



**FIRST INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER AND AWARENESS  
AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

**Feast of Saint Josephine Bakhita, 8 February 2015**

**Message by the Most Reverend Paul-André Durocher  
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In his 2015 Message for the World Day of Peace, Pope Francis focused on the many faces of slavery in today's world: the exploitation of migrant labourers, the deprivations and abuse often faced by migrants, forced prostitution and forced marriages, the trafficking of human organs, the recruitment of minors as soldiers, tricking others into narcotics smuggling, and kidnappings by terrorist groups. These "*victims of human trafficking and slavery,*" the Pope pointed out, "*often end up in the hands of criminal networks which organize human trafficking.*"

Last April, I attended an international conference at the Vatican entitled "Combating Human Trafficking". Presidents of various Bishops' Conferences were in attendance, as were national chiefs of police and various experts in the field. The aim of the forum was to build on the work of women's religious orders who have been involved in this fight for a number of years, and to learn from an experience in London, England, where Church groups have collaborated with Scotland Yard in this struggle.

The conference was an eye-opener for me. I heard Sister Florence Nwaonuma, a Sister of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, speak about her work helping trafficked individuals escape their exploiters and start a new life. I heard actress Mira Sorvino, U.N. goodwill ambassador to combat human trafficking, explain that this scourge ranks with drug and arms trafficking among the top three money-making international crimes: millions of people are enslaved in the world, reaping billions of dollars annually for their exploiters. I heard Pope Francis' words: "*Human trafficking is a wound in the body of contemporary humanity; it is a wound in the flesh of Christ. It is a crime against humanity.*" But the most powerful moment was when I heard three women tell their stories of being enslaved into prostitution in England. Bishops and hardened police could not hold back the tears as we listened to their horrible stories. That's when it struck me: this is going on in our back yard.

Here are a few Canadian stories (the names have been changed):

Mary, a 13-year old Aboriginal girl, ran away from her foster home. After a week of living on the street, an older man offered to give her a place to stay. He sold her to another man who told her that she had to work in the sex trade. He also introduced her to cocaine: she needed it to help her through the day. Over the next year and a half, Mary tried to leave several times but each time she was caught and beaten.

Mai came from Indonesia to a city in Ontario to work for an Indonesian-Canadian family. She had a visitor's permit and a contract that stipulated that she would work for the family for two years and would get paid at the end of the two years. Her employers took her passport and promised to do all the necessary immigration paperwork. Mai worked seven days a week (usually from 5:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.) and slept on the kitchen floor. At the end of the two years, she was not paid. When she complained to the family, they ignored her except to say that if she tried to call the police, she would be arrested because she didn't have the proper documentation.

Linda was a 15-year-old girl who lived in a social housing complex with her mother. She fell in love with a boy from Toronto who was hanging around her complex: he took her to the movies, bought her dinner, clothes and jewellery. Then, he suggested that Linda should go back to Toronto with him, and she went. He soon started blaming Linda for their money problems, insisting that he had spent all his money on her. He pushed her into going to work as a stripper and insisted that she take men back to the VIP lounges to make more money. He also insisted that Linda give all her money to him. She eventually learned that Phil was running other young women as well. When she complained, Phil hit her. He began to control her movements more closely; she needed to stay in his sight or she would be beaten.

Jin was the second son in a family that was living in poverty in Thailand. When he turned 19, he was chosen by the family to be the one who would work overseas to make money for the family. The family took out a loan (equivalent to about \$12,000 Canadian) and then went to a worker recruitment office. There they were told Jin would earn enough money in three months to pay back the loan, and could then spend the next few years earning money for the family. He signed a contract (written in English) to work at a farm in Canada, but when he arrived, Jin discovered he was not taken to the farm on the contract. Instead, he was taken to a run-down house on a different farm where he slept on a mattress on the floor with 13 other men and women. Instead of working in one place, he was transported to a different farm each day. Some days, he worked for as little as \$7 a day. He also discovered that three-quarters of his pay would go back to the contractor to pay for room and board at the house, as well as transportation to the various farms. When he complained to the contractor that this wasn't what he signed up for, he was told to be quiet because he was in Canada illegally. Jin could not possibly go back to Thailand without the money his family needed. He was stuck, not knowing where to turn for help.

It is difficult to know the full extent of human trafficking here in Canada. The first national report was prepared by the RCMP in 2010. Relying on information from investigations and court cases, the report concluded that 90% of cases involve sexual exploitation of Canadian citizens, and that most victims are young women between the ages of 14 and 25. Since the creation of a law on human trafficking in our country in 2005, 50 trials have been held, leading to the sentencing of 97 individuals. Experts agree, however, that this is but the tip of the iceberg.

In fact, human trafficking takes many forms. It occurs whenever someone gains a profit from the exploitation of another person through means of coercion, deception or fraud. This exploitation can take many different forms such as sexual exploitation (in the sex trade, one partner exploiting another), labour exploitation in the service industry (restaurants, hotels), agriculture (fields, greenhouses), domestic work (baby sitters, nannies, personal care workers, housekeepers) and manufacturing. Forced marriage often leads to both sexual and labour exploitation and, at times, reaches the level of human trafficking.

One fact I realized at the conference in Rome (and the follow-up conference in London in November) is that our efforts to work against human trafficking cannot be simply about protecting the human rights of persons who have been trafficked, or prosecuting those who buy and sell people, although this is clearly necessary. People become vulnerable to being trafficked through social and economic exclusion. Many people experience exclusion because of barriers such as poverty, gender bias, racism, lack of education and lack of opportunity; others become excluded as a result of mental illness, addiction, family disconnection or social isolation. Aboriginal women and girls can be particularly vulnerable to being trafficked because they often experience multiple barriers intersecting in their lives. Human trafficking is challenging us, as a society, to address these underlying patterns of exclusion.

There is so much more I could say here about the need for legislation, enforcement, information, community involvement, re-education and re-integration, political action. Suffice it to mention two key needs for responding to people who have experienced trafficking here in Canada: 1) government funding for regional safe houses, 2) and an ombudsperson to monitor how and if the rights of individuals who have been trafficked are being protected.

The Holy See has asked that this 8 February be celebrated, in all dioceses and parishes in the world, as the first “International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking”. It is the feast day of Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese slave, freed, who became a Canossian nun and was declared a Saint in 2000.

What can we do to mark this day?

- Read Pope Francis’ Message for the World Day of Peace published this past January 1, 2015, “No Longer Slaves, but Brothers and Sisters”.
- Thank the women religious we know for their commitment to this cause. The Canadian Religious Conference made this a priority in 2004, in response to calls from women religious throughout the world. In this Year of Consecrated Life, let us give thanks to God for this prophetic voice and re-echo it around us.
- Do a web-search on the words “human trafficking” and simply start reading about it.
- Call around to see who in your area is involved in this struggle, and ask what you can do to help.
- Speak to your Members of Parliament, and invite them to be informed and involved.
- Pray – for those who are enslaved and for the oppressors, for the police and for the politicians, for eyes to be opened and hearts to be enflamed.

With Pope Francis, I pray: “*May we have the courage to touch the suffering flesh of Christ, revealed in the faces of those countless persons whom he calls ‘the least of my brethren’.*” (World Day of Peace Message, 1 January 2015)



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