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 Francis declared, “to entrust human beings to the devil, like this moneylender does, is a sin that is against the heart of the law of God.” In response to human trafficking in all its forms, Pope Francis has appealed to all people of good will for a commitment to “abhor every form of slavery in all its aspects” and to “confront this problem with a clear moral imperative.” Therefore, it is necessary to examine the phenomenon of coercive labor and other dehumanizing working conditions.

To strengthen its mobilization against trafficking and to eliminate all forms of exploitation, the entire Catholic Church must become a universal witness of justice. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains: “In our era, transnational human trafficking is probably fueled by two contradictory global dynamics: on the one hand, the growing global integration of the economy, and on the other, the increased poverty and vulnerability of certain populations. In the sphere of labor, trafficking is present in many ways: from low-skilled labor – for example, in urban, agricultural, and domestic work – to highly skilled workers in various professions, as well as to victims of child abuse. Victims of trafficking are also often to be found in the fishing industry, on farms, in factories and 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 figures, based on the victims who have been identified. From 2003 to 2016, UNODC recorded 225,000 victims of trafficking, while in 2018 the US State Department identified 85,613 victims globally.

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 significant statements against human trafficking: "To consider them not only as material objects of exchange, as if they were mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons." For the Council Fathers, these practices are "a supreme dishonor to the Creator." Previously, in the encyclical VeritatisSplendor, 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.
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.

For Benedict XVI, the "dignity of human work" implies "work which, in every society, is the expression of the essential ... woman: work chosen freely, which effectively associates workers, men and women, with the development of their community." These criticisms stem from the fear that the complex phenomenon of labor exploitation will be oversimplified, as will the variety of ways in which the term "trafficking" is used today by both activists and governments.

In his speech to a conference dedicated to the implementation of this document, Pope Francis observed that "Trafficking ... trafficking seriously damages humanity as a whole, tearing apart the human family as well as the Body of Christ." These words, which call for a serious reflection on the structural causes of trafficking, confirm the recent diplomatic efforts of the Holy See.

In a painful tone, he wrote: "How I wish that all of us would hear God's cry: 'Where is your brother?' (Gen 4:9)"

Francis also stressed that the world suffers from a "globalization of indifference." Those who do not pay attention to ... evil." In order to face it, the pontiff called for a "mobilization comparable in size to that of the phenomenon itself."

At the same time, the Holy See has given increasing attention to this tragic problem, to the point that human trafficking ... "a particular priority of the diplomatic work of the Holy See and an urgent pastoral task ..."
In the same way, in *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis states that “it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually enriching work that a person is able to realize his or her personal and professional growth. The dignity of the worker and the respect for the rights of workers are at the very heart of this teaching.” 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 destroys the image of God in the person trafficked, but also because it frustrates the humanizing potential of work.

How to intervene

Human trafficking damages the dignity of both the trafficked person and the trafficker, and it frustrates the humanizing potential of work. It leads to a situation of reified and demeaning work, in which the person is reduced to a mere means for someone else’s benefit. Trafficking is thus a form of exploitation and a violation of the dignity of the person.

Without denying the need and urgency to work to protect every victim of trafficking, we now need effective, timely and well-coordinated interventions that address the root causes of the problem and help to create conditions that are conducive to the rehabilitation and reintegration of victims. In this regard, pastoral reflection would also be important.

Finally, responding to human trafficking in an authentic, integral and coherent manner requires a change in the economic and social systems that sustain it. It requires 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 action on the issue of human trafficking. We are convinced that these efforts will be an important step in the fight against this evil and in the promotion of justice and peace in our world.
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