

12 February 2025

**Submission** to Committee Secretariat of the Justice Committee on the **Crimes (Increased Penalties for Slavery Offences) Amendment Bill**.

As a Catholic Justice and Peace Commission we express our support for the Crimes (Increased Penalties for Slavery Offences) Amendment Bill. We evaluate this proposed Bill through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) which focuses on the inherent dignity of every person, the importance of solidarity, and the preferential option for the poor. We also recognise the significance of addressing modern slavery and exploitation in all its forms. Our submission will highlight how this Bill aligns with the core principles of CST.

## 1. Dignity of the Human Person

The Catholic Church teaches that every human being possesses inherent dignity as a creation of God. As articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, "The dignity of the human person is to be found in the image and likeness of God" (GS, 12).<sup>1</sup> The respect for human dignity is foundational in Catholic ethics and is central to how society should treat all people.

Slavery in all forms is a direct violation of human rights, freedom and dignity. It reduces human beings to the status of property, denying them their basic rights of self-governance, independence and autonomy. Slavery, therefore, is an affront to the God-given dignity of the human person and a serious moral injustice.

*The Crimes (Increased Penalties for Slavery Offences) Amendment Bill* is a positive step toward affirming the dignity of all people, particularly those vulnerable to enslavement. By increasing penalties for slavery offences, this Bill will send a clear message that we, as a society, reject the denial of human dignity and will hold perpetrators accountable for such crimes.

## 2. Solidarity and the Common Good

Solidarity is a central tenet of CST. Pope John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* described solidarity as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (SRS, 38).<sup>2</sup> This principle calls for a collective commitment to the well-being of

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<sup>1</sup>Pope Paul VI. (1965, December 7). *GAUDIUM ET SPES – Pastoral Constitution*. Vatican II: The Holy See. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>2</sup>Pope John Paul II. (1987, December 30). *SOLLICITUDO REI SOCIALIS – Encyclical Letter*. Vatican: The Holy See. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html)

others, especially the poor, marginalised, and vulnerable. The common good, as Pope Benedict XVI articulated in *Caritas in Veritate*, "is the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily" (CV, 7).<sup>3</sup>

Slavery undermines the common good by exploiting individuals and creating divisions within society. It harms both the victim and society as the violation of basic human rights affects the social fabric and hinders the flourishing of all people. The Bill Amendment aligns with the principle of solidarity by seeking to protect those most vulnerable to exploitation and ensuring that society works together to eliminate the scourge of slavery. By increasing penalties for slavery-related crimes, we can as a nation and people foster a more just and equitable society in which the common good is highly prioritised.

#### **4. The Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

A fundamental principle of CST is the preferential option for the poor. As Pope John Paul II stated in *Centesimus Annus*, "The option for the poor... is a necessary condition for the moral legitimacy of social structures" (CA, 57).<sup>4</sup> The Church teaches that the needs of the poor and vulnerable should be prioritised, and society should act to protect those who are at greatest risk of exploitation.

Slavery disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including the poor, migrants, and those with limited opportunities and resources. These individuals are often the most susceptible to being trafficked or coerced into forced labour, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation. Again, increasing penalties for slavery offences will serve the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. By committing to stronger penalties for perpetrators and strengthening legal protections for those who are most likely to be exploited, this Bill will encourage society to commit to safeguarding the rights of these marginalised and vulnerable individuals and communities.

#### **5. Rights and Responsibilities**

Our social doctrine teaches that every person has fundamental rights, including the right to life, liberty, and security. Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* states that society has a responsibility to protect the rights of all people, particularly those who are weak and

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. (2009, June 29). *CARITAS IN VERITATE – Encyclical Letter*. Vatican: The Holy See. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html)

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II. (1991, May1). *CENTESIMUS ANNUS – Encyclical Letter*. Vatican: The Holy See. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html)

defenceless (QA, 79).<sup>5</sup> The responsibility to uphold the dignity and rights of others is central to the Church's teachings on social justice.

Slavery violates the most basic human rights, particularly the right to freedom. People bound by slavery are denied their autonomy, their right to make decisions about their own lives, and the ability to live with dignity. We all have a moral responsibility to protect these rights and prevent any violations.

Once more, this Bill moves to strengthen penalties for slavery-related crimes and reaffirm our responsibility to protect the basic human rights of all peoples. The Bill reflects and aligns with the Church's commitment to ensure that the rights of vulnerable people and communities are not violated or victimised by slavery.

## **6. Practical Considerations**

We reiterate that increasing penalties as outlined in this Amendment Bill will be a solid deterrence and strongly discourage individuals from participating in or facilitating slavery and human trafficking. A stronger legal framework helps ensure that those who exploit others are held accountable for their actions.

The Church advocates not only for punitive measures but also for proactive efforts to prevent exploitation. The increased penalties should be accompanied by measures that raise awareness of slavery and human trafficking, particularly in vulnerable communities, and promote early intervention and support for at-risk individuals.

Our teachings also emphasise restorative justice, which includes offering support to victims of exploitation and slavery. Victims should receive legal, psychological, and social support to help rebuild their lives. We recommend the Bill be enhanced by advocating for victim-centred services and reintegration programmes to ensure that those freed from slavery are given the opportunity to live with dignity and security.

## **Conclusion**

The Crimes (Increased Penalties for Slavery Offences) Amendment Bill strongly aligns with Catholic Social Teaching, particularly in its commitment to human dignity, solidarity, the common good, and the preferential option for the poor. It represents a vital step in the ongoing effort to eradicate slavery and human trafficking, ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable, and we as a whole take responsibility for protecting our most vulnerable members in society.

We especially tautoko the first reading to the House of this Bill by Greg Fleming MP in its entirety. We share the prayer, hope and vision that this Bill is instrumental in abolishing,

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Pius XI. (1931, May15). *QUADRAGESIMO ANNO – Encyclical Letter*. Vatican: The Holy See. [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html)

prosecuting and preventing all forms of slavery in Aotearoa, but especially slavery within our own midst. We too envision and advocate for a future where all are unbound and free to flourish in a just existence and livelihood of their choosing.

We encourage the government as policymakers to pass this Bill and to continue addressing the systemic factors that perpetuate slavery.

As Pope Francis reminds us, "Slavery is a crime against humanity" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 25).<sup>6</sup> It is our shared duty to combat this evil in all its forms.

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis. (2020, October 3). *FRATELLI TUTTI – Encyclical Letter*. Vatican: The Holy See. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)