



ARCHDIOCESE OF VANCOUVER  
ARCHBISHOP'S OFFICE

## Pastoral Letter on Human Trafficking

*At the heart of every situation of sin are always to be found sinful people. So true is this that even when such a situation can be changed in its structural and institutional aspects by the force of law ... the change in fact proves to be incomplete, of short duration and ultimately vain and ineffective ... if the people directly or indirectly responsible for that situation are not converted. (Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* [1984], no. 16).*

### *What is happening?*

The international community has identified victims of human trafficking as those taken advantage of for purposes such as forced labour, forced marriage, fraudulent adoption, illicit organ trade, or sexual exploitation.<sup>1</sup> An estimated 800,000 people are trafficked annually across national borders, and millions more were trafficked within their own borders.<sup>2</sup>

Victims are often trafficked domestically or abroad in response to the specific demands of others. Many people unknowingly procure services of trafficked persons. Especially vulnerable to human trafficking are people with limited options to support themselves and their families.

Those trafficked within Canada often come from remote rural communities and places of high poverty and underemployment. Persons trafficked trans-nationally into Western Canada are frequently from Asian countries and may arrive under lawful pretexts as visitors, students, refugees, family-class immigrants or temporary migrant workers. Having been deceived and unaware of their true fate, they fall victim to ongoing exploitation at their destination.

Traffickers often maintain this cycle of exploitation through physical confinement; rape, physical assault and abuse; alcohol and drugs; financial control such as debt bondage; threats of harm to the individual or others; and abuse of the legal process, by seizing identity documents and instilling fear of deportation or arrest. Cultural and linguistic

differences can also increase a person's vulnerability. Some individuals manage to escape, while others are rescued.

Human trafficking is regarded by some as the "fastest growing form of transnational organized crime."<sup>3</sup> When the victims are treated as objects and commodities, such trafficking entails a loss of their God-given dignity as human persons.

### *How is the Church reacting?*

The Catholic Church repudiates unequivocally this trade in human persons as "a shocking offence against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights."<sup>4</sup> The *Catechism* explains unambiguously that the "seventh commandment forbids acts or enterprises that ... lead to the enslavement of human beings, to their being bought, sold and exchanged like merchandise, in disregard for their personal dignity" (no. 2414). The Second Vatican Council described as infamies "whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit."<sup>5</sup>

Defence of the dignity of the human person is a basic principle of Catholic social teaching. The bond between the person and the Creator is the foundation of his or her dignity and of fundamental inalienable rights guaranteed by God. No individual, society or human institution has the right to reduce a person to the status of an object. Our belief that God is at the origin of mankind radically affirms the equal dignity of all persons. This conviction ensures that nothing can justify any servitude of the weak or less fortunate.<sup>6</sup>

"This trade is often passed over in silence because it is considered a part of supposedly democratic freedoms and is too deeply rooted in places and is too lucrative to confront."<sup>7</sup>

Catholic organizations across the world are fighting human trafficking from the highest levels at the United Nations to the very streets and ports where trafficked persons are victimized.

### *What can we be doing?*

*To all those suffering ongoing exploitation:* As God walked with the refugees of the Exodus in search of a land free from slavery, the Church walks with you today in solidarity. The representatives of more than a million consecrated men and women worldwide and the global confederation of 162 Catholic aid organizations are formally committed to your practical assistance and to advocacy on your behalf. We will pray that the hearts of those who perpetrate all forms of human trafficking will turn away from evil. Moreover, we promise you pastoral care, and we will continue to work with all people of good will to ensure that your human dignity is always respected.

*To those in government:* We are encouraged by your efforts to coordinate services for those rescued from ongoing exploitation, and expect that government support will be genuine, generous and lasting. We endorse a rehabilitation process centred on human dignity and reiterate the call of our brother Bishops for the reinforcement of measures protecting those rescued. We look forward to your strengthened resolve in prosecuting traffickers. We implore you always to serve the integral promotion of the human person both at home and abroad.

*To those in advertising and social communications:* We invite you to foster the common good, to report responsibly on the ongoing exploitation of people and its root causes, and to respect them in accordance with their full human dignity. We implore you to cease the humiliating portrayals of women in advertising, the trivialization of sexuality and the family, and the promotion of destructive patterns of consumption. Because of the media's educational potential, you bear a special responsibility for promoting the God-given dignity of every person.

*To all the faithful:* You are called to personal ongoing conversion and reconciliation with God and one another. To indicate the destructive presence of sin is readily understood as a service of hope. As witnesses to the love of Christ, you must uphold and defend the dignity of every human person.

We are all called to live in solidarity with all those who are exploited. Education makes us increasingly aware of the harmful moral and human effects that human trafficking has on victims, on their perpetrators, and on society as whole. The victims of trafficking are persons created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26-27). They are always to be treated with the love, respect and compassion that **belong** to each of God's children. As a community committed to the following of Christ, we dedicate ourselves to making every effort to help those who have been victimized to regain their sense of dignity. We call upon all men and women of good will to eliminate the mentality that treats human beings as commodities of commercial exploitation and as objects for pleasure. With God's help this can be accomplished by strong legislation, use of the media, and above all through prayer and good example.

Above all, we must love one another. "Now to Him who is able to accomplish all things in a measure far beyond what we ask or conceive, in keeping with the power that is at work in us - to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, down through all the ages of time without end. Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21).

## References:

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations (UN), *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (US TIP), *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000: Trafficking in Persons Report 2007* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Pino Arlacchi, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, *Address to the Permanent Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran on the Occasion of the International Conference "Twenty-First Century Slavery - The Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings"* (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), no. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society* (1988), no. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, 51<sup>st</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women (2007).