

Keynote Address – Archbishop Thomas Collins
29th Annual Cardinal’s Dinner – October 30, 2008

A Safe Path through Turbulence

I: Turbulence

It is always a bit frightening during a flight on an airplane when the pilot puts on the “Fasten Seatbelt” sign, and tells everyone to return to their seats since the plane is about to enter a zone of turbulence. Once I heard a pilot speak of “a bit of bumpy air ahead”, but the homey language did little to calm my anxiety.

Our society is presently going through significant financial and economic turbulence, with grave social consequences. Perhaps the turmoil is more dramatic elsewhere, but in this world in which the economic and financial destinies of separate nations are so tightly woven together we are not immune, and already are experiencing the effects of the global crisis. In our own diocese people are losing their jobs.

With the pressure arising from economic hard times, new problems are created in families and in the wider society, and existing ones are made worse. As financial pressure bears down upon parents, they worry about how they will care for their families. Our agencies within Catholic Charities, experience increased demands for their services, and this is true as well of other religious and secular social agencies.

Already domestic violence is a significant issue, and the increased tensions arising from financial anxieties can only make it worse. The problems of poverty and homelessness were with us before the current economic downturn, and we may expect that they will become even more serious.

At the same time, charities are concerned that their revenue will drop just when needs are greater, and so their capacity to respond to the increasing challenges will be limited. Now is the time when ever greater generosity is needed from all of us. I urge everyone to contribute more generously than ever to ShareLife, and to the other charitable appeals within our wider community.

Since Cardinal Carter established the Cardinal’s Dinner in 1979, over \$4.5 million has been distributed to those in need, and last year’s Dinner raised \$145,500. This was used to help care for the vulnerable in our community through the work of Barrett House, the Cardinal Carter Breakfast Club, Good Shepherd Refuge, and many others groups. Although some of the proceeds from this event go to well known charities, we specialize in helping many smaller initiatives which do immense good in serving people of all faiths in our whole community, and which do not have a great capacity for fund raising. I thank you for enthusiastically supporting this effort through your presence here this evening.

Beyond the ever greater necessity of practical generosity, as we experience economic and social turbulence, we need to pray for the political, financial, and economic leaders who exercise authority and responsibility within our community. May they have wisdom and courage. May they work co-operatively for the common good of all, especially those who are most at risk.

We all need to learn from our situation, and to grow in wisdom. To do that, we must look intently at reality, and escape the fog of illusion.

Underlying the complex financial and economic forces that have led to our present situation, it may well be that the common theme is the danger of illusion, which invariably brings trouble. Reality always wins in the end. If we are living beyond our means, and unrealistically leveraging our future, there has got to be a day of judgment, even in this world. Bubbles always burst. Houses built on sand collapse. Greed is not good. Virtue is good. It is also practical.

For anyone who seeks to go beyond illusion to a wise understanding of reality, the social teachings of the Catholic Church are an extraordinary treasure, though largely a hidden one. By pondering those wise teachings in these difficult days, we can gain insight into how to respond to the stresses and suffering of our present situation, and to see the path ahead.

These teachings are a treasure which Catholic Christians can share with their friends and neighbours of all faiths, as they also learn from them and their traditions of wisdom. There are many common themes in the rich spiritual heritage of our diverse community. At any time, but especially in difficult times, we do not need more information. We need more wisdom.

Catholic Social teachings are based to some degree on natural human wisdom, for grace builds on nature, but above all they are derived from the Gospel of Jesus, especially the vision of the last judgment in Matthew 25. Enriched by the insights of intellectual giants such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, and articulated in several documents, but especially in a series of letters from the Popes beginning in 1893 with Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, "On the New Things", they are a trusty guide to a better world. Although the full richness of Catholic social teachings cannot be expressed in the brief time available this evening, here are a few principles that may help us all to navigate our present situation.

II: Three Signposts to Sanity in a Turbulent World

1) The Principle of Personal Dignity

First, the principle of personal dignity: each person must be treated with reverence from the first moment of existence. Each of us is a "who", not just a "what".

That is why we should not use other people for our benefit: we use things, not people. In our relationships, whether economic or personal, we always need to keep before our eyes the human faces of those who are affected by our actions. If decision

makers forget to do that, then all kinds of grief inevitably follow. As we watch the news we see the lines go up and the lines go down on the charts, mostly down, and the numbers flash by. It can seem quite abstract, but personal human tragedy is written in those numbers, as people lose their jobs and their homes, and as they discover that the revenue they relied upon for their old age is evaporating.

Those who are being hurt by what seem to be irresistible abstract forces beyond their control need to find in you and in me friends and neighbours who care. No one is a statistic. Our parishes need to be places of warm human welcome and practical love. As St John says, “How can I love the God I cannot see, if I do not love the neighbour that I do see.” (John 4:20)

2) The Principle of the Common Good

We must always be aware of the effect of our actions on the whole community in which we live. When any individual seeks personal gain without consideration of the effect on others, then both community and individual suffer. When individuals or institutions act wisely in the context of the common good, then everyone benefits. Self-absorption is deadly. We cannot be always looking out for number one.

In recent years a concern for how our individual actions have an impact upon the fragile physical environment of our planet has led us all to become more acutely conscious of the need to be attentive to the common good, but the principle of the common good has wider implications. Our real environment has human, economic, and social dimensions: it is only when the web of human relationships in our community is strong, and our whole society is healthy, that we can all flourish.

Social responsibility by individuals and corporations is essential, and we should applaud the many businesses which have a real sense of corporate citizenship, and which as institutions and in the actions of their employees reach out to make our community a better place: that is an immense benefit, especially in times of trouble. It is a great strength that should be celebrated.

Whether it is from the perspective of government, of business, or of our diverse religious communities, we need to be attentive to what our whole society is like as a place in which to live, particularly for those who are marginalized. The common good is not measured by a mathematical average; if any of our brothers and sisters are suffering, then the common good is diminished, and we all need to find creative and effective ways to respond.

3) Neighbour helping neighbour: The Principle of Subsidiarity

The Latin word “subsidiūm” means “help”, and the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic Social teachings shows a most effective way in which help can both be offered and accepted: by people working together at the grassroots level, neighbour helping neighbour. Normally action should be taken at the level closest to where people live, where we can most clearly recognize the faces of those whose lives we affect. A politician once wisely remarked: “All politics is local.” It is only if those on the scene do not have the capacity or resources to help one another that action should

be taken at higher and higher levels, each more distant from the personal impact of the matter at hand.

This is why a large community such as a city, province, or country needs within it many and varied voluntary associations and smaller communities, a rich biodiversity of local helping societies. When these flourish, our whole community is the stronger, and much more able to weather the economic and social storms that break upon us.

These smaller helping societies, intermediate between the individual and the state, frequently have a religious foundation. They are motivated by the coherent religious belief of their members, who offer their service out of religious conviction, although they serve all people in need without restriction. Some examples are the Catholic Hospitals and Social Services, or helping associations, large and small, based on Christian, Jewish, or Muslim faith, or other faiths.

It is a wise community that recognizes and respects the fact that the faith focus of such smaller helping societies is what energizes them in the service of the most needy. Destroy these societies by undermining the integrity of their foundation in faith, and we are all in deep trouble. Allow them to flourish, so that they can continue to enhance the common good, and we are all the better for it.

In some countries there is a principle called “the separation of Church and State”, which sometimes is misinterpreted in such a way that freedom of religion becomes freedom from religion. That is not the Canadian way. It never has been. In our country our social harmony has been enhanced over the past centuries by the co-operation of Church and State, each distinct, yet working together for the common good, so that smaller helping societies can more effectively care for all citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

In Canada we have seen other marvelous examples of the effect of the principle of subsidiarity, from which we can learn as we face our current problems. In Nova Scotia in the first half of the 20th century the great Moses Coady and the Antigonish movement showed people who were being ground down by forces beyond their control how to work together, neighbour helping neighbour, to become “masters of their own destiny” through the establishment of co-operatives and credit unions. Alphonse Desjardins did similar work in Quebec. One of the early pioneers of this approach in Ontario was George Keen, an immigrant from England who went to a meeting of concerned citizens in Brantford in the early years of the last century, and was so inspired by the idea of co-operation that he dedicated the rest of his life to advancing the co-operative movement in Ontario and Western Canada. I have a particular interest in his work, as he was my grandfather.

These are just a few examples of subsidiarity in action. In our parishes, as in the neighbourhoods of the wider community, there are plentiful opportunities for neighbour to help neighbour. One of the great joys of being Archbishop of Toronto is the opportunity I have to visit parishes and schools and other such local communities where all kinds of creative initiatives are in place to bring help to those in need. In our Catholic schools, the principles of human dignity, subsidiarity, and the common good

are taught in the classroom, but more importantly, they shape the practical service offered by all in the school community.

God has entrusted us with so many gifts, to be used generously and creatively during our brief passage through this life. That is what stewardship means. We are to learn from the parable of the talents, and not bury our gifts in a hole in the ground. Instead we are to use our time, talent, and treasure for the good of those around us. It should always be remembered that in the Gospel of Matthew, the parable of the talents comes just before the vision of the last judgment, in which people are held accountable for how they cared for those in need. Every parish should be animated by the spirit of stewardship, and each person should ask: how can I be a good steward of the gifts I have received, so that I may make fruitful use of them for the glory of God and the service of my neighbour.

III: Conclusion : The Path Ahead

These are challenging times, but the shock of the bursting bubble provides a salutary occasion for all citizens to think deeply about the difference between reality and illusion, and to gain practical wisdom from that reflection. Now is a time for ever greater generosity, when that is undeniably more difficult. As a practical matter, we do need to dig deeper. But we also need to think clearly about what makes a healthy society, one in which all persons are treated with reverence, in which neighbour helps neighbour, and in which concern for the common good banishes the folly of selfishness.