

Speaking Up for Social Justice

Address by Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

Good Friday Walk

Edmonton, April 6, 2012

Here, in this setting, the stark contrasts of our society confront us: the tall, commanding sweep of the powerful and the glittering allure of greed in a panorama; and the homeless, the jobless, the vulnerable and the addicted in the shadows. The small number of rich dominating the many who are poor is what the Occupy movement is all about. The Occupy protests have inspired the theme of our Good Friday walk: “In the midst of inequality and injustice, what does God require?”

Our Good Friday Walk must be foremost a spiritual experience that we feel deeply in our hearts and communicate outward to the society around us. When a person is hungry, when a person is homeless, when a person is uneducated, unemployed and oppressed, we must reach out to them with love, help and hope. For indeed, as the Second Vatican Council proclaimed: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, those too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” The human right to life is God-given, and all of us are led by the Holy Spirit in our journey to the Kingdom of the Father.

But loving our neighbour as ourselves, as we are commanded to do, requires more than charity. It demands justice. And we, as the followers of Christ, must stand up, and speak up, to the public policy-makers in the name

of the most vulnerable around us. Never before has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, yet a huge proportion of the world is still tormented by hunger and poverty. The gulf is widening between the very rich and the very poor. We must say clearly that we want a just and sustainable society and an economic system that puts people at the centre of the development process.

The voice of religion, demanding justice for the dispossessed and disadvantaged of the world, must now cut through the din and clamor of a confused age. Nothing is challenged more than religion to help create a just economic order. Religions must speak together, utilizing the deep spiritual resources found in the diverse religious traditions of humanity.

There is much to protest against.

It is not right for the governments of the world to be spending \$1.6 trillion a year on weapons of all kinds when they cannot fund the health and education projects of the Millennium Development Goals.

It is not right for the Government of Canada to be cutting development assistance to the poorest countries when we are funding unneeded new fighter aircraft.

It is not right for the City of Edmonton to be more concerned about the well-being of a future hockey arena in the city centre when the community facilities trying to serve the people who now live in the city centre are so deprived of funds.

Social justice demands changing the thinking in the power structures, which have failed to meet the needs of the most vulnerable people. We need

a thinking that says yes to environmental protection, yes to protecting all human rights, yes to fair community development for all. We need a thinking that says no to more tax breaks for the rich, no to nuclear weapons anywhere in the world, no to militarism in Canadian society.

As we reflect today on the life, suffering and death of Jesus, let us be inspired to witness before the power structures of our day, to call out for social justice in all public policy, and to make our own lives instruments of truth and love.