

Priest refuses to leave prison ministry in spite of pandemic

With the federal prison system shutting down all visits, a Catholic priest has volunteered to be incarcerated rather than leave inmates without spiritual care.

“He offered to go there and live in the institution 24-7,” said Victoria Bishop Gary Gordon. “For a bishop to hear that from a priest, you say ‘OK, this is what it’s all about. This is the vocation – lay it on the line.’ It’s really beautiful.”

As COVID-19 infections begin to emerge in prisons, spiritual care for inmates has dwindled amid growing anxiety over the dangers faced by inmates and prison staff alike.

Gordon, who is the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops’ representative for prison ministry, said the priest who volunteered to remain with inmates has a deep and long commitment to prison ministry. He wouldn’t divulge the name or location of the priest to Canadian Catholic News for privacy reasons. Prison officials tuned down the priest’s offer.

As the official liaison for Canada’s bishops with Corrections Canada, Gordon hopes to persuade federal officials not to completely cut prisoners off from their chaplains.

“If someone is gravely ill, then the priest should be allowed to bring them the holy Anointing of the Sick and viaticum,” he said.

The situation inside jails can be very dangerous, said Bonnie Weppler, executive director of the Church Council on Justice and Corrections. She compares the spread of COVID-19 in prisons to how it can spread in long-term care homes and cruise ships.

“What would you expect to happen? The same as you see happening in seniors’ homes. If one person gets it a whole bunch are going to get it,” Weppler said.

As of April 4, Corrections Canada had reported 12 positive COVID-19 tests out of 112 federal inmates who had been tested, with 20 more test results pending. Five of the positive tests were at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ont.

Public Safety Minister Bill Blair has directed Correctional Services Canada and the Parole Board of Canada to find ways to thin out prison populations through early release.

Just letting non-violent offenders nearing the end of their sentences out isn't as easy a solution as it might first appear, said Wepler.

"If they come out, where are they going to live?" she asked. "It's not helpful to have them filling up shelters. The same kinds of things are likely to happen if we have them in shelters."

Subtracting prison ministry from prisons, even for a short time, could have negative consequences for inmates and for the atmosphere inside the institutions.

"There is lots of research that, for religious or spiritually-engaged people, chaplaincy services are integral to those peoples' mental health," said Carleton University law professor Rebecca Bromwich in an e-mail.

At the same time, the institutions must prevent visitors "from becoming disease vectors," Bromwich said.

Catholics should be praying for prisoners and leaving the judgment to others, said Gordon.

"We've got a very vulnerable population in these institutions by virtue of their addictions history. We really should be offering up a prayer," said the bishop. "Every human being has a right to everything a human being has a right to."