

Canadian Catholic Bishops

In Message on

INTRODUCTION

1. A cry for justice rings out today from the Native Peoples who inhabit the Canadian North. Dramatically, on a massive scale the Native Peoples of the North find themselves and their way of life being threatened by the headlong search for new energy sources on this continent.
2. At the same time, other voices are raising serious ethical questions about the enormous demands for energy required to maintain high standards of wealth and comfort in industrial society. A variety of public interest groups are calling for greater care of the environment and responsible stewardship of the energy resources in this country.
3. We, Catholic bishops of Canada, want to echo these cries for justice and demands for stewardship in the Canadian North. They tell us much
 - about ourselves as citizens and consumers,
 - about the industrial society of North America,
 - about the Native Peoples of the North.
 As Christians, we cannot ignore the pressing ethical issues of northern development. For the living God the God we worship, is the Lord of Creation and Justice.
4. We wish to share with you, fellow citizens, some reflections and judgements on the ethical problems posed by the industrial development of the Canadian North. (1) We hope that these reflections and judgements will contribute to more public debate and stimulate alternative policies regarding the future development of the North. We also ask that these expressed concerns be tested in the public arena along with other points of view.

THE NORTHERN DILEMMA

5. Since "time beyond memory", the vast land mass that covers the northern tips of our provinces and the sub-Arctic regions has been the home for many of this country's Native Peoples: Indians, Inuit, Metis. Through time, these Native Peoples developed social, cultural, economic, and religious patterns of life which were in harmony with the rhythms of the land itself. (2)
6. This land has been the source of livelihood for a significant portion of Northern Native Peoples, along with a number of early white settlers. It has been the basis of their traditional economy
 - hunting,
 - fishing,
 - trapping.
 For the Native Peoples the land is more than simply a source of food or cash. The land itself constitutes a permanent sense of security, well-being and identity.

For generations, this land has defined the basis of what the natives are as a people. In their own words, "Our land is our life." (3)

After countless generations of occupation, use and care the Native Peoples of the North have come to claim their rights to these lands. (4) While some northern natives are giving up their life of hunting, fishing, and trapping these lands remain essential to their future economic development. For these northern lands contain a natural storehouse of some of the most valuable resources on this continent: potential reserves of oil and natural gas, powerful river systems and rich mineral deposits.

8. But now the "energy crisis" in the industrial world is posing a serious challenge to the people and resources of the northern lands. The search for new supplies of
 - oil,
 - gas,
 - electricity
 on this continent is largely focussed on the untapped energy resources of the Canadian North.
9. In recent years, provincial governments, crown corporations and private companies have been planning large scale projects to harness the power potential of the northern rivers.
 - Dams,
 - power plants,
 - railroads,
 - highways
 are now under construction in several provinces:
 - the James Bay hydro project in northern Quebec;
 - the Churchill-Nelson hydro development in northern Manitoba;
 - the Churchill Falls hydro project in Labrador;
 - the hydro electric plants in northwest British Columbia.
10. Simultaneously, the Canadian North has been sighted as a major region for potential reserves of oil and gas. Assisted by the federal government, the giants of the oil industry
 - Exxon,
 - Shell,
 - Gulf,
 - Mobil,
 - Sunoco,
 - and others
 have led the way, through their Canadian subsidiaries, in making discoveries and initiating plans to build several major industrial projects: (5)
 - the Mackenzie Valley pipeline in the Northwest Territories to bring natural gas from Alaska and the Canadian Arctic to Southern Canada and the United States;
 - the Polar Gas pipeline designed to bring natural gas from the high Arctic to the Maritimes and the United States;
 - the Syncrude project to develop the Athabaska tarsands in northern Alberta.

In this way the Canadian North is fast becoming a centre stage in a continental struggle to gain control of new energy sources. The critical issue is how these northern energy resources are to be developed

- by whom and for whom.

 We are especially concerned that the future of the North not be determined by colonial patterns of development, wherein a powerful few end up controlling both the people and the resources.

12. Some present examples of industrial planning give us cause for grave concern. (6) For what we see emerging in the Canadian North are forms of exploitation which we often assume happen only in Third World countries: a serious abuse of both the Native Peoples and the energy resources of the North. (7) Herein lies the Northern dilemma. What has been described as the "last frontier" in the building of this nation may become our own "Third World."

DEMANDS FOR JUSTICE

13. Our first pastoral concern is that justice be done in the future industrial development of the Canadian North. In various parts of the northern lands the Native Peoples' protests have drawn attention to a series of injustices:

- (i) In several cases, governments and corporations have secretly planned and suddenly announced the construction of large industrial projects without prior consultation with the people who will be most directly affected. (8) As a result, the future lives of these Native Peoples and their communities tend to be planned for them by Southern interests.
- (ii) The plans for these industrial projects are usually finalized and implemented before land claim settlements have been reached with the Native People of the region. (9) Yet, for people whose land is their life, and who wish to secure control over their future economic development, a just settlement of their land claims lies at the very heart of their struggle for justice.
- (iii) The construction of these industrial projects has sometimes proceeded without an adequate assessment of their environmental and social consequences. In several instances, the building of power plants and hydro dams will cause the flooding of vast areas of land, damage to the vegetation and wildlife, and the relocation of whole communities of people whose lives have traditionally depended on hunting, fishing, and trapping. (10)
- (iv) The promise of jobs in the construction of these industrial projects has offered no real alternative way of life. For most of the Native People, these jobs are temporary, paying relatively low wages for low skilled labour. (11)
14. As a result, more and more Native People are being compelled to give up their land-based economy and move into the urban centres where alcoholism and welfarism have become prevalent for many. While compensation may be offered, money can hardly replace the loss of land and what it means to the lives of the Native People and their future economic development.
15. A sense of justice, coming from the living God, tells us there are better ways of developing the resources of the Canadian North. The Lord of Creation has given mankind the responsibility to develop the resources of Nature so as to make possible a fuller human life for all peoples. (12) This coincides with the beliefs of the Native Peoples who have traditionally called for a "communal sharing" of the land which belongs to the Creator.
16. To develop the resources of the Canadian North is a responsibility to be shared by all who live in this country - North and South. While Native People in the North must be prepared to share in this responsibility, they rightly demand that their claims to justice be realized. In the words of one Northern Native leader: "... We also want to participate in Canadian society, but we want to participate as equals. It is impossible to be equal if our economic development is subordinated to the profit-oriented priorities of the American multi-nationals. ... the Native People are saying we must have a large degree of control over our own economic development. Without control we will end up like our brothers and sisters on the reserves in the South: continually powerless threatened and impoverished." (13)