



Message from His Eminence the very Reverend Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodríguez Maradiaga to the Participants in the Roundtables on the Social Responsibility of Canadian Mining Companies Overseas

It is with hopeful anticipation that we learned of the initiative of the Canadian Government and various national social sectors to reflect on the social responsibility of Canadian mining companies operating overseas. We trust that this initiative will translate into measures and policies that will lead to a greater regulation of the latter in order to guarantee our people full enjoyment of their rights to a healthy environment, environmental sustainability in the companies' operations and a significant contribution to development for our peoples.

In this context, the accelerated environmental degradation and depletion of non renewable natural resources, compelling nations to debate the existing tension between environment and the expansion of trade, need to be addressed. Behind the efforts of the WTO and other initiatives are a number of questions: Can natural resources be considered tradable goods? Should natural resources be traded in the same way as any other commodity? Do all natural resources have a hierarchical value in function of their uses and their contribution to the fulfillment of human needs? Can we consider ethical the extraction and exploitation of mineral resources, at the expense of other resources, such as fresh water and forests? In short, should political and commercial ends be at the centre of and the driving force of human relations?

The above dilemma is not an economic one, nor an environmental one, it is eminently ethical, as it brings us face to face with the need to review not only the rules and practices of trade in the natural resources sector, but also to review the level of stewardship and responsibility with which we care for natural resources when considering this question through a lens of social and international solidarity.

We must also evaluate whether the commodities produced through the exploitation of natural resources, in particular those of a limited and non-renewable nature, justify the economic, environmental and social costs that are generally borne by the communities

and nations who produce these commodities, and who, paradoxically, nearly always live in conditions of greater poverty and vulnerability than those communities and nations for whom they are produced.

In recent years, this dilemma has been more in evidence in the context of the exploitation of precious mineral resources, such as gold and silver, through modern techniques that lower extraction costs, while causing significant environmental impacts and risks that are not always possible to mitigate or neutralize throughout the exploitation period by the companies engaged in these activities.

The increasingly frequent conflicts in different parts of the world between mining companies and affected communities, as well as the growing efforts of civil society organizations to demand stricter regulation, more rigorous monitoring, more responsible and transparent practices, are a sign that we can no longer continue to adhere solely to the logic of the business market that operates on the principle of "the less invested, the greater the profits."

We must move towards a vision of Corporate Social Responsibility, which cannot be reduced to corporate voluntarism alone but must be complemented by a social responsibility regulated by the state and international organizations.

Such a redefinition is urgent, as the depletion of natural resources has been substantially accelerated partly because of the growing demand for precious minerals.

The investigation and development of new technologies for the exploitation of mineral resources which are also compatible with conservation and preservation of the balance of eco systems is increasingly urgent.

No less vital is the promotion and adoption of ethical norms in trade and aid relations between countries of the North and South.

Trade treaties must be accompanied by ethical agreements and codes in order to resolve the current contradictions that occur when on the one hand, world or regional summits adopt policies of environmental protection and conservation, that are later made operational by aid programs, while at the same time, high tech industries that generate or increase levels of social and environmental vulnerability are promoted. These same industries, taking advantage of the weak legislation in our countries, behave in an unethical and irresponsible manner that fuels corruption, environmental degradation, pollution of our natural resources, and social divisions in our communities.

We cannot continue with ambivalent policies where what we build with one hand, we destroy immediately with the other. It is time to review market and trade rules and to complement them with values of solidarity, justice, subsidiarity, and shared responsibility in our actions and in the future of humanity.

It is also necessary to adopt regulatory mechanisms that guarantee that these industries are made responsible for their actions and behaviour not only in the countries where they operate, but also in their countries of origin and in the corresponding international bodies.

Today, the message of the Latin American Bishops at the Fourth Episcopal Meeting in Santo Domingo, has a particular relevance: "There can be no market economy that is innovative and at the same time socially just, without a solid commitment from the whole of society and all its players to solidarity through a judicial framework that guarantees the value of the human person, honour, respect for life, just distribution of the earth's resources, and a real concern for the poorest." (Santo Domingo, Conclusions 195.)

Respectfully,

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