

Pastoral letter on human trafficking issued within the context of preparations for the 2010 Olympic Games to be held in Vancouver.

**Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops**

What is human trafficking?

In 2010, Canada will host the Olympic Winter Games. Many are looking forward to watching some of the world's best athletes compete. Others, in Vancouver and elsewhere – especially groups involved in the struggle against human trafficking – are worried. They know that some see this event as an opportunity to make money, no matter the cost to human dignity and human rights.

The fact is that at some major sporting events, systems are often put in place to satisfy the demand for paid sex. Unfortunately, this is likely to be the case during the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver.¹

As pastors of the Catholic Church in Canada, we denounce human trafficking² in all its forms, whether it is intended for forced labour (domestic, farm or factory work) or for sexual exploitation (whether it be prostitution, pornography, forced marriages, strip clubs, or other). We invite the faithful to become aware of this violation of human rights and the trivialization of concerns about prostitution. Following the example of Jesus, who came into the world so that people “may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10), we can share in the suffering of the victims and change the behaviours and mentalities that foster institutionalized violence in this new form of slavery which is human trafficking. Jesus himself proclaimed the liberation of captives as a sign of his presence among us (Luke 4:18-19).

The scale of human trafficking is alarming. While it is difficult to find precise figures, the International Labour Organization (ILO) nevertheless estimates that 2.4 million people are victims of trafficking;³ 1.3 million of these are involved in various forms of sexual exploitation.⁴ In another study, the United States Department of State estimates there are 800,000 victims of

trafficking worldwide every year; the majority of whom are women and children.

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According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the most widespread form of human trafficking is sexual exploitation (79 percent).

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This area of organized crime brings in billions of dollars for pimps and for owners of strip clubs, massage parlours, and legal and illegal brothels. This figure does not include taxes paid to governments that often turn a blind eye to this activity.

How is human trafficking possible?

In a context of economic globalization where the gap between rich and poor countries is only increasing, the impoverished populations of the South and East remain vulnerable to trafficking. Their desire for a better life sends them across the border towards the North or the West to look for jobs. When hunger threatens their family's lives, people are more likely to believe the promises of unscrupulous smugglers or to succumb to the attraction of earning money through sexual tourism. Today, the speed of Internet and cellphone communication makes it easy to recruit people, who may find themselves in another country just a few hours later. Often, they cannot speak the language, their passport has been taken from them, and they are at the mercy of pimps who demand to be reimbursed for the victim's transportation costs. Women and children, usually under the influence of drugs, must then engage in prostitution under the vigilant eye of pimps who pocket the profits. If the victims try to run away or stand up for their rights, the pimps threaten to kill them or members of their families back home.

In Canada, Aboriginal women and young girls disappear from their villages and are never seen again. Increasingly, younger immigrants work the downtown streets or get jobs in strip clubs and massage parlours. Escorts answer calls that result from classified ads in the newspaper. With the support of non-governmental organizations working to combat trafficking, many of these women and girls describe their experiences as a living hell. Often their stories reveal similarities between their suffering and the symptoms of post-traumatic stress experienced by survivors of war.

What can we do?

First, we must become aware that human trafficking is happening in Canada, as it is elsewhere.

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We need to recognize it, talk about it with others, and take action in our communities to stop it. The author of the First Letter of John asks us, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17). We must also recognize that the demand for prostitution fuels the market for human trafficking. Without customers who ask for sexual services, there would be no prostitution, and thus no trafficking. In a country that considers equality between women and men to be a fundamental value, a country where a majority of citizens are Christians who promote the dignity of each person created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), how can we tolerate prostitution, which is a form of institutionalized violence that destroys the physical, psychological and spiritual integrity of other human beings?

Many avenues exist to help solve this problem. We can support organizations that work with those who are victims of human trafficking, and also ask our governments to set up programs to educate people and to prevent violence against women. To help women break free of prostitution, as they are generally the victims, we must provide concrete assistance: including health care, psychological counselling, detoxification programs, safe housing, decent employment, and spiritual support.

Our prayers will also strengthen the hope of those many people whose liberty and humanity have been taken from them by trafficking and the courage of those groups that assist them. We believe that we are the hands and feet of the Risen Christ today: he who passed from death to life shows us the path that leads to the liberation of those caught in the snares of death. May our faith and outrage spur us to get involved, individually and together, for the transformation of our world!

26 January 2010

Members of the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace:

- + Brendan M. O’Brien, Archbishop of Kingston (Chairman)
- + François Lapierre, P.M.É, Bishop of Saint-Hyacinthe
- + David Motiuk, Ukrainian Eparchial Bishop of Edmonton
- + Valéry Vienneau, Bishop of Bathurst

¹ See Senator Mobina Jaffer's statement:

<http://sen.parl.gc.ca/SenWeb/speeches/details.asp?lang=en&sen=59&speechID=388> .

See also the first report, dated November 2007, of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women on trafficking of women and children during the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. The federal Minister of Justice, Rob Nicholson, clearly expressed before the Standing Committee his objection to the legalization of prostitution in any form (39th Parliament, 2

nd

Session, 7 February 2008).

² According to Article 3 in Annex II of the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime* , “Trafficking in persons’ shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs....”

http://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/a_res_55/res5525e.pdf

³ International Labour Organization (ILO), *Combating Forced Labour: A Handbook for Employers and Business* , 2008, p. 13.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2009* (June 2009), p. 8.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2007* (June 2007), p. 8.

⁶ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* (2009), p. 6.

⁷ More information on the trafficking of women and children is available on the website of the Canadian Religious Conference, under the heading “CRC Priorities”: <http://www.crc-canada.org/>