



Archdiocese of Vancouver  
ARCHBISHOP'S OFFICE

## Pastoral Letter on a Grave Social Issue

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

I am writing to you – the Catholic faithful of the Archdiocese of Vancouver – about a serious threat to the moral fabric of Canadian society: the possible decriminalization of sexual exploitation through prostitution by its buyers and profiteers. This Pastoral Letter examines what we can do as a community and a nation to answer the needs of girls, youth and women who are prostituted. Any law that would treat prostitution as if it were a commercial business reduces human sexuality to a mere commodity. That is morally unacceptable.

The reality of Easter, the fact that Christ rose from the dead as Man and God, invites us to think carefully about what it means to be a human person. His Resurrection transformed us radically, restoring our human dignity to “its original beauty and ennobled by the grace of God.”<sup>1</sup> This transformation calls us to accept our responsibility to build a social order that ever more perfectly serves the dignity of every human person.

In fidelity to the Risen Lord, the Church is for everyone, especially for the marginalized. She is “a mother with an open heart.”<sup>2</sup> We must show, powerfully and tenderly, the Lord’s preferential love for the most vulnerable members of our community. In the words of Pope Francis, “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid.”<sup>3</sup> To do this effectively as Jesus’ disciples, we must strip away any bigotry and ideology that prevent us from loving those on the margins of society. Any form of institutionalized

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1701.

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 187.

violence that destroys the physical, psychological or spiritual integrity of other human beings cannot be tolerated.

The Supreme Court of Canada ruled last December that our nation's laws did nothing to protect prostituted women from the violence inherent in this form of exploitation. The Court gave Parliament a year to enact laws that would be more effective in safeguarding the life, liberty and security of women involved in prostitution. In describing prostitution as a "constrained choice," the Court recognized the ways in which economic and social inequality, violence and other forms of coercion make women vulnerable to prostitution. "These are not people," the Court wrote, "who can be said to be truly 'choosing' a risky line of business."<sup>4</sup>

If Canada's parliamentarians fail to act, pimping, living from prostitution, keeping brothels and communicating for the purposes of prostitution will cease to be offences under the Canadian Criminal Code. Should these activities become legal, the enforcement of our laws against the slavery of human trafficking will become impossible. This will exacerbate the suffering of Aboriginal communities, because First Nation and Métis girls, youth and women are tragically over-represented among those exploited. It will also escalate the trafficking of girls, youth and women from Pacific Rim countries to Vancouver, making our city a hub for globalized sex slavery.

Canadians, and the parliamentarians whom we have elected to represent us, must consider the future of our laws from the point of view of the people who are victims of violence and the most vulnerable: the girls, youth and women who are prostituted. We would be a better country if we defended the human dignity of all by enacting laws which demonstrate our moral conviction that the most vulnerable and marginalized deserve our most urgent attention.

How would the Lord want us to respond to the girls, youth and women who are prostituted in our communities?

The answer advanced by countless women emancipated from prostitution, First Nation leaders, jurists, and constitutional scholars is to curb the demand which fuels the market for this sexual violence: the power to coerce girls, youth and women into having sex. The actions of such men are to be condemned as unjust and evil.

Let us be mindful that, in the words of Pope Francis, "changing structures without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same

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<sup>4</sup> *Canada (Attorney General) v. Bedford*, 2013 SCC 72, [2013] 3 S.C.R. 1101, 86.

structures will become, sooner or later, corrupt, oppressive and ineffectual.”<sup>5</sup>

As Christians, we are always ready “to re-read everything on the basis of the Cross and its victory.”<sup>6</sup> We must, therefore, more vigorously promote respect, understanding, compassion and a non-judgmental attitude towards women who have been caught in prostitution. To help them break free of this way of life, we are being called to provide even more concrete assistance, including health care, psychological counselling, detoxification programs, safe and affordable housing, decent employment, and spiritual support.

Together with all men and women of good will, our community of faith must work to do everything possible to create pathways out of prostitution. All of us must play our part. We must be tireless in exercising our obligations and rights as citizens to promote the common good. At the same time, it is necessary for us to ensure that all levels of government assume an active role in healing this social and personal wound by eradicating its underlying structural causes. Only in this way can we foster a social order that advances the dignity of every human person.

We are the hands and feet of the Risen Christ today. May our faith and outrage spur us to get involved, individually and together, to address the grave situation which confronts us! I invite our parishes, Religious congregations, schools, health-care institutions, the Catholic Women’s League and the Knights of Columbus, and our numerous lay movements and organizations, to answer this pressing appeal to become agents of the Lord’s emancipating love for prostituted girls, youth and women. I ask you to join your name to mine in urging the Parliament of Canada to enact legislation that respects the human dignity of all persons.

During the Easter season, when we celebrate the fresh hope poured out on the world with the Lord’s Resurrection, the Church frequently turns her attention to Mary Magdalene. Along with the Mother of Jesus, she had the courage to stand by Jesus as he offered himself for us on the Cross. Mary Magdalene was also the first to witness the empty tomb, the first to see the Risen Lord and experience the joy of Easter, and the first to proclaim his Resurrection from the dead: “I have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:18).

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<sup>5</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 189.

<sup>6</sup> Francis, Homily at the Easter Vigil (19 April 2014).

Let us pray for her intercession as we consider the vulnerability of prostituted girls, youth and women in Canada and our need to respond resolutely to ensure the protection of their human dignity.

St. Mary Magdalene, first witness to the Resurrection, pray for us!



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