in Quebec, and the ethno-cultural communites who have arrived more recently. It is together with these groups that the ethnically French majority constitute the Quebec people.

The point is made again in the 1979 pastoral, "The people of Quebec and its future": "it is together with these groups that that the francophone people of Quebec today ponder their future and search for an answer."[8] The

ethically acceptable nationalism, according to the bishops, is defined in territorial, not in ethnic terms.

> The future of Quebec shall not be decided by the francophone majority alone, but by all its citizens, that is by all who live within its boundaries, develop its economy, form a significant community, enrich its common culture, share the same legal and political institutions inherited from a common history. It is in this sense then, providing for all the necessary nuances, that one may refer to "the people of Quebec."[9]

We note here a significant development. In their 1967 statement, the Canadian bishops proposed an idea of peoplehood that was defined in ethnic terms. Quebecers were descendents and heirs of the French-Canadian community founded over three centuries ago. In 1979, over ten years later, the Quebec bishops recognized that this definition was no longer adequate. They resisted the idea of an ethnic nationalism. According to them, history has taught the founding community of French origin to interact with Native peoples and groups of other ethnic origins and to construct with them — not always without injustice and conflict — a modern society, which is the Quebec of today. Today the nationhood of Quebec, the distinct society, must be defined in territorial terms.

It is interesting to note that in recent years the nationalist organizations in Quebec, such as the Parti Québécois and the Société de St. Jean-Baptiste, have also moved to a multi-ethnic definition of Quebec's collective self-identity. We also note that the position taken by the Quebec bishops is shared by the federal New Democratic Party. The Quebec wing of the federal N.D.P. recently (December, 1990) passed a motion that closely corresponds to the bishops' position:

> Il est résolu que le NPD-Canada (Québec) réaffirme le droit collectif à l'autodétermination des Québécois et des Québécoises de toute origine. Ce principe est maintenu dans ce parti depuis 1944 et plus récemment lors du congrès du NPD-Canada à Montréal en 1987. Le NPD-Canada (Québec) propose qu'un gouvernement fédéral néo-démocrate négocie avec le gouvernement du Québec l'option choisie suite de l'exercise de ce droit à l'autodétermination dans un référendum démocratique, en respectant l'intégrite du Québec.

Quebec's Catholic bishops offered, in the same pastoral letter, further reflections on the conditions under which nationalism is ethically acceptable. Firstly, a nationalist movement for political self-determination is ethical only if it recognizes the interdependence of all nations and envisages a political future of trust and cooperation with them. Excluded is an isolationist political imagination. Secondly, a nationalist movement is ethically acceptable only it respects the minority communities and guarantees their human rights.

In this context, as in several others, the bishops lamented the presence of prejudice and discriminatory practises in their society. The churchmen recognized that the passion engendered by the struggle for collective self-determination easily leads to conflicts with those who are seen as obstacles and often encourages insulting discourse, ethnically-based prejudice, and discriminating practices. Social ethics and elementary Christian teaching, the bishops argued, demand that this trend be vehemently resisted.

To calm the rhetoric used in the debate prior to the Referendum, the bishops told the Catholic community that in the debate over federalism or independence no one may invoke the Gospel to defend their point of view. It would be wrong to say that Confederation is a holy covenant and

that to disrupt it would be a grave sin. And it would be equally wrong to say that Quebec's subjugation in Confederation is so massive that to oppose the liberation of Quebec would be sinful. The crucial ethical issue, according to the bishops, is not whether Quebec chooses one or the other political option, but whether the political project chosen will conform to the norms of social and economic justice.

The Language Legislation

How have the bishops of Quebec reacted to Bill 101, the Charter of the French Language, which the Parti Québécois introduced in 1976? The bishops regarded this historical event worthy of a pastoral letter in which they examined the ethical questions raised by the new legislation.

Relying on the White Paper produced by the government to announce the new bill, the bishops spelled out the intentions of the new law and in general approved of the values that the law wants to promote. The bishops agreed that the French language is in need of protection.

> To achieve this, the bill intends to redress the equilibrium between the majority and the minority and make Quebec a basically French-speaking society. Among possible measures taken, it will be principally the proclamation of French as the official language of Quebec, the common language of our joint social project, including the means to assure its implementation: in the life of society, in teaching, communications, the work place, administration, the face of Quebec, etc.[10]

Is this just? The new bill will limit certain acquired rights of the English-speaking minority and affect the immigration of other ethno-cultural commun-

ities. The moral justification for restricting these rights, the bishops argue, is redress, redress of a previous unbalance, the correction of an unjust situation.

> It has become increasingly evident that justice should be established in favour of the francophone majority which, because of certain historical circumstances, did not receive what was rightly due to them, for instance protection, security, economic participation corresponding to their number, recognition and promotion of the cultural values of their language.[11]

At the same time, redress demanded by justice has ethical limits. What is demanded is that one find the right proportion between the rights of the majority and those of the minorities. "The concern of the francophone community to see the priority of French respected must not prompt it to limit excessively the use of English."[12] The bishops are pleased that the White Paper contains declarations such as: "English will always have an important place in Quebec"; "English belongs to the cultural heritage of Quebecers"; "that English-speaking Quebecers keep their language, their ways of life and their culture is held by the government as a given of our common history."[13]

It is true that none of the nationalist politicians in the Parti Québécois have ever questioned the historic rights of the English-speaking community to its educational, social and cultural institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals, welfare agencies, and so forth.

While the bishops approve of Bill 101 in principle, they worried that its application might manifest lack of respect for the minorities. In this context, as I mentioned above, the bishops defined Quebec as a multi-ethnic society. They demanded that the francophone majority never forget that anglophones and allophones are also Quebecers, members of the same political community, citizens enjoying the same rights, with whom the majority participate in building a just society.

The ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada in December, 1988, that certain articles of Bill 101, especially the one demanding commercial signs in French only, were not in comformity with the Quebec Charter of Rights, produced a heated debate in the province of Quebec. For French Quebecers Bill 101 was a Charter as much as the Charter of Rights. English-speaking Quebecers did not agree. Eventually the Liberal government decided to find a compromise solution. Invoking the "notwithstanding clause" of the Canadian Constitution to limit the application of the Supreme Court's decision, Premier Bourassa introduced Bill 178, which allowed bilingual commercial signs inside stores but ruled that commercial signs facing the street must be in French only. Because Bourassa had promised to permit bilingual signs before his election, the anglophone community felt betrayed by the government's decision. Many anglophones did not appreciate fully Bourassa's dilemma: if he had watered down the protection of Montreal's French public face, great numbers of Quebecers would have turned to the separatist Parti Québécois.

A group of English-speaking Catholics, unhappy with the action of the Liberal government, addressed a formal request to the Quebec bishops, asking them to offer an ethical evaluation of the Bill 178 and the use of the "notwithstanding clause." The bishops replied to this request in a public declaration on the need for civic friendship.[14] They argue that a decision made by a court, based on an interpretation of existing laws, is not necessarily decisive for an ethical evaluation. Ethical reflection on Bill 178, and even on Bill 101, must take into account the concern of the two linguistic communities, both of which are minorities — though in different ways, and both of which are or feel threatened — though in different degrees. In the earlier pastoral letter of 1977, the bishops already acknowledged that the redress of a previous imbalance in favour of the francophone majority places certain restrictions on the anglophone community.

This, alas, is the logic of redress. Twelve years later, in the present public declaration, they still believe that in Quebec French remains threatened by the powerful language of the North American continent. French still needs supplementary protection.

The Supreme Court understood the present situation as a conflict between the collective right of Quebec to promote the French language and the civil liberties of English-speaking Quebecers, in particular their freedom of expression on commercial signs. It is interesting that the bishops saw this rather differently. For them the conflict was between two collective rights: the group rights of francophones versus the group rights of anglophones. The question the bishops asked, therefore, was whether Bills 101 and 178 threaten the well-being of the language and the cultural life enjoyed by the anglophone community. Because they answered this question in the negative, they defended the ethical character of the French language charter.

Social and Economic Justice

More important than the language question is the issue of social and economic justice. I mentioned above the turn to the left taken by the bishops of Quebec and Canada in the seventies. Over the years, the bishops have become constant critics of the governments at Ottawa and at Quebec for the growing indifference to the well-being of working people and the fate of men and women whose lives are damaged by a never-ending economic crisis. While the Church repeatedly repudiated socialism in the past, in the seventies the Canadian bishops acknowledged socialism as a valid option for Catholics if they tried to promote the ethics of Jesus within the socialist movement.[15]

A glance at the book, *La justice sociale comme bonne nouvelle*, a collection of the pastoral statements made by

the Quebec bishops over a decade, reveals the extent of their social solidarity. The pastoral letters deal with specific labour struggles, the unemployed, health in the work place, the cooperative movement, unemployed youth, people on welfare, the closing of factories, immigrant workers, the threat to the environment, the problems of farmers, and the decline of the regions.

The bishops not only blame the government and its political philosophy, they also denounce the injustices committed by other agencies in Quebec society, in particular the discrimination inflicted upon immigrants and their families. Because the bishops envisage Quebec as a multiethnic society, they are disturbed by the existence of widespread prejudice and the economic exploitation connected with it.

In one pastoral letter, the bishops expressed a particular concern for the exploitation of immigrant women, especially in the clothing industry, the employment at hotels and restaurents, and domestic work and other family services.[16] The bishops asked Quebecers to reflect on the situation of these immigrant women, some of whom find themselves in the labour market for the first time. They have problems of personal adaptation, they find it difficult to re-organize their family life and gain a new type of relation to their husbands, and they lack access to daycare services. In addition to these serious problems, the bishops continue, we inflict upon them our mistrust, our hesitation, and our prejudices. In this context, as in many others, the bishops insist that "the society we are about to build, whatever the political form we give to it, must be open, welcoming and solidary."[17]

We noted that the bishops never use the word "nationalism." Instead, as in the above instance, they speak of Quebec's quest for political self-determination. Their message is quite clear. A nationalist movement is ethically acceptable only if it is guided by a vision of a just society. And what is a just society? In a second pastoral letter prior to the Referendum, called "Building

Together a Better Society," the bishops spell out the vision of the just society under several subtitles: a society of participation, a society based on respect for human rights and acknowledgement of civil duties, a society based on a just distribution of goods and responsibilities, a society attentive to cultural and spiritual values, and finally a society that is open and solidary.[18]

The bishops make the same point in a brief submitted to the Bélanger-Campeau Commission on the political and constitutional future of Quebec. They are disturbed that in the present discussion "the national question" is increasingly separated from "the social question," i.e., the question of social and economic justice. If justice to workers, the unemployed and the poor becomes a secondary issue in Quebec's political agenda, society is drifting further in an ethically reprehensible direction.

The teaching of the Quebec bishops on the nationalist movement recalls the theory relating ethics and nationalism presented over half a century ago by the German Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich. In his book, *The Socialist Decision*, published in 1932,[19] Tillich argued against liberal and socialist thinkers who in the name of universal values rejected nationalism in any of its forms. Because of their exclusive reliance on reason, Tillich believed, liberals and socialists underestimated the important role played by particular national traditions in the building of a just and cooperative society. Tillich admitted, of course, that the unguarded surrender to a particular national tradition, whether defined in religious, cultural or ethnic terms, represented a dangerous political orientation because particular values, however precious, quickly become principles of discrimination, exclusion and subjugation. This danger is the element of truth in liberal and socialist theory. Still, the particular values mediated through family, tribe, community, church or nation were so deeply woven into people's personal and communal lives that it would be foolish to adopt a social philosophy that

disregarded the national heritage altogether. Tillich criticized the "economism" of liberal and socialist thinkers, i.e., their tendency to analyse society in purely economic terms, either for liberals as a product created by the logic of the market, or for socialists as a reflection of the economically defined class conflict. Sound socialist policy, Tillich argued in this book, would be to appreciate particular cultural, ethnic and religious values, including nationalist sentiment capable of creating solidarity and social cohesion, provided that this particularism was subject to the universal principles of justice.

Tillich's theory anticipates the position taken over the last two decades by the Quebec bishops. A nationalist movement, or national self-affirmation, is an ethical undertaking only if it is controlled by a vision of society defined in terms of justice, equality, respect and participation.

Notes

1. See my article, "Catholicism and Secularization in Quebec," *Cross Currents* 4 (Winter 1986-87): 436-458.

2. See my forthcoming article on the Dumont Commission in *Sociologie et société.*

3. In *Do Justice! The Social Teaching of the Canadian Catholic Bishops*, ed. E.F. Sheridan, 399-410 (Toronto: Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 1987).

4. In *Do Justice!*, pp 122-134.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

6. *La justice sociale comme bonne nouvelle: Messages sociaux, économiques et politiques des évèques du*

Québec: 1972-1983 (Montreal: Editions Bellarmin, 1984), pp. 137-145.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-118.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

14. *L'église de Montréal* (February 16, 1989): 151.

15. "A Society to be Transformed" (1977), in *Do Justice!*, pp. 326-332.

16. *La justice sociale comme bonne nouvelle*, pp. 157-166.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 145-156.

19. Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). Tillich had to leave Germany soon after the Nazis came to power because of this book.