

Dear Prime Minister,

I am most concerned that you and the government of Canada, in this time of financial cuts to important services, are prepared to significantly increase investment in the building of new prisons.

My concerns are based in 22 years of personal experience in prison chaplaincy, serving on the executive of the Interfaith Committee for Chaplaincy in the Correctional Service of Canada, and now as Bishop Ponens of prison ministry for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Proposed new federal laws will ensure that more Canadians are sent to prison for longer periods, a strategy that has been repeatedly proven neither to reduce crime nor to assist victims. Your policy is applying a costly prison response to people involved in the courts who are non-violent offenders, or to repeat offenders who are mentally ill and/or addicted, the majority of whom are not classified as high risk. These offenders are disproportionately poor, ill-equipped to learn, from the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups. They require treatment, health services, educational, employment and housing interventions, all less expensive and more humane than incarceration.

The Canadian government has regretfully embraced a belief in punishment-for-crime that first requires us to isolate and separate the offender from the rest of us, in our minds as well as in our prisons. That separation makes what happens later easier to ignore: by increasing the number of people in jail for lengthier sentences you are decreasing their chance of success upon release into the community.

The vision of justice we find in Scripture is profound. We are called to be a people in relationship with each other through our conflicts and sins, with the ingenious creativity of God's Spirit to find our way back into covenant community. How can that be if we automatically exclude and cut ourselves off from all those we label "criminal"?

Increasing levels of incarceration of marginalized people is counter productive and undermines human dignity in our society. By contrast, well supervised probation on release, bail options, reporting centers, practical assistance, supportive housing, programs that promote accountability, respect and reparation: these measures have all been well-established, but they are underfunded. Their outcomes have proven to be the same or better in terms of re-offending rates, at a fraction of the cost and with much less human damage.

Public safety is enhanced through healthy communities that support individuals and families. I, therefore, respectfully ask you to modify your government's policy by taking into consideration the impact it will have on the most disadvantaged, its lack of effectiveness, and its serious budgetary implications.

Sincerely,

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Cc Most Reverend Pierre Morissette
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