

Rich-poor gap prompts bishops to call for anti-poverty strategy

Canada's bishops are calling for the federal government to develop a national anti-poverty strategy.

"We invite Canadians today to join us in calling on our federal government to emulate the efforts of many provincial governments and develop a national anti-poverty strategy," the bishops said in an Oct. 15 letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"Today, most new wealth is going to those who already have more than enough. Inequality is increasing in Canada. The growing rich-poor gap is threatening the economic and political power of our middle class and our treasured participatory democracy."

The bishops have signed onto the Dignity for All campaign (www.dignityforall.ca), and don't accept a minimal role for the federal government, said Archbishop Brendan O'Brien of Kingston, chair of the bishops' Commission on Justice and Peace.

"These issues are common across the country," he said. "If we had a national focus on these things we would get a little bit further. The government could do a lot by just acknowledging these issues."

The letter came despite the fact that just two weeks earlier the government had dismissed the same request from the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology.

The bishops are right to keep pounding on the government's door, said Brice Balmer, director of the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition.

"We have to be like the widow (Luke 18.1-8)," he said. "We have to ask, we have to ask and we have to ask."

With the Dignity for All campaign and various other groups insisting that poverty is an issue, it has to rise to the national agenda soon, said Balmer.

"The evidence is amassing. At some point governments are going to have to make this a priority."

Starting their letter to Harper with references to both the Old and New Testaments, and ending with the recent papal encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, the bishops want Catholics to understand poverty is an issue for all Christians.

"This is an integral part of the Christian vocation. We need to insist on that," said O'Brien.

With more than three million Canadians living in poverty, most of them children, inequality has become a challenge to the political, social and moral health of the nation, said O'Brien.

"There is a gap, a widening gap, and we need to pay attention to that," he said. "How can we have a more equitable society? Or are we just going to accept this?"

"You would like to see something beyond just the political posturing on these things."