

Awaiting the Charbonneau Commission Report:

A REFLECTION ON CORRUPTION

For many months, the Charbonneau Commission hearings have put a hitherto unsuspected degree of corruption on display before us. It is easy to understand the indignant reaction of citizens who work for a living, while respecting the demands of justice - a healthy indignation shared by the population as a whole. This indignation sketches in outline an ideal to which we all aspire, that of a just society where everyone's dignity is respected, and equal opportunity is fostered. This ideal ought to motivate as much the actions of our governments as our personal choices. As the Commission prepares to present its

recommendations, and as Christians enter into the Lenten season, we find it relevant to reflect together on the ways that corruption destroys the ideal of a just society, and on the ways we can overcome this obstacle. Such a reflection will allow the feeling of indignation to bear fruit in justice and equity. While we are inspired by the Catholic tradition that bears us up, we also wish to carry on this reflection with all those who desire the well-being of our society. Corruption, after all, directly affects our lives together and offends against the universal values that we all share.

1. Corruption, “a cancer on the bodies” of our societies

Corruption, a phenomenon as old as the world, is the perversion of something that one finds in all cultures and that strengthens and nourishes social connections: the reality of *gift*. While a gift by its very gratuitousness allows one to enter into neighbourly, respectful, and friendly

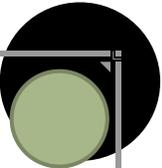
Corruption, a phenomenon as old as the world, is the perversion of something that one finds in all cultures and that strengthens and nourishes social connections: the reality of *gift*.

relationships with others, corruption reduces it to a purely utilitarian gesture done in order to acquire some gain.¹ It can happen that one moves imperceptibly from gift to graft: cultural codes can sometimes be difficult to interpret, and the lure of gain may deform a relationship that began innocently enough. It can be difficult to set a clear boundary between mere “good manners” on the one hand, and acts intended to obtain specific advantages on the other. As mercantile interest increases, the criteria of conscience become looser, and the phenomenon of corruption spreads throughout human relationships and invades the whole planet.² To the outside observer, there is not

always a clear difference between a gift offered out of friendship or propriety, and a “gift” offered with a view the individual gain. There can, however, be a *corrupt intention* that changes the nature of the gesture; an intention that is not always easy to discern, especially when the actors are from different cultures.

¹ See Jacques T. GOUBOUT, *L'esprit du don*, Boréal, 1995.

² This is a universal phenomenon. Transparency International, an NGO, has published its 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI): based on a number of surveys and investigations by independent organizations, the report indicates that two-thirds (69%) of the 177 countries studied are seen as highly corrupt. See <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results/>.



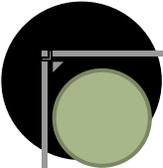
One need not be a believer to note the harmful effects of corruption on the social fabric: it shatters the feeling of trust that must exist between the various social elements in any democracy, whether between citizens and government or among the citizens themselves. As a report of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly states, "unless those who govern do so exclusively for the good of society, public trust in them, and in democracy itself, will suffer. [Moreover], economic development so critically depends on a social contract of trust between various economic actors, including the public at large. In a corruption-free society citizens can go about their business knowing that they contribute to the public weal [...]. Where such trust does not exist, however, everybody becomes suspicious. Greed and egoism replace the legitimate quest for the betterment of one's condition."³ The same document goes so far as to speak of a "cancer on the bodies of our individual countries and on the international community as a whole."

In a corruption-free society citizens can go about their business knowing that they contribute to the public weal [...]. Where such trust does not exist, however, everybody becomes suspicious.

This observation coincides with the judgment of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace: "Among the deformities of the democratic system, "political corruption is one of the most serious",⁴ because it betrays at one and the same time both moral principles and the norms of social justice. It compromises the correct functioning of the State, having a negative influence on the relationship between those who govern and the governed. It causes a growing distrust with respect to public institutions, bringing

³ Role of parliaments in fighting corruption. Doc. 8652, February 18, 2000. Report. Committee on Economic Affairs and Development, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. See <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=8861&Language=EN>.

⁴ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* 44; *Centesimus annus* 48; 1999 Message for the World Day of Peace, 6.



about a progressive disaffection in the citizens with regard to politics and its representatives, with a resulting weakening of institutions.”⁵

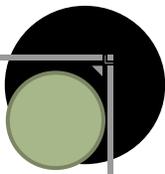
At the source of all of these negative appraisals of corruption lies the great biblical tradition which, from the Old Testament on, condemns the greed that leads the merchant to tamper with his scales and to buy the needy with a pair of sandals (Amos 8:5), leads the rich man to demand ransom (Amos 5:12), and leads the judge to demand bribes (Micah 3:11; 7:3). Thus Isaiah lambastes the leaders of Israel because “everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them” (Isaiah 1:23, *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*). In contrast, he praises “those who walk righteously and speak uprightly, who despise the gain of oppression, who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it” (Isaiah 33:15, *NRSV*). Clearly, at the heart of the Old Testament’s preoccupations stand the rights of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant.

The New Testament echoes this call when it speaks of the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the prisoner, the homeless, all of whom cry out to our compassion and sense of justice (Matt. 25:31-46). When it opens our hearts in this way to the needs of others, the biblical message severs the roots of the temptation to corrupt, or to let oneself be corrupted. This becomes clearer when we examine more closely the deeper causes of corruption.

2. In search of the causes of corruption

Some *extrinsic causes* that are likely to foster corruption are easy to note right from the outset: the weakness of institutions, such as

⁵ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, para. 411. See also the same Council’s Note, *The Fight Against Corruption*, 2006, para. 8.



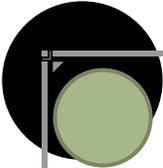
professional orders, that ought to serve as fail-safes; the absence of government policy aimed at preventing corruption; and loopholes in existing regulations.

We can denounce an administrative and corporate culture that creates what might be called a *corrupting situation*: one that gives rise to fears, and discourages principled employees from disclosing or even simply reconsidering corrupt practices. Such a situation can sometimes arise inadvertently, bit by bit: we may create impressive codes of ethics, but gradually stray from them in practice; or we may lead employees to make small ethical compromises, and they will then easily find ways to justify themselves, thus making it that much easier to take steps towards bigger compromises. This is the principle of the slippery slope, whereby actions that are increasingly at odds with ethics are trivialized.⁶

This last remark invites us to go beyond legislative frameworks and the economic context. We must dig deeper and seek out the *interior attitudes* that feed corruption, and the motives that drive people to carry out or to accept corrupt acts. We will uncover them by identifying certain behaviours and attitudes that are valued by contemporary society. In every society and ethical environment, there is an *ethos* that favours certain values and behaviours and that influences individuals all the more powerfully for being part of the very air they breathe.

First of all, we might note the *consumerism* that is constantly being stimulated by marketing tricks. It is a vital component in the market economy that stirs up the need to acquire more and pricier consumer goods - a market economy, as Pope Francis warns, whose anthropological orientation “reduces man to one of his needs alone, namely, consumption,” or even worse, nowadays considers “human beings themselves [...] as

⁶ Lisa POLLACK, *Where have all the cowboys come from?* FT Alphaville, 23/08/2013.



consumer goods which can be used and thrown away.”⁷ This consumerism draws many into a *spiral of competition* whereby one always wishes to possess more, without regard to the less well-off. Spiritual values that would open one to another dimension of life are thereby weakened, and no longer speak to one’s conscience. One becomes ever more turned in on oneself, thinking only of one’s own interests, thus giving in to the “new idolatry of money.”⁸

This is how, in one way or another, an *excessive individualism* develops, and it blunts the feeling of solidarity among persons, allowing the notion of

This consumerism draws many into a *spiral of competition* whereby one always wishes to possess more, without regard to the less well-off. Spiritual values that would open one to another dimension of life are thereby weakened, and no longer speak to one’s conscience.

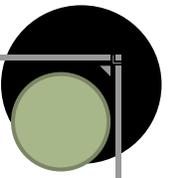
duty to disappear in favour of the notion of *right*. Benedict XVI recognizes it explicitly: “Nowadays we are witnessing a grave inconsistency. On the one hand, appeals are made to alleged rights, arbitrary and non-essential in nature, accompanied by the demand that they be recognized and promoted by public structures, while, on the other hand, elementary and basic rights remain unacknowledged and are violated in much of the world [...]. The link consists in this: individual rights, when detached from a framework of duties which grants

them their full meaning, can run wild, leading to an escalation of demands which is effectively unlimited and indiscriminate. An overemphasis on rights leads to a disregard for duties.”⁹

⁷ FRANCIS, “[Address to the new non-resident Ambassadors to the Holy See](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130516_nuovi-ambasciatori.html)”, May 16, 2013. See http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130516_nuovi-ambasciatori.html.

⁸ Pope Francis has strong words to say about this: “The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose,” *Evangelii gaudium*, para. 55.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, para. 43, June 29, 2009.



At the same time, we are seeing the disappearance of the idea of a *common good* with whose promotion, for the benefit of all, the State is especially entrusted. As Benedict XVI explains further, “Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it.”¹⁰ The common good is not simply the sum total of the particular goods of persons, as some philosophical and economic theories would have it. It goes beyond them, is the condition for their achievement, and consists of all the external conditions necessary for particular goods to be attained. One must devote oneself to it, even if this occasionally means neglecting one’s immediate interests. For this, it is necessary to cultivate a spirit of devotion to “public affairs,” an ability to go beyond one’s own interests, a preoccupation with the just distribution of goods, a will to eliminate inequalities, and a profound sense of social justice.

For the Christian tradition, goods, even if legitimately owned, retain a universal destination given to them by God, and this renders the undue accumulation of goods unjust. However, the pastors of the first centuries – knowing, like St. Paul, that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (I Tim 6:10) – “insist more on the need for the conversion and transformation of the consciences of believers than on the need to change the social and political structures of their day.” This is why they “call on those who work in the economic sphere and who possess goods to consider themselves administrators of the goods that God has entrusted to them.”¹¹ In this way they offer us some avenues for the fight against corruption.

¹⁰ *Caritas in veritate*, para. 7.

¹¹ *Compendium*, para. 328. Paragraph 329 quotes some very beautiful texts from the Fathers of the Church.

3. Some avenues for the fight against corruption

First of all, it is possible to address what we have called the *extrinsic causes* of corruption. We can propose laws and regulations that would limit the possibilities of corruption; we can establish agencies of

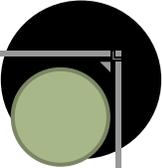


oversight and control that would apply themselves to ensure the necessary transparency. Such measures are proper to the State, which may be motivated to carry them out by the actions of citizens who are aware of the issue. Here we must emphasize the importance of

freedom of the press and of the right of association, which permit the general public to be informed of corrupt overtures and to apply pressure to governments. All these things can help restore the climate of trust that collective well-being requires.

However, one must go deeper. The multiplication of laws necessarily brings about a more and more invasive bureaucracy; what's more, such laws cannot substitute for the absence of interior convictions. We could perhaps limit corruption through stricter laws, but it is above all to the undertaking of forming consciences that one must apply oneself. Besides denouncing the *notions* or *collective representations* that favour corruption, one must cultivate the interior attitudes that allow people to be discerning and that develops in them solidarity, respect for justice, moderation and the courage of one's convictions. Institutions that bear society's moral and religious convictions – and especially the churches – can play an essential but delicate role. It is not a question of their judging people, but of bringing about a reflection





wherein they can apply convictions to their own proper way of doing things. They should offer a place where mutual assistance and solidarity can be exercised, a place where spiritual values are cultivated.

In particular, one will fight against consumerism and the obsession with money by awakening the mind to spiritual realities, to what gives life meaning, to voluntary simplicity. The *Réseau québécois pour la simplicité volontaire* (“Quebec Network for Voluntary Simplicity”) rightly proposes “a better way of living that seeks to be less gluttonous with the planet’s resources, the discovery that one can live with less, the choice to emphasise being rather than having, the ‘enough’ rather than the ‘more’, human relations rather than material goods, sharing rather than hoarding, community rather than individualism.”¹² The environmental movement resonates particularly in this respect, inasmuch as it calls for a humane ecology and urges the adoption of an attitude of *moderation* towards the acquisition of the planet’s resources. This is a theme dear to Benedict XVI,¹³ and Pope Francis is devoting an encyclical to it that will be appearing soon. Being faithful to this theme will require both an ability to resist the language of advertising, and the courage of one’s convictions.

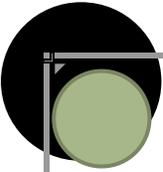
One must take care as well to combat the hold exerted by “ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation,¹⁴ insisting instead on the necessity of subordinating economics to politics and, beyond politics, to the development of human beings who are created in “the image of God” and who find in the very fact of that creation “a datum which gives rise to [their] inviolable dignity”¹⁵ Benedict XVI expands on this idea when he writes that “Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of *commercial*

¹² See the Network’s website: <http://simplicitevolontaire.org>.

¹³ See, for example, *Caritas in veritate*, para. 51.

¹⁴ FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, para. 56.

¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, para. 45.



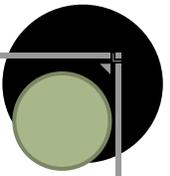
logic. This needs to be directed towards the pursuit of the common good, for which the political community in particular must also take responsibility. Therefore, it must be borne in mind that grave imbalances are produced when economic action, conceived merely as an engine for wealth creation, is detached from political action, conceived as a means for pursuing justice through redistribution.”¹⁶

To combat an excessive individualism, one must call to mind the core of the Christian message as well as of every authentically humanistic ethics: the virtue of justice which opens its heart to respect the rights of others; the love of neighbour that calls one to give of oneself and one’s goods. If justice is the foundation, love of neighbour surrounds and energizes it. Gift, the fruit of love, and right, the fruit of justice, mutually nurture one another. “*Charity goes beyond justice,*” explains Benedict XVI, “because to love is to give, to offer what is “mine” to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is “his”, what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting. I cannot “give” what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice. If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them.”¹⁷ However, we might add, love drives one towards acts of solidarity, of which our traditions here in Québec offer many examples. We have only to think of

“*Charity goes beyond justice,*” explains Benedict XVI, “because to love is to give, to offer what is “mine” to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is “his”, what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting. I cannot “give” what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice. If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them.”

¹⁶ *Caritas in veritate*, para. 36.

¹⁷ *Caritas in veritate*, para. 6.



the burst of generosity that filled Québec at those moments when disaster occurred in Lac-Mégantic and in Isle-Verte, or of the fundraising that mobilizes the entire populace when some cataclysm strikes in one country or another.

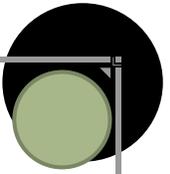
However, a sense of justice and of sharing is not enough to resist corruption. It takes courage, especially when one finds oneself in a corrupting situation like the ones of which the Charbonneau Commission has provided a few examples. Objecting to a given behaviour when everyone else accepts it, or breaking a guilty silence, are far from easy, as reprisals are possible. This is why we so admire those who, in business or politics, have risen up against corrupt situations or who have lived their whole lives without letting themselves be corrupted by bribes: we praise their integrity and instinctively trust them. Each of us can no doubt think of a few such people – we must speak their names to each other to strengthen our own convictions, although naming them here could be touchy for the people in question.

CONCLUSION

The Charbonneau Commission is carrying on its work as we speak, and will draw from it a certain number of recommendations that will be presented to the government. The worst way to greet these recommendations would be to consider the problem of corruption to be solved and to turn the page. Regardless of such laws and regulations as may be issued, corruption will always remain a threat to the social fabric and a temptation for each of us. This is why the indignation that we feel with respect to certain corrupt practices must provoke our sense of responsibility and shed light on our own behaviours. This is what Pope Francis wished when he addressed the family members of victims of the Mafia, on March 21, 2014: “I feel the desire to share with you a hope, and it is this: that the sense of responsibility may little by little overcome corruption in every part of the world.... And this must begin from within, from the conscience, and from there restore and rehabilitate behaviour, relationships, choices, the social fabric, so that justice may gain space, broaden, take root and replace inequity.”¹⁸ We all have a part to play in building a society of solidarity where individual interests do not harm the good of the many, and where the quest for personal profit does not blunt our sense of responsibility.

“I feel the desire to share with you a hope, and it is this: that the sense of responsibility may little by little overcome corruption in every part of the world.... And this must begin from within, from the conscience, and from there restore and rehabilitate behaviour, relationships, choices, the social fabric, so that justice may gain space, broaden, take root and replace inequity.”

¹⁸ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco_20140321_fondazione-libera.html.



A publication of the *Conseil Église et Société* (Council on Church and Society)

Bishop Pierre Morissette, president, Bishop Thomas Dowd, Bishop Denis Grondin, Bishop Noël Simard, Sister Éliisa Fernandez, s.f.a., Monsignor Pierre Gaudette, Mr. Norman Levesque, Mr. Pierre Piché, Ms. Louise Cormier, secretary.

Original Title: Dans l'attente du rapport de la Commission Charbonneau – une réflexion sur la corruption

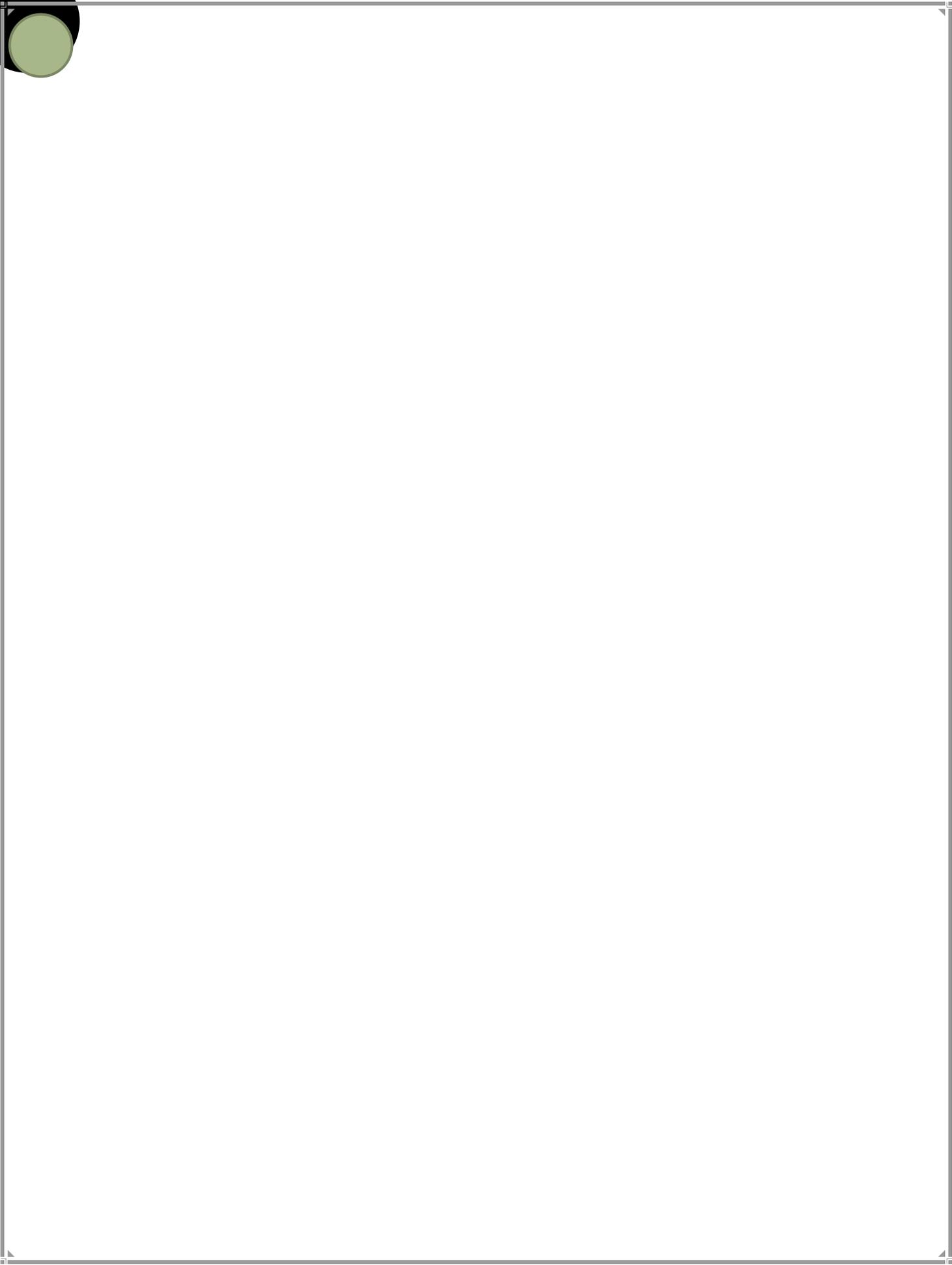
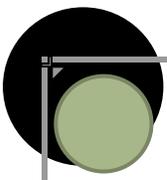
English Translation by Richard Bernier

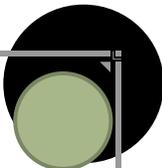


Secrétariat des évêques catholiques du Québec
3331, rue Sherbrooke Est - Montréal (Québec) H1W 1C5
Téléphone : (514) 274-4323 Télécopieur : (514) 274-4383
<http://www.eveques.qc.ca> aecq@eveques.qc.ca

Legal Deposit, February 2015
Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec
ISBN 978-2-89279-152-5 (Printed version)
978-2-89279-153-2 (PDF)

February 2015





Going Further

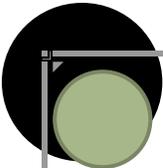
Ideally, this text on corruption ought to be more deeply studied in small groups. This could take place within the context of the regular activities of a parish, religious community, or association of the lay faithful. Likewise, a special activity might be promoted among regular parishioners and announced in the parish bulletin and at Sunday Mass.

If possible, this text, as well as the study questions found below, should be provided beforehand to interested persons. Otherwise, a significant period for personal reflection on the questions should be offered, followed by a review of the questions in groups of five or six, with sharing of ideas. Ideally, at the end of the exchanges, some directions for practical courses of action ought to emerge.

Study Questions

1. Corruption, “a cancer on the bodies” of our societies

- What is corruption, for me?
- What is the relation between *gift* (which we consider a good) and *corruption* (which we consider wrong)?
- Why are we indignant in the face of corruption?
- What are the repercussions of corruption on our lives together as a society?
- How does the Christian tradition shed light on the question of corruption?



2. In search of the causes of corruption

- If corruption exists, is it solely the fault of the “system” and of the government?
- What are the causes of corruption that we can identify within ourselves?
- Which of these causes seems the most important?

3. Some avenues for the fight against corruption

- What should Christians do to improve the “system” and reduce the possibility of corruption?
- What interior transformations must we undertake in order not to be tempted by corruption?
- How can we put in place a world of justice and charity?
- What concrete commitments can we see ourselves making?