

# Convening the

# CONVERSATION:

## The Choices We Make Matter



## A Workshop Guide on Advocacy for Poverty Reduction

Prepared by the Social Justice Representatives of the Catholic Dioceses of Ontario and  
endorsed by the Social Affairs Commission of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario  
Spring, 2014

# PREAMBLE:

The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO) has a long tradition of calling Catholics and all citizens to reflect on the choices they make when it is time to vote in an election. The workshop entitled Choosing a Government, calls us all to an ethical reflection based on the principles of Catholic Social Teaching and responsible citizenship as to which candidate and which political party is best suited to serve given the issues facing our province at that time.

Following in the steps of this tradition, the Social Affairs Commission (SAC) of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario offers the workshop, Convening the Conversation: The Choices We Make Matter, as an invitation to reflect on:

- the choices our governments have made especially in tough economic times;
  - how these choices have impacted citizens who live in poverty;
- how might a new path into the future with different choices better serve the poor, the disabled, the unemployed;
  - how might people of faith influence those choices.

Convening a conversation on advocacy for government action to put the needs of the poor and the vulnerable as a priority is in accord with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Such a conversation is especially encouraged during any election campaign when political parties, including the governing one, are traditionally more open to listening to the needs of their constituents as they formulate or refine their policies.

This workshop is meant for use by social justice groups, parish pastoral councils and other parish groups or any other group who wishes to raise awareness of issues that impact the least among us and who believe that people of faith have something important to add to the conversation.

# CONVENING THE CONVERSATION: THE CHOICES WE MAKE MATTER

**Time Frame: 2 hours maximum**

**Setting: Comfortable room with tables seating 5-6 people**

**Materials: Flip chart paper, markers and painters tape as well as the following documents:**

- **Summary: “Falling Behind, Ontario’s Backslide into Widening Inequality, Growing Poverty and Cuts to Social Programs”**
- **Passages from Sacred Scripture and Church documents**
- **Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching prepared by the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace**

1

## **Step One: Opening Reflection (Allow 15 mins)**

Invite participants to select one passage from the Handout One: Passages from Sacred Scripture and Church Documents on Justice, reflect on the passage you have chosen and respond to the following questions:

What does this passage say about how the followers of Jesus are to be in the world?

Invite comments from the larger group.

Invite participants to conclude with the following prayer:

O God, you have planted deep within us a longing  
to know you and to make your love known.  
Open our hearts to the sound of your gentle voice.  
Shape our hearts to respond to the needs of those around us.  
Make us, as stewards of creation, witnesses of your  
steadfast love for all you have created.  
Father, you alone are holy.  
We ask that your Spirit draw us more profoundly  
into your holiness in the one Body of Christ.  
Amen.

*(Prayer for Spiritual Renewal in the Diocese of London)*

## 2

### **Step Two: Our Tradition Calls us to Love One Another and to be Agents of Justice in the World (Allow 25 mins)**

*"To evangelize implies a desire in the Church to come out of herself. The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only in the geographic sense but also the existential peripheries... When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referent and then she gets sick."*

-Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires,  
Jorge Bergoglio, March 7, 2013

Handout Two: "Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching," from the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. Give participants 5 mins to read this document.

Our times are complex. Often our care of those in need is not enough. As followers of Jesus, like Jesus, we must call into question and challenge the structures, policies and choices that keep people in poverty or at the margins of society. The Church's Catholic Social Teachings can help us to critically reflect on choices made by government, industry, financial institutions that do not take into account the reality of the least in our society.

Brainstorm at your table:

- What are the issues facing the poor, the disabled, the unemployed and the homeless in your city or town or in the Province of Ontario?
- Taking into account the Key Themes, how can your faith community influence how these issues are addressed?
- At your table, chart your responses. After the discussion, tape your charts on designated wall space.

Participants will be invited to review these sheets at a break and/or at the end of the workshop when it is time to commit to an action.

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We hear much in the media today about the growing gap between the rich and the poor. In August of 2012, Ontario Common Front, an organization made up of groups and individuals across the province who are working to expose the growing inequality in Ontario and to propose workable solutions to rectify this inequality, published a document entitled, "Falling Behind: Ontario's Backslide into Widening Inequality, Growing Poverty and Cuts to Social Programs." This document details who is most impacted by the choices made by government and industry and the extent of the impact.

Pass out Handout Three: Quotes from the document Falling Behind. (Allow 10 mins to read these.)

Invite participants to reflect on the following questions and then to enter into table conversation (15 mins):

- Do the conclusions from this document speak to your knowledge and experience?
- What is new learning for you in this document?
- What is most disturbing?
- Keeping in mind the passage from Sacred Scripture you reflected on and the Key Themes from Catholic Social Teaching, ask the larger group the following questions: (Allow 20 mins for this conversation)
- Does the Christian community have a role to play in moving this debate forward?
- How can our Tradition contribute to a conversation that calls all citizens to rethink choices that keep fellow citizens in poverty or that worsen their economic situations?

## 3

### **Step Three: How the current situation in Ontario is impacting the poor, the disabled, the unemployed and others in need. (Allow 45 mins)**

# 4

## **Step Four: Commitment to Action on Behalf of Justice (Allow 30 mins)**

*Oh, how I would like a poor Church, and for the poor.*

-Pope Francis

Pass out Handout Four: Selected Quotes related to Commitment to Action on Behalf of Justice

Invite participants to read this handout (5 mins) and then invite table groups to discuss the following question: (25 mins)

- So then how might we, as Christians and as citizens, respond to the current situation we find ourselves in in Ontario?

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*“There are no borders, no limits: He sends us to everyone. ... Do not be afraid to go and to bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away, most indifferent.”*

-Pope Francis

Pass out Handout Five: Suggestions for Action. In the large group, initiate a conversation in response to this question and introduce possible actions the group may take on together or individually.

Also, invite participants to review the charts posted on the wall as part of Step Two. (Allow 15 mins for this discussion)

Before leaving the workshop, each person and/or each parish is asked to consider committing to one action to move the conversation begun today forward.

# 5

## **Step Five: Commit to One Action (Allow 5 mins)**

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# CONCLUSION

Invite each person to reflect back on the passage from Sacred Scripture or Church document they chose at the beginning of the workshop, read the passage in silence and then together, pray the Our Father.

*“I would like to make an appeal to those in possession of greater resources, to public authorities and to all people of good will who are working for social justice: never tire of working for a more just world, marked by greater solidarity.”*

-Pope Francis, World Youth Day, 2013

# HANDOUT ONE

## Passages from Sacred Scripture and Church Documents on Justice

### Acts 2:44-47

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds\* to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home\* and ate their food with glad and generous\* hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

### James 2:1-5, Warning against Partiality

My brothers and sisters,\* do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?\*

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet',\* have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.\* Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

### Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

### Matthew 25:34-40

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,\* you did it to me."

### Leviticus 19:34

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

### Gal 6:10

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

### John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

### **James 2:14-17: Faith without Works Is Dead**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters,\* if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

### **1 Timothy 5:8**

And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

### **Romans 15:25-27**

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.

### **Quotes from Church Documents on Justice**

As disciples of Christ, all of us have a responsibility to play a role in the creation of a social order based on justice. For we stand in the biblical tradition of the prophets of Israel (Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah) for whom to know God is to seek justice for the disinherited, the poor and the oppressed. The same Spirit of God that came upon the prophets filled Jesus of Nazareth. With the power of that Spirit, Jesus prayed and healed, all the while proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand (Mt 4:17, 23; Lk 6:12, 11: 1-4).. In the light of the Spirit he announced he was the message of the prophets come true – “the good news to the poor” and “liberty to the oppressed” (Lk 4:18, 19) (From Words to Action, Canadian Bishops, 1976, par. 4)

It is in our local communities that we can best exercise these social and political responsibilities. This calls for our personal and collective participation in local struggles for justice with the jobless, exploited workers, poor or lonely immigrants, small producers, native people, the culturally oppressed and others. We therefore ask local Christian communities to stimulate and intensify this kind of activity through special study/action projects as well as by existing family and religious education programs. And we urge leaders in the political and economic spheres of Canada to increase their efforts towards building a more just social order. Such actions will say louder than any words: “I am in the midst of you as one who serves” (Lk 22:27). (From Words to Action, Canadian Bishops, 1976, par. 11)

The century and the millennium now beginning will need to see, and hopefully with still greater clarity, to what length of dedication the Christian community can go in charity towards the poorest. If we have truly started out anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt 25:35-37). This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ. By these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity as the Bride of Christ. (From Millennio Ineunte , Pope John Paul II, 2001, par. 49)

To evangelize implies a desire in the Church to come out of herself. The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only in the geographic sense but also the existential peripheries... When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referent and then she gets sick. (Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, March 7, 2013)

# HANDOUT TWO

## **Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching**

### **Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and euthanasia. The value of human life is being threatened by cloning, embryonic stem cell research, and the use of the death penalty. The intentional targeting of civilians in war or terrorist attacks is always wrong. Catholic teaching also calls on us to work to avoid war. Nations must protect the right to life by finding increasingly effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them by peaceful means. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

### **Call to Family, Community and Participation**

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society – in economics and politics, in law and policy – directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. Marriage and the family are the central social institutions that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

### **Rights and Responsibilities**

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities – to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

### **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

# HANDOUT THREE

## **Ontario Common Front Quotes: Falling Behind, Ontario Backslide into Widening Inequality, Growing Poverty and Cuts to Social Programs**

The following quotes are taken from the document, *Falling Behind, Ontario's Backslide into Widening Inequality, Growing Poverty and Cuts to Social Programs*, a report of the Ontario Common Front, August 29, 2012.

- The average earned income (before tax) of the richest 10 per cent of Ontario families raising children was 27 times greater than that of the poorest 10 per cent in 1976. By 2004, the gap had ballooned to 75 times. While the highest income earners have enjoyed large income increases over the last generation, the bottom 40 per cent have seen stagnant or declining incomes, despite putting more hours into the workforce each year (Source: Armine Yalnizyan, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. *Ontario's Growing Gap: Time for Leadership* (2007), page 6).
- With more than 152,000 Ontario households on wait lists for assisted housing, Ontario has the worst record of all provinces in affordable housing investments. In 2009, Ontario spent \$64 per person on affordable housing compared to the average among all provinces of \$115 per person (Source: Michael Shapcott, Wellesley Institute (March 23, 2011), page 6).
- Ontario's austerity budget – heralding five years of retrenchment and a government –created recession in the public sector -- will undoubtedly accelerate Ontario's growing inequality and poverty unless a more balanced approach to public policy is restored (page 9).
- Families and individuals from racialized communities -- many of them immigrants – are overrepresented among Ontario's poor. Racialized families are 2 to 4 times more likely than white families to fall below the low income cut-off (LICO). The disproportionate impact of growing income inequality is all-too evident in Ontario's largest city where ethno-racial minority families make up 37 per cent of all Toronto families, but comprise 59 per cent of families living in poverty (page 21).
- While the incidence of poverty among seniors across Canada rose 25 per cent, Ontarians 65 years and older saw an extremely high poverty growth rate of 41.9 per cent, although the overall proportion of seniors in poverty still remains below 9 per cent. Single women over 65 were the largest group among unattached individuals of all age categories that has fallen into poverty since 2007 (page 22).
- Children live in poverty because their families live in poverty. It is therefore not surprising that the significant growth in child poverty over the last decade in Ontario mirrors the growth in overall poverty. From 1981 to 2009, the percentage of children living below the low income measure in Ontario jumped from 11.4 per cent to 14.6 per cent (page 24).
- Our social assistance system was never perfect. But policy changes focused on cutting costs and penalizing those who require social assistance, have deepened and expanded poverty. In 2011, approximately 6.5 per cent of Ontario's population – numbering 870,000 Ontarians – lived on social assistance, including Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Program. A family led by a single parent in 2011 is forced, under the current social assistance systems, to live on \$9,122 less than the low income measure (page 40).
- The trends in food bank usage illuminate the picture of growing inequality in Ontario. Families and individuals, already experiencing increased inequities since the early 1980s, never recovered fully after the last recession in the 1990s. Social assistance was dramatically cut and has never been restored, and income inequality took off. A year after the recession of 2008, food banks saw a 19 per cent spike in the number of people who needed emergency food help, compared to a 10 per cent increase during the recession of the early 1990s (page 27).

# HANDOUT FOUR

## **Selected Quotes related to Commitment to Action on Behalf of Justice**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

Christians are called to be both people of charity and of justice. We are called to tend to the needs of each other, especially those in most need but we are also called to bring right order to structures that are unjust. We have a long history of helping others especially in times of natural disasters or acute need. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us in paragraph 2446:

St. John Chrysostom vigorously recalls this: "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs."<sup>239</sup> "The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity":<sup>240</sup>

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 of justice.<sup>241</sup>

We are a little more reticent to become involved in the work of justice. However, two Church documents concerned with the role of the laity in the life of society and the world, call on us to be active participants in the social, economic and political from the perspective of the Gospel. The first one is from *The Church in the Modern World*, *Gaudium et Spes*, from the Second Vatican Council:

"This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation....The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, jeopardizes his eternal salvation. (GS 43)

And, from *Christifideles Laici*, from the 1987 Synod on the Laity:

At the same time, the Synod has pointed out that the post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to avoid: the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world. (CL 2)

# HANDOUT FIVE

## **Suggestions for Action:**

- Educate ourselves! Read the document “Falling Behind: Ontario’s Backslide into Widening Inequality, Growing Poverty and Cuts to Social Programs.” The full text can be found at [www.WeAreOntario.ca](http://www.WeAreOntario.ca).
- Hold politicians to their promises and commitments. In December of 2008, the Government of Ontario, with the support of all political parties, initiated a program to reduce poverty by 25 per cent in five years, by 2013: “Breaking the Cycle: Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy.” This program has largely been set aside.
- Following is a list of other possible actions flowing from this workshop:
  - Speak to your pastor about the possibility of collaborating with other parishes in your area and connect with representatives from Ontario Common Front and invite them to make a presentation in your area of your city.
  - Contact your member of the Provincial Legislature and invite him/her to meet with representatives from your parish (and possibly other area parishes) to discuss how his/her party is seeking to address this inequality. Encourage them to consider the recommendations contained in “Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario”.
  - Invite representatives from the different mainstream political parties to present to parishioners on how their party is prepared to repair this inequality.
  - Write letters to members of the Provincial Legislature and the Government of Canada asking that the growing inequality between the rich, the middle class and the poor be brought to the forefront and new choices be made to that address this reality from the perspective of justice.
  - Bring this inequality to the attention of your family, friends and co-workers. Invite them to read the document, “Falling Behind: Ontario’s Backslide into Widening Inequality, Growing Poverty and Cuts to Social Programs.” and then invite a discussion on the contents.
  - Form a Social Justice Committee in your parish that can educate all parishioners about the reality of inequality faced by citizens who rely on social assistance, the disabled, the unemployed and those that are homeless or who cannot find affordable housing.
- Other options .....