

## **CHAPTER 5 THE ERA OF BISHOP MARCEL GERVAIS: THE TEACHER, 1985-1989**

At the age of 75, Bishop Carter retired, to be succeeded by the first French-speaking Bishop of the Diocese, Marcel Gervais. A Franco-Manitoban by birth, the future Bishop Gervais moved as a teenager to Sparta, Ontario (near London). Not surprisingly, he could speak English without a hint of a French Canadian accent. Ordained in 1958, he then studied for two years in Rome, the first year at Angelicum, the second at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. From 1960 to 1961, he studied at the *École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem*. In 1962, he became Professor of Sacred Scripture at St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ontario, where he remained until 1976. From 1974 to 1978, Father Gervais was a member of the Advisory Committee to the International Commission for English in the Liturgy. At roughly the same time (1974-1979), he was Director of the Divine Word International Centre of Religious Education in London, Ontario. While there, he prepared forty lessons on the Bible entitled *Journey*, which appeared between 1977 and 1980. Since then, *Journey*—which has proved useful for home study by individuals or groups—has appeared in fourteen other languages. From 1975 to 1980, Father Gervais was an active member of the Education Committee of the Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, founded by the Catholic Canadian Bishops for the promotion of socio-economic projects for the Middle East and related education projects in Canada.

In 1980 Father Gervais was installed Auxiliary Bishop of London. In that capacity, he served as a member of two Episcopal Commissions of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Liturgy and Theology. From London, Bishop Gervais moved to North Bay in 1985 as Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie.<sup>1</sup>

As an authority on the Scriptures, Bishop Gervais had strong opinions on what the role of

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<sup>1</sup>. Bishop Gervais' biography appears in the *Canadian Catholic Church Directory, 2001*, p. 247. As Archbishop of Ottawa, Bishop Gervais also provided the author with his curriculum vitae for use in preparation of this book.

the clergy ought to be. He thought the priest's role should resemble that of a cook rather than an attendant at a service station. (During the 1980s, there were more service stations with full services than there would be in the twenty-first century.) A cook knows that his clients need constant feeding, and as soon as one meal ends he begins to prepare the next. A service station attendant provided a fill-up when the customer felt the need. Unlike the Pharisees of the New Testament, Bishop Gervais thought that priests had to concern themselves with the physical well-being of their parishioners and of society at large. He condemned as heresy "the pastoral abuse which Jesus most condemned--emphasis on God so obsessive that it rendered relations to people unimportant." At a training session for clergy, Bishop Gervais cited St. Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37) and the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Amos in support of his position. Matthew 23 and Mark 7 offered many examples of the horrors perpetuated by the Pharisees.

Bishop Gervais deplored the notion that God would expect any priest to devote himself to a "full time job keeping Him happy....The primary temptation for priests," he continued, "is to focus on a God not interested in people but so obsessed with Himself that He keeps His people so busy in worship that the real world is ignored." Social justice was imperative, and Bishop Gervais saw three aspects to social justice.

The first was issues arising from normal growth of a society. He explained, "If things are going half decently well, there will be more food and material goods available." Laws may have to change to allow for a more equitable distribution of the wealth, and he illustrated his argument with a commentary on starvation. "There is no justification for starvation anywhere in the world," he said. "We have all the resources, land, and technology to eliminate starvation within three months, but we lack the will....On Judgment Day, we must answer for this." He elaborated. Drought in Manitoba or Saskatchewan does not mean famine for the people who live there. There are laws and a social conscience to prevent that. "But what has happened nationally has not happened internationally. There is no excuse for what is happening in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Uganda. There is no justification for starvation." Two hundred years ago Europeans and North

Americans could excuse themselves from responsibility for starvation on distant continents; they lacked the technology to cope. That argument, however, no longer has any validity. “Our sense of social justice is retarded.” On the bright side, Bishop Gervais was pleased that the Social Gospel had provided Canadians with medicare and universal access to education.

The second aspect to social justice was contending with what is new. One of his concerns in this respect was multinational corporations. Companies which functioned in many nations but belonged to none, he noted, had flourished for roughly 40 years and were thus comparatively novel. No government could control them, and their economies were larger than the economies of most countries. While some of their actions were good, some were “disastrous”, and Christians had not come to terms with this new phenomenon. Meanwhile, he noted, “They topple governments and support dictators.” Opposition by the International Telephone and Telegraph Company and copper companies to the elected, constitutional Chilean government of Salvador Allende had contributed to the 1973 military coup which installed Augusto Pinochet as President of Chile. Pinochet, assisted by fugitives from Hitler’s Germany and its allies, still held that office as Bishop Gervais spoke. As far as the Bishop was concerned, the primary concern of leaders of multinationals too often was power for the sake of power. The interests of shareholders were secondary. To deal with multinationals, Bishop Gervais argued that governments must establish international control over multinationals. “Only a world government with some teeth can control them,” he warned.

Despite his thoughts on multinationals, Bishop Gervais did not intervene in the federal election of 1988 and urge Roman Catholics to vote one way or the other regarding free trade with the United States, the dominant issue in that campaign. Free trade was a complex issue, he believed, and there were strong arguments both for and against it. Under the circumstances, he thought silence the most appropriate course of action.

Another example of the “totally new”--at least in the context of a Church which thinks in terms of thousands of years--was nuclear war, which Bishop Gervais regarded as “indefensible”. Aircraft with nuclear weapons regularly flew “over our heads”, he said in a statement with

particular relevance to North Bay, then the diocesan headquarters. Submarines armed with nuclear weapons surrounded Canada. That the Great Powers should be able to destroy all life on this planet ten times was “insanity, diabolical”, and Christians had not given adequate thought to the question of nuclear war. “The day will come when the Church will have to take a stand and say, ‘We cannot have any more to do with this.’”

Statements such as this might conceivably have created greater controversy within the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie than in most other parts of Canada. After all, North Bay had been site of the Bomarc-B missiles, and Elliott Lake owed its existence to the mining of uranium. However, by the time when Bishop Gervais was speaking, the Cold War was ending, and international tensions were minimal. Those who disagreed, if any, kept their thoughts to themselves.

Bishop Gervais cited the third aspect of social justice as “retrogression”. Despite the presence of Christianity for almost 2000 years, each generation had to learn for itself. “Virtue,” he said, “is not genetically communicated.” Hence, retrogression was both a possibility and a reality. Even before the era of Premier Mike Harris and his “Common Sense Revolution”, Bishop Gervais lamented that people were losing their sense of collective responsibility and focusing too much on the rights of individuals. Society had forgotten “the common good”. He used the example of a civil rights lawyer, whom he did not identify, who defended the rights of his clients to intimidate others. At one point, Canadians had regarded universal access to food, shelter, and clothing as part of their responsibility as Christians, but in an era of homelessness and food banks, such was no longer the case. Credit Unions which had once helped people to become prosperous had become part of the financial world. Relations to the larger society, said Bishop Gervais, “cannot be locked in a closet.”

Bishop Gervais observed that a lack of organization had left Christians politically weak. The fact that Canada was a democracy, he said, meant that politicians would respond to pressure. If people with a social conscience did not work together, politicians would serve those who lobbied most effectively. “We cannot act only as individuals,” he told the assembly of clergy.

“We must organize. Unfortunately, at the moment, we don’t pose much of a threat to the government or to companies...We are not organized...I don’t know of anyone who has spoken effectively on the morality of banking and high interest rates.”

On the international scene, Bishop Gervais saw both light and darkness. Charities such as Oxfam which had to depend on voluntary contributions simply could not cope with the needs of Third World people, he lamented. There ought to be a tax for the betterment of the world. On the other hand, Bishop Gervais found grounds for optimism in Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru, and the Philippines--all countries, he noted, with a Roman Catholic tradition. There should be major improvements within the next 15 years, he forecast, in large measure because of the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and the Social Gospel which it was espousing. In this Bishop Gervais was prophetic. The dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos ended and democracy returned to the Philippines in 1986. Nicaraguans voted one government out of office and chose another in 1990, arguably an indication of a free and honest election. Following elections of 1996, the new Guatemalan government negotiated a cease-fire with the rebels and negotiated a peace accord designed to terminate a civil war which had lasted 35 years and killed some 200,000 people. In 2001, Brazilians elected Luiz Ignácio Lula da Silva and Peruvians Alejandro Toledo, both of whom claimed to represent the many poor rather than the relatively few members of the élite.<sup>2</sup>

Like St. Augustine of Hippo, the Bishop who lived while barbarians were invading the Roman empire which he loved, Bishop Gervais accepted that violence might occasionally be necessary in the fight against oppression. “If I had been a priest in an occupied country during

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<sup>2.</sup> These citations on Social Justice are taken from the videotape “Social Justice--Parts I and II”, no date indicated but obviously filmed during Bishop Gervais’ tenure of office, housed at the Diocesan Cath-com offices, Sudbury. Archbishop Gervais discussed the election of 1988 and reaction (or lack thereof) regarding the nuclear weapons issue in a telephone interview with the author 3 April 2003. Cited hereafter as Gervais interview. For information on the Nazi connection with the Pinochet régime, see Graeme S. Mount, *Chile and the Nazis* (Montreal: Black Rose, 2002), pp. 156-158.

World War II and a member of the Underground had come to me to confess that he had killed a Nazi, I would have absolved him,” he told an assembly of priests. Similarly, violence might be the only way to fight injustice in certain parts of Latin America. Certainly, Christians need not feel guilty about opposing certain Latin American governments or the multinationals which supported them, Bishop Gervais continued. In Eastern Europe, the Soviets were the oppressors. In Latin America, North Americans too often were the ones who denied social justice to most of the people. Pacifism was not always realistic. “If someone is choking his neighbour, you may have to drag him off. There are situations where you don’t theorize any longer. You do not have that luxury.” Bishop Gervais thought that Canadians received reasonable information about Eastern Europe, where the Soviets were the oppressors, but much less about Latin America, where the guilt lay closer to home.<sup>3</sup>

On 29 April 1986 in North Bay, Bishop Gervais addressed an assembly of Grade XI students on the subject of “Marriage and Morals”. He began by noting that 37 per cent of all Canadian marriages ended in divorce or separation. Society, he said, was not supportive of marriage, and too many accepted the principle of serial marriage. One reason for this was that people who regard sexual pleasure as an “absolute right” cannot know fidelity,. “If you have not been practised in chastity,” he warned, “you will not be able to resist temptation. Chastity is the prerequisite of fidelity.”

As the students listened, Bishop Gervais condemned as “diabolical” the desire of some married couples not to have children. Such people were suppressing the God-given ability to give life. For them, life was about getting, not about giving. Intimacy, he said, was more important than the sex act, and it was not easy to achieve. Yet, it was essential, because “Sexual intercourse in marriage without intimacy is rape.” Happily, Christ offers support, and through the Eucharist reminds people that He is on their side. The Bishop told the young people that practising Roman Catholics had a better chance of marital success than did other Canadians.

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<sup>3</sup>. Videotape “Social Justice--Part III”, filmed in the same context as Parts I and II.

In June 1989, Bishop Gervais presided over the Second Synod of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, otherwise known as “Vision 2000”. The First Synod had met twenty years earlier and established parish councils, regional councils, and a diocesan pastoral council with two sectors, English-speaking and French-speaking. Bishop Gervais created a third sector, for Natives. From those evolved the “Synodal Process”. The Native sector proved significant when the one and only plenary session—the Second Synod—met in June 1989 at Cambrian College in Sudbury for a discussion on infant baptism. Hundreds of people—overwhelmingly lay but clergy as well, men and women—participated.

For months the parish councils had debated. They had taken their recommendations to the regional councils: North Bay, Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie. The next step in the Synodal Process was a debate at the Diocesan level. Finally, Synod itself met. Those from the English and French sectors were debating whether infant baptism should be for anyone whose parents sought it, or only for the children of those whose parents were practising Roman Catholics. At that point, a young man from one of the First Nations parishes jumped to his feet. “Why focus on the parents?” he said. “I hold what religious convictions I have because of my grandmother. In Aboriginal communities, grandparents—particularly grandmothers—are largely responsible for the religious upbringing of the young!” Other Aboriginals agreed. The young man’s intervention, recalled Archbishop Gervais (as he had become) almost fifteen years later, created a totally new perspective.<sup>4</sup>

After four years in the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, Bishop Gervais moved to Canada’s capital where, on 27 September 1989, he was ordained Archbishop of Ottawa. The Synodal Process continued under Bishop Jean-Louis Plouffe, Bishop Gervais’ successor, where there was a similar study on marriage. It was during Bishop Gervais’ term that the Diocese began to deal with questions of financial and personnel shortages. How could it best manage what limited resources it had? The answers became challenges for Bishop Plouffe.

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<sup>4</sup>. Gervais interview, 3 April 2003. Also, Cath-com tape of the Synod, filmed in June 1989.