Human Trafficking and the Dignity of Work

The campaign against human trafficking is one of the most important and urgent global social responsibilities of our time. As Pope John Paul II observed, "It is an intolerable evil that must be combated with all energy and determination. It is an evil that is not a renunciation of the dignity of work, but a dishonor of it. It is a supreme dishonor to the Creator who made every human being in his image. It is a grave sin against humanity. It is a sin against humankind's dignity. It is a sin against the very essence of work. It is a sin against the very essence of life itself."

Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation "Fratelli Tutti," emphasized the necessity to prevent human trafficking, as well as the moral imperative to combat it. He stressed the importance of international cooperation to combat this evil and to ensure that the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are respected.

Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery. It involves the exploitation of individuals through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced labor, or organ trafficking. This phenomenon affects all parts of the world, with victims being trafficked from one country to another, often across borders. The victims of human trafficking are usually subjected to violence, abuse, and exploitation, and are deprived of their basic human rights.

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, were adopted in 2000 to fight human trafficking. These international agreements seek to eradicate human trafficking by promoting international cooperation and providing for the protection of victims.

Since then, many organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, have been active in helping victims of trafficking and in providing assistance to those affected by this crime. One of the objectives of the Global Compact on Migration is to prevent, combat, and eradicate human trafficking.

Transnational human trafficking is fueled by two contradictory global dynamics. On the one hand, there is the globalization of economies and the spread of financial and labor markets, which creates opportunities for human traffickers. On the other hand, there is the growing awareness of the risks associated with human trafficking, and the efforts of governments and international organizations to combat it.

In the sphere of labor, trafficking is present in many ways: from low-skilled labor, such as in urban, agricultural, and domestic work, to high-skilled workers, such as in the medical and legal professions. Victims of trafficking are also often to be found in the fishing industry, on farms, in factories, and in wealthy households.

The Global Slavery Index, published by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Walk Free Foundation, estimates that in 2016 40.3 million people were involved in some form of "modern slavery." This term includes human trafficking, both in the case of "forced labor" and in the case of arranged marriages. However, the ILO report notes that the real number of victims is likely to be much higher, as only a small fraction of cases are reported to authorities.

Catholic efforts against human trafficking

In 2002, addressing an International Conference on "Slavery in the 21st Century," Saint John Paul II made one of the most famous statements about this issue: "Human trafficking is a sin against life, against the human person, against human dignity. It is a crime against humanity. It is a crime against God. It is a crime against the Creator who made every human being in his image. It is a sin against the very essence of work. It is a sin against the very essence of life itself."

For the Council Fathers, these practices are "a supreme dishonor to the Creator." Previously, in the encyclical "Veritatis Splendor," John Paul II himself had defined these social ills as "intrinsically evil," inasmuch as they "radically contradict the good of the person made in the image of God."
The Vatican State collaborates with police forces through the Santa Marta group, which promotes cooperation between the local Churches and police forces. In the encyclical *Laudato Si’*, the pope spoke of the “culture of relativism,” which reduces other people to mere objects of our desires and immediate needs. How can human trafficking be prevented, and what limits can be placed on it?

For the pope, the root cause of this is the corruption of sin, which distances humanity “from our Creator and our neighbors” in such a way that we reject the humanity of others. This means that “human trafficking” can encompass a broad range of circumstances that involve some form of exploitation: slave-labor, debt-bondage, forced prostitution, child labor, and underpaid migrant labor.

In 2014, addressing the participants in an International Conference on Trafficking organized by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Pope Francis emphasized that human trafficking is not just an economic phenomenon but a spiritual one. He called it “an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ. It is a crime against humanity.”

For Saint John Paul II, work is a “fundamental dimension” of human existence, and is sanctified by Christ’s own participation in the toil of labor at the carpenter’s bench. Such dignity is undermined when human persons are regarded as bargaining chips rather than as workers, as ends in themselves. At the United Nations, the Holy See contributed to the negotiations on the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* and the *Global Plan of Action to Combat Human Trafficking*.

In their work people realize their dignity, their being created in the image and likeness of God. Moreover, human work is not just a means to an end but a moral act. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI reiterated this idea, emphasizing that workers must be respected for their human dignity and not just as a source of profit. For Saint John Paul II, human labor carries a twofold tension: it involves toil and wear, yet it also aids in the ongoing creative work of God, and with it people become cooperators and co-creators at the service of the common good.

At the same time, the Holy See has given increasing attention to this tragic problem, to the point that human trafficking has been recognized as a particular priority of the diplomatic work of the Holy See and an urgent pastoral task of the Catholic Church. In 2014 the Holy See promoted the Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders against Modern Slavery, signed by Pope Francis and representatives of world religions gathered in the Vatican.

In his message for the 2015 World Day of Peace, Francis highlighted the incongruence of the fact that, despite the global efforts to combat human trafficking, many people today – children, men and women of all ages – are deprived of freedom and forced to live in conditions akin to slavery. In 2013, in a speech to the newly-accredited ambassadors to the Holy See, Pope Francis condemned the commodification of human persons, stating that whoever uses human persons in this way and exploits them, even if indirectly, becomes an accomplice of this injustice.

Trafficking is a constant theme in the teaching of Pope Francis. In his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he expressed his concern for “those who are victims of various kinds of human trafficking.” The Catholic Church has taken a leading role in the contemporary movement to combat human trafficking. In particular, the Holy See has participated in the international network *Talitha kum*, which aims to combat trafficking and stimulating international commitment. In recent years, both the reality of trafficking and the ways in which it is defined have changed. In a comprehensive way, this definition includes the multiple circumstances that could be considered forms of human trafficking. For example, in the last 10 years, the international network *Talitha kum* has been active in defining precisely its various aspects, with a consequent attenuation of the commitment to eliminate it completely.

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In the same way, in *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis states that “it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually beneficial work that ... lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use.”

Work is therefore a privileged expression of human freedom; it allows us to share our creativity and assume our responsibilities, protecting the earth’s resources and promoting the good of humanity.

In the light of these teachings on human work, we can say that trafficking offends human dignity not only because it robs people of their freedom to choose and makes them vulnerable, but also because it frustrates the humanizing dimension of work that enables the individual to become a person, a member of the human family and of the community.

How to intervene

Human trafficking damages the dignity of both the trafficked person and the trafficker, and it frustrates the humanizing dimension of work. It is therefore a violation of human dignity because it destroys a person’s capacity to cooperate in God’s ongoing creative action. In this regard, pastoral reflection would also be important.

How can we respond to human trafficking?

How can we respond to human trafficking in an authentic, integral and coherent manner? The response requires a change in the economic system as well as an evangelization of our global economic system, so that the dignity of each person is respected in every type of work.

Therefore, we look forward with confidence to the forthcoming initiatives of Pope Francis that aim to foster further dialogue and cooperation among states, the private sector, civil society and religious institutions, and helping each of them to find forms and conditions of labor that promote their human dignity in an integral manner.

Finally, responding to human trafficking in an authentic, integral and coherent manner requires a change in the economic system. This would entail a debate on the role of the market in human development, the forms of participation of workers in the enterprises in which they work, the conditions for fair competition, and the mechanisms for the protection of the environment.

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