

POPE FRANCIS ON SLAVERY AND TRAFFICKING

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From the beginning of his papacy Pope Francis has spoken out strongly about the issue of slavery today. It is hard to let in the reality that there are about 35 million slaves in today's world—more than all the slaves that were carried across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas over the three hundred years of the slave-trade in the past. Francis is very aware of the reality of slavery and he has taken every opportunity work against it.

He put this modern version of slavery at the top of the list of social evils which he mentioned in two places in his document *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 75 and 211). One has the sense that he was speaking in the light of his own experience of personal contact with the victims of trafficking when he made an impassioned plea and challenge:

Where is your brother or sister who is enslaved? ... Let us not look the other way. There is greater complicity than we think. The issue involves everyone! This infamous network of crime is now well established in our cities, and many people have blood on their hands as a result of their comfortable and silent complicity. (EG 211)

Francis devoted almost the whole of his address to foreign diplomats on 13 December 2013 to the issue of trafficking which he called 'a crime against humanity.' He returned to this topic in his Peace Message 2014. In the first paragraph of that message he referred to 'the tragic phenomenon of human trafficking, in which the unscrupulous prey on the lives and the desperation of others;' and in paragraph 8 he refers to 'the abomination of human trafficking.'

But Francis has not been content to just speak out on the topic; he has also taken important steps to organizing effective action against it. He hosted a major conference on this topic which took place in the Vatican on November 2-3, 2013. It had originally been intended that it would include only scholars who had studied and written about this topic. But at the request of activists "on the ground" the invitation was extended to sixty "observers"—people who had practical experience of ministering to victims of trafficking. These observers were allowed to participate actively and it was acknowledged that this provided an enriching experience for all the participants. When the conference was taking place the pope was particularly interested in

what was going on, and afterwards he engaged in dialogue with the activists. One of the participants in the conference was Detective Inspector Kevin Hyland of the London Metropolitan Police. He described a new and more effective program which had been put in place at Scotland Yard, one that enables the victims of trafficking to testify in court against the traffickers.

Some months later Pope Francis hosted a follow-up conference at the Vatican on April 9-10, 2014. This one brought together police and law enforcement officers from various parts of the world as well as social workers dealing with the victims of trafficking. In his address to the participants Pope Francis said:

Human trafficking is an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ. It is a crime against humanity. The very fact of our being here to combine our efforts means that we want our strategies and areas of expertise to be accompanied and reinforced by the mercy of the Gospel, by closeness to the men and women who are victims of this crime ... Conferences such as this are extremely helpful, and, I would say, much needed.

These representatives of police from so many countries agreed to advance their international cooperation to combat the scourge of trafficking.

Meanwhile, on March 17, 2014 Pope Francis brought together representatives from several of the great religions of the world at the Vatican. They signed what was called a "revolutionary and unprecedented" agreement called '*The Global Freedom Network*.' They said: 'Modern slavery and human trafficking are crimes against humanity,' and they committed themselves to working together to eradicate modern forms of slavery and human trafficking by 2020.

Pope Francis has played a key part in a follow-up to this inter-religious initiative. On 2nd December 2014 he hosted at the Vatican a gathering of religious leaders who are all inspired by their religious beliefs to take practical action against trafficking and the slavery which it leads to. There the pope and 11 leaders representing the Muslim, Jewish, Orthodox, Anglican, Buddhist and Hindu faiths made a united commitment to help eradicate slavery worldwide. The signatories included: Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury; Rabbi David Rosen, of the American Jewish Committee; Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi al-Modarresi, an influential Shiite scholar; and representatives signing on behalf of Ahmad el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar University --

a leading Sunni Muslim institution in Cairo, as well as a representative of the well-known Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh.

In their declaration these religious leaders said: 'We pledge ourselves here today to do all in our power, within our faith communities and beyond, to work together for the freedom of all those who are enslaved and trafficked so that their future may be restored.'

The leaders have asked their followers to sign up to the same pledge to which the leaders themselves have committed themselves to. You can sign up by going to the following website: <http://www.globalfreedomnetwork.org/>

Francis returned to the issue of trafficking in his "Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2016," issued on September 12, 2015. And at two points of his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 25, 2015, Francis spoke out strongly against the evil of trafficking in persons.

For those who may be interested in knowing some of the statistics about human trafficking here are some rather shocking figures taken from The United Nations 'Global Report on Trafficking in Persons' for 2014. 70% of those who are trafficked are adult women or girls. As we know, people are trafficked for various reasons, including forced labour and organ removal. But the main reason why people are trafficked is for purposes of sexual exploitation. In Africa and the Middle East well over half of the victims have been trafficked for this reason; and in Europe and Central Asia two-thirds of the victims have been trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation. Almost two-thirds of the victims of trafficking are foreigners—they have been trafficked across at least one national boundary. An increasing number of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are girls rather than women. In the case of most crimes only 10% to 15% of the criminals are women. But sadly, in the case of the crime of trafficking almost 30% of the offenders are women.