

Comment

Fair Trade and ethical purchasing are a real way to apply the Church's social doctrine, says a Catholic social justice promoter

Theology of coffee

By Andrew Conradi, SFO
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The City of Vancouver has had an ethical purchasing policy that includes Fair-Trade-certified items since 2005 and will become the first major Canadian city to be certified as a Fair Trade Town.

Probably without realizing it, the city is actually applying Catholic Social Doctrine. Several Popes have commented on ethical purchasing and trade relations, and in 2009 Pope Benedict XVI in Caritas in Veritate summed it up beautifully: "Purchasing is always a moral — and not simply economic — act. Hence the consumer has a specific social responsibility.... Consumers should be continually educated regarding their daily role, ..." (66)

Should the Archdiocese of Vancouver also have an ethical purchasing policy? One that also binds the parishes, schools and other organizations within it? The archdiocese could, and some think should, show leadership in ways for consumers to exercise "social responsibility" in purchasing.

Because the archdiocese has great influence in such matters, it could take the lead in educating and encouraging Catholic organizations and individuals to uphold Catholic Social Doctrine.

Catholics can be proud of Father Frans (Francisco) van der Hoff's role in Fair Trade, which really started to take off in the 1980s thanks in part to him.

Father van der Hoff, a Dutch Dehonist priest, was asked by the bishop in southern Oaxaca, Mexico, to look into serious problems of hunger and misery

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among indigenous small coffee growers. Speaking in Toronto in 2006, the priest said, "The degree of exploitation was in that time tremendous. Value of the coffee in the market was \$1.50 a pound, but they got hardly forty cents a pound. Intermediaries, called coyotes, government bureaucracy and corruption and an overt apartheid policy against Indians were the rule."

Father van der Hoff worked with the farmers and in 1981 after analyzing their situation they formed a coffee growers cooperative (UCIRI). In 1985 they obtained organic certification (Naturland). In 1988 Fr van der Hoff co-founded the first Fair Trade label ("Max Havelaar" in the Netherlands) because as he put it: "a different [fair] market is more important than charity," or as the slogan put it: "Fair trade, not aid".

Father van der Hoff has degrees in political economy and theology. He has received many honours for his leadership and work in developing Fair Trade including a Knighthood in the Legion of Honour from French President Jacques Chirac in 2005 and an honorary doctorate from

the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, in 2006. In spite of this he continues to live a very humble life in Mexico.

So what are Vancouver Catholics doing about their "social responsibility"? The Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace promotes Fair Trade through its "Just Coffee®" project. It has a policy to serve Fair Trade coffee, tea, chocolate and sugar at its meetings, and to even provide it at its own additional cost if caterers do not.

The Canadian Bishops (Pastoral Letter, Oct. 4, 2003, 16) advocated fairly traded merchandise.

Archbishop Emeritus Raymond Roussin, SM, encouraged use of Fair Trade and Just Coffee® in 2004, and Plato's Cave Café at Corpus Christi College serves Just Coffee®.

The Catholic Women's League advocated Fair Trade coffee in 2000, and served it at the Archdiocesan Olympic Welcome Centre; a few Knights of Columbus Councils serve it at Pancake breakfasts.

Unfortunately this is not enough. It is time now for all Catholic organizations to adopt an ethical purchasing policy to

persuade those members who still balk at paying the price and who, perhaps unwittingly, actually support exploitation and poverty.

Pope Paul VI challenged us: "Let each one examine his conscience,.... Is he prepared to support out of his own pocket works and undertakings in favour of the most destitute? Is he ready to pay a higher price for imported goods so that the producer may be more justly rewarded?" (Populorum Progressio, 48)

Will the archdiocese and all Catholic organizations within it take up Paul VI's challenge and adopt ethical purchasing of Fair Trade goods? Lip service is not enough. We must live our faith as in 1 John 3:18: "Little children, let us stop just saying we love people, let us really love them, and show it by our actions."

For more info see www.just-coffee.ca and www.fairtradevancouver.ca.

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(Archbishop J. Michael Miller recently accepted a proposal from the Office of Service and Justice that diocesan offices be asked to purchase only "fair trade" products for use in the building and at diocesan events.

"This decision promotes authentic development by ensuring that farmers and other producers in poor countries are fairly compensated. It also sets an example for the parishes and people of the archdiocese," said the archbishop. — Editor.) □