



Pastoral Letter on Gambling, Gaming and Casinos

April 2013

To the faithful of the Archdiocese of Toronto:

In my years of pastoral ministry as priest and bishop, I have become sadly aware of the grievous suffering experienced by individuals and families because of gambling dependence.

We are now engaged in debating a plan for a major new casino in our area. Although at the moment this debate concerns Toronto, many of the other proposed sites are also within our archdiocese, and so I am writing to offer pastoral guidance to our Catholic community.

This current discussion is an appropriate occasion for each of us to reflect more deeply upon the effects of gambling in our community.

In recent years governments have more and more used gambling to increase tax revenue, proposing as well that gambling benefits the economy. It is understandable that governments are tempted by the prospect of what seems to be an easy way to do that. Even if there were significant long-term economic benefits, however, and that is far from clear, the establishment of a new casino will have a negative social impact that outweighs such benefits, and will have an adverse effect on the vitality and social health of our community.

It is sometimes argued that yet another casino could be a source of employment and would attract visitors and tourists. That approach is short-sighted. We need to consider the overall effects of the expansion of gambling. I recommend that you read the January 28, 2013, report of the Medical Officer of Health, *Community Health Impacts of a Casino in Toronto*, which concludes that “with respect to all other potential impacts, the available evidence indicates that the introduction of a new casino is likely to have greater adverse health-related impacts than beneficial impacts.”

I am particularly concerned that marriages and families will be hurt or even destroyed through greater ease of access to gambling through the construction of yet another large casino. The health of families is a constant concern of our Catholic Family Services and of Catholic Charities member agencies throughout the archdiocese. In our parishes as well we seek to strengthen families, and we directly deal with the suffering which gambling addiction causes to individuals and families. We seek to heal, and are concerned by the expansion of the capacity to harm.

Licensed gambling is undeniably legal, and in fact is being heavily promoted by the government. In view of the suffering that gambling can cause, however, it is important to consider what light both our Christian faith and reason shed on the moral issues related to it.

Occasional and small-scale gambling can be a legitimate form of entertainment, and is not inherently evil. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in the section relating to respect for persons and their goods, states that games of chance or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice, but become morally unacceptable when these activities deprive people of what is necessary to provide for their needs and those of others.¹ That, unfortunately, is what happens far too often. *The Catechism* also notes the power of gambling to enslave.

Individuals, and the government, and charitable organizations as well can become enslaved by the lure of easy gambling revenue, and that is clearly not healthy.

The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario has consistently raised concerns about the proliferation of gambling, advising governments to take a more cautious approach towards promoting this source of income. These concerns have heightened as gambling has grown over the past 30 years to become a basic source of government revenue.ⁱⁱ

Gambling is inherently based on illusion – on promoting the fantasy, particularly attractive to the most vulnerable and the most desperate, that it is an easy way to provide a quick solution to the financial problems that they face. That is a cruel illusion, and it is not wholesome for governments to promote it, especially through extensive advertising.

It is sometimes said that should anyone become addicted, gambling's proceeds can be used to treat their addiction. Apart from the fact that this is rather dubious logic, as it makes more sense not to cause the problem in the first place, problem gambling is a serious public health concern.ⁱⁱⁱ There is evidence that a significant amount of revenue is derived from people who are most vulnerable to gambling.^{iv}

When gambling is so extensively available, and is so aggressively promoted, it is also very difficult to protect our young people from viewing gambling as a worthwhile activity, whose negative effects are masked.^v

As we consider this important issue in the civil society in which we all live and participate as citizens, we should also look carefully at whether we as a Church are also caught up in an unhealthy dependence on gambling that can harm others. I ask all Catholic organizations to examine any connection which they might have with gambling as a source of revenue. If we are engaged in any form of gambling that is likely to cause harm, we should find alternatives as soon as possible. We must not fund our good works in ways that cause suffering to others.

As a Catholic community, we should ponder carefully the proposals before our elected officials and add informed commentary to the discussion. Is yet another major casino a truly wholesome development that enhances the quality of life in our community? Does even more gambling make for a better society for individuals and for families? Can we support the further extension of a reality which already causes significant harm to the most vulnerable among us?

If you or someone you know is struggling with such an addiction, I urge you to address the problem. The Ontario Problem Gambling Helpline (1.888.230.3505) is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They provide a free, confidential and anonymous service to people throughout Ontario in more than 140 languages. We have also established a web page: www.archtoronto.org/gaming to provide background resources concerning this issue, to help educate and support our Catholic community.

May we join together in caring for the most vulnerable among us and, guided by a concern for the common good, in creating a community that is a truly wholesome place where individuals and families may flourish.

Sincerely in Christ,

+ Thomas Card. Collins
Thomas Cardinal Collins
Archbishop of Toronto

ⁱ "2413 – Games of chance (card games, etc.) or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice. They become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others. The passion for gambling risks becoming enslavement. Unfair wagers and cheating at games constitute grave matter, unless the damage inflicted is so slight that the one who suffers it cannot reasonably consider it significant," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Respect for Persons and their Goods."

ⁱⁱ "Gambling as an activity, in and of itself, is not a major concern. However, there are a number of serious concerns about the ramifications of gambling in our current culture. They are as follows: 1. Gambling is becoming a basic source of government revenue in our society. It is, therefore, becoming institutionalized and as a society we will become increasingly dependent upon it. We will lose our freedom of choice about controlling it or eliminating it; 2. There is clear evidence that a disproportionate amount of the revenue from gambling comes from the poorer sections of society; 3. As our society reaches saturation point for gambling forms and outlets, the marketing is becoming very aggressive and the pressure on people to gamble increases; 4. Some of the forms of gambling being introduced have been shown to be addictive. This is particularly the case with VLT's; 5. From experience in other societies, an increase in social problems and the presence of organized crime can be anticipated; 6. The introduction of establishments, such as casinos, in a community brings employment and attracts visitors. When additional costs are considered, it is not clear if the cost benefit ratio is entirely favorable; 7. It is not possible in this atmosphere to insulate young people from opportunities to gamble," Social Affairs Commission, Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, *On Gambling*, July 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Medical Officer of Health, Toronto Board of Health, *Community Health Impacts of a Casino in Toronto*, "Summary," January 28, 2013.

^{iv} "36% of Ontario gambling revenue is derived from people with moderate and severe gambling problems." Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario, *The Impact of Gambling Expansion in Ontario*, Q & A, November 2012.

^v The average amount each Ontarian spent in 2009 was \$455, compared to \$105 in 1992. It is estimated that 1.2%- 3.4% of Ontarians are affected by moderate and severe problem gambling. The highest rate of moderate and severe gambling problems (6.9%) is among young adults, aged 18 to 24 : Problem Gambling Project, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), *Problem Gambling: The Issues, the Options*, 2012.

Questions for Reflection – Proposed Casino Development in the Greater Toronto Area

For full citations, support documents and other helpful resources, visit www.archtoronto.org/gaming

With debate and dialogue currently underway throughout the Greater Toronto Area regarding casino development, the following questions are provided to help assist Catholics and our elected officials in discerning the path forward.

For Catholics, an opportunity to discern our own views and habits towards gambling:

1. Does our parish, school or Catholic organization rely heavily on profits from “high stakes” gambling to support our activities? What percentage of operating funds relies on these activities? (note “high stakes” gambling refers to casino nights and bingos offering prizes of several thousand dollars)
2. Are there alternative methods to raise funds that do not require gaming to be part of any financial plan?
3. Have I utilized income or savings to support gaming while letting bills go unpaid?
4. Have I or a loved one felt depressed or suicidal due to losses related to gaming?
5. How often do I gamble longer than planned? Does this habit have a negative impact on responsible use of my time, family commitments, and presence to others?

In dialogue with our elected officials:

1. Have we fully considered the negative effects of problem gambling on our citizens and do we judge it acceptable to inflict more of these costs?
2. Who is ultimately responsible for the social costs of such a development: gambling addiction, prostitution, crime, etc. Are we underestimating the overall “costs” to strengthening our communities and families?
3. Is a casino the most appropriate way to address fiscal stress in our community? To what degree should we/will we become reliant on this revenue stream?

Visit www.archtoronto.org/gaming for additional resources on this important issue.