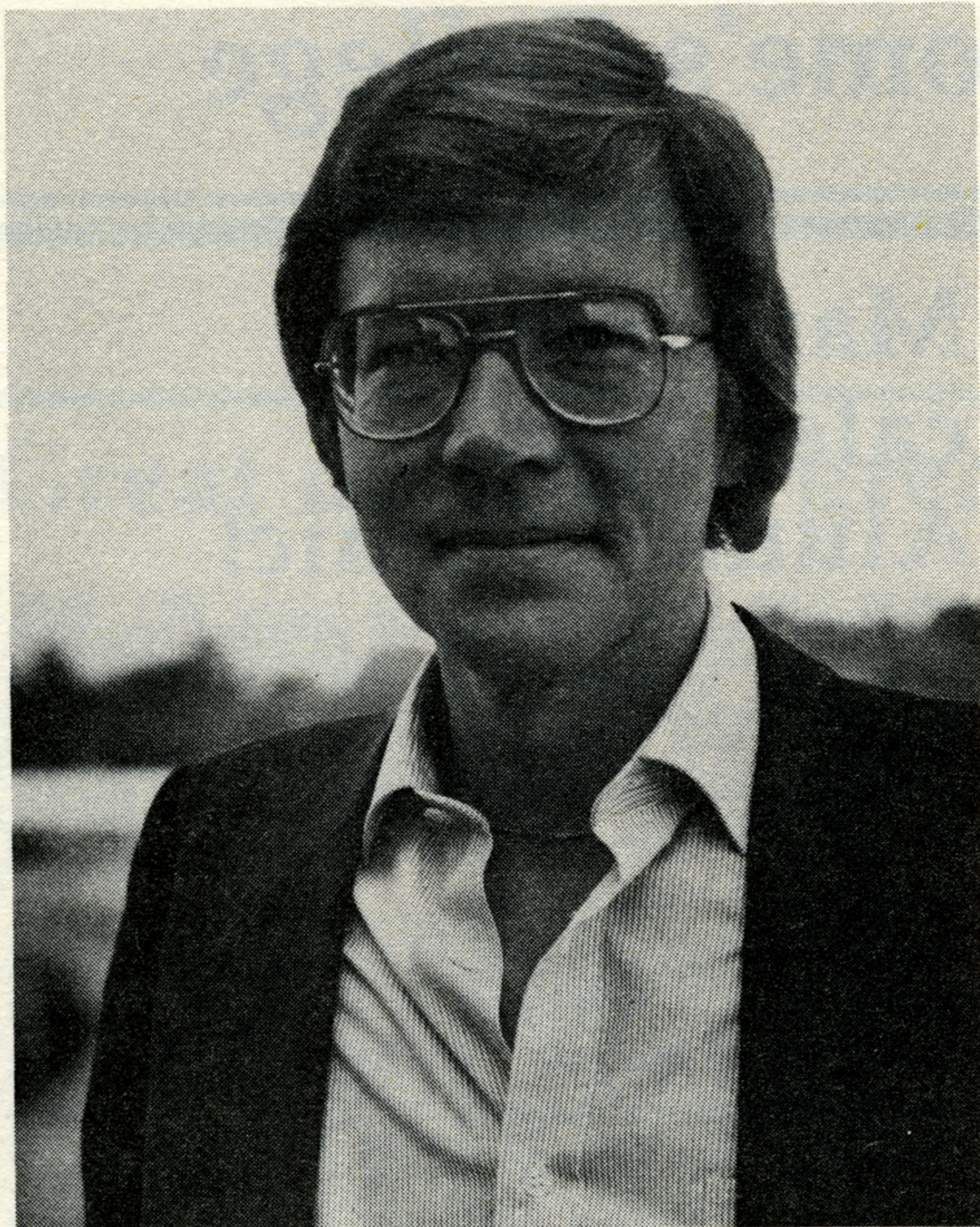


Feature Article

The Bishops, The Economy, and the University

by Kenneth Westhues



Dr. Kenneth Westhues, former chairman of the Department of Sociology at the University of Waterloo, is a lecturer in the Institute for Studies in Theological Renewal at St. Jerome's. In recent years he has given a course here in Catholic Sociological Thought. For 1982-83 he is Visiting Professor of Sociology at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Canadian Catholics barely stirred in 1968, when a conference of bishops in Medellin, Colombia, condemned the status quo in Latin America and called for radical change. That southern continent, after all, is a long way from here. Nor were Canadian Catholics upset when the Polish bishops made common cause with the Solidarity move-

ment. The Polish government, after all, is communist. Even last year, when the U.S. bishops criticized the Reagan administration's preparation for nuclear war, Catholics in the Great North were not perturbed. With our meager weaponry we couldn't even get into such a war, much less win it.

But then came the first week of 1983, and a 10-page statement from the Canadian bishops entitled "Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis." It was not the work of the entire national episcopate, but only of its 8-member Social Affairs Commission. Some bishops, moreover, publicly disagreed with it. Besides, that short document said little that ordinary Canadians had not already thought: that the unemployment rate is a moral outrage, that Ottawa's austerity program is unjust, and that to place profits before human rights is wrong. Against the background of cries in Quebec and the West to put an end to Canada itself, the bishops' statement indeed sounds tame.

Then why all the fuss? Why the headlines from St. John's to Victoria, the page in *Newsweek*, the cover-story in *Maclean's*, the annoyance of Trudeau, and heated debates in parishes across the land? Clearly not because of the specific ideas proposed. These are no more or less debateable than any other plans for escape from the economic doldrums we are in. The reason for the uproar is simply that the church has entangled itself in the complexities of everyday Canadian life, has come down to earth and pointed out a need for social change. This one little document brought home to Canadians what people in Poland and Latin America already know: that the Catholic Church has at last accepted history, plunged itself into history, that it now pointedly asserts that the City of Man could become through responsible human effort the City of God.

There is a lesson in this for a Catholic university. So long as the church ignored history and portrayed the Cities of God and Man as worlds apart, one of the hallmarks of a Catholic school was reluctance to find fault with existing political and economic realities. These were but a vale of tears to be understood and patiently endured until entry at death into the divine kingdom. Criticism of public policy and attempts at social change were in fact thought dangerous, since a preoccupation with reforming this basically unreformable world might distract a good Catholic's attention from the eternal verities.

Today's Catholic university has a different character. Its mission is to encourage a critical awareness of the status quo, indeed to facilitate and hasten the process of becoming called for in church documents. And true to its tradition, to serve these ends in light of a gospel of peace and justice. This means an end to rote learning and an insistence on the harder discipline of reasoned, creative thought. It means new courses and programs like those at St. Jerome's in the Institutes of Family Life and Sex Education and for Studies in Theological Renewal, and in the Centre for Catholic Experience. The new mission gives a new and critical slant to the classic courses in history, philosophy and literature. Above all, it makes the Catholic university come alive as more truly Christian, and more truly a university.

Do you have a comment or question about this article? Why not offer your own views on this topic or submit an article on a topic that interests you? Responses from readers will be published in the June Update! Submissions should be no more than 500 words in length and are subject to editing.

Faith and justice linked, says Baum

Gregory Baum, the internationally-known Canadian theologian and professor of Religious Studies and sociology at the University of Toronto, gave a talk on "Justice and the Modern Encyclicals" at the St. Jerome's Centre for Catholic Experience on February 25.

In the course of his spirited lecture, Baum provided an overview of the challenges raised in papal encyclicals concerning justice in modern society. He spoke of the new religious experience that has emerged in many parts of the world during the past twenty years.

"It is the union of faith and justice; the realization that faith must include social commitment," he said. "Faith and justice are intertwined when we are ready to look upon

society from the perspective of the poor and marginalized. God is seen as just in the scriptures when he is merciful to the poor and oppressed."

Baum acknowledged, though, that our instincts cause us to look at society from the viewpoint of the middle class. But he warned that to view society from the perspective of the poor means that we are at odds with modern culture. He called on people to reread the Bible and discover Christ's call for social justice.

Since 1971, he concluded, the Canadian Bishops have joined other Christian churches to pursue social justice in an ecumenical context. He sees this as a hopeful development. "We cannot change institutions from the top down," acknowledged

Baum. "It is through the grass roots networks that people begin to think and act differently. They eventually move to the top."

