

# A DAY OF PRAYER

## A Faith Reflection on Human Trafficking

An invitation to reflect on what is happening, pray for all the people involved, and make some concrete commitment that will help to improve the situation.

Human Rights Day  
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**T**oday we can see a total lack of appreciation for life, manifested in many different ways: the trafficking of human beings, especially of women and children; forced migration, which more often than not looks distinctly female; political exile and racism; organized prostitution; slave labour; trafficking of human organs; violence in the home; sexual exploitation of minors; break-up of families; marginalization of women. These and many other features of life are the signs of the same social ills that provoke the repudiation of and the reaction of many groups, Christian and otherwise, religious and otherwise. They revolt against all these things that are daily occurrences and that very often go unpunished.

There are many who take these situations very seriously and feel called to fight against these inhuman and dehumanizing situations. There are people who on account of their faith in God become involved in this struggle. Other do so simply out of a human awareness and sensitivity that brings them to oppose these crimes. Others, and they are the majority, become aware of what is happening, do not agree with it, but do not know what to do about it. They feel totally powerless and incapable of doing anything that might improve the situation and lessen the suffering of victims and their families.

A group of religious from around fifty congregations, taking up the lead given by the Conference of Religious in Brazil (CRB), and following on the suggestion by the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), set about joining other groups that are fighting against human trafficking. They did this as a demand of their faith in God, and in the Bible they seek the deepest motivation for them to continue in this struggle and to involve more and more people in it.

In this regard, taking a lead from the Conference of the Religious in Sao Paolo, Brazil, with the help of the biblical meditations of Carlos Mesters, O. Carm., we offer here a series of reflections for the purpose of 1) helping to create and deepen in each one of us a spirituality of commitment to the defense of life and the recovery of the human dignity of so many sisters and brothers that suffer all the time from exclusion, purchase, prostitution, murder, and human trafficking. 2) getting people to think about more effective and extensive ways to overcome these problems and to build a more human way of living together, 3) offering material that is simple and practical to those who wish to use it in the meetings of people who are committed to this cause.

*The Carmelite NGO*

## I Some Facts to Think About

Human trafficking “constitutes a shocking offence against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights.” [John Paul II]

Human trafficking involves fraud or coercion and violent force to enslave a person. Street children or runaways can fall under the control of traffickers who force them into begging rings. [CarmeNGO 2(2009)2]

Human trafficking is the second largest and fastest growing criminal operation in the world. Human trafficking is the third most profitable criminal activity, following behind drug and arms trafficking.

Sexual exploitation is by far the most commonly identified form of human trafficking, followed by forced labour. [CarmeNGO 2(2009)3]

The exploitation of children in begging, sex trade and warfare is real and rising. [CarmeNGO 2(2009)3]

- The majority of trafficking victims are between 18 and 24 years of age;
- 95 % of victims experience physical or sexual violence during trafficking;
- 98% of those victims of forced sexual exploitation are women and girls;
- 56% of those victims of economic exploitation are women and girls;
- Many victims have at least middle level education;
- There are at least 30 million victims of modern slavery in the world today;
- 50% of those in slavery are children;
- Each year there are 1 million new victims of human trafficking;
- At any given moment, 2.5 million people are being trafficked;
- 52% of traffic recruiters are men, 48% are women;
- In 54% of the cases the recruiter was a stranger to the victim, in 46% of cases the recruiter was known to the victim;

## II Stories to Make Us Think

### 1. Child Soldiers

Life on the frontlines often brings children face to face with the horrors of war. A child soldier is defined as a person under the age of 18 who directly or indirectly participates in an armed conflict as part of an armed force or group. While some children wield assault rifles, machetes, or rocket-propelled grenades on the front lines, others are used in combat support roles as messengers, spies, cooks, porters, sexual slaves and mine clearers. [CarmeNGO 2(2009)3]

- What kind of a mentality allows a child to bear weapons and stand in the frontline?
- What kind of future can child soldiers hope for?
- How should people where you live be affected by the information that is available about child-soldiers?

### The Word of God

Matthew 18:1-7,10: Jesus defends the life of children against scandal

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believes in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

## Commentary:

The disciples asked, *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?* Behind this somewhat senseless question there is the competition between them for the first place. Jesus calls a small child and makes that child the teacher of the grown-ups. I say to you, if you are not converted and become like little children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Straight away they hear him strongly condemn all scandal committed against children, against the little ones: *Whoever scandalizes one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for that person to have a millstone put around his neck and be thrown into the sea.*

To give scandal to the little ones means being a reason for the little ones losing their faith in God, when they leave the good path and no longer feel loved, they can no longer know the love of God. If Jesus spoke with such force against scandal, it is because in fact at that time, there must have been a lot of scandal against children. Jesus then says: *It is inevitable that there will be scandals, but woe to the person who causes scandal.*

Why, inevitable? The way in which at that time religion was organized and taught was a scandal for the little ones and led them to lose their faith in God (Lk 17:1-2; Mt 18:6-8; Mk 9:42). The insistence by the scribes and pharisees that all the customs of purification should be kept meant that many people would be marginalized: women, Samaritans, foreigners, lepers, publicans, the sick, the paralytics and children. The scribes despised the simple people (cf. Jn 7:49; 9:34). In the name of the law of God, incorrectly interpreted by the religious authorities, many good people were excluded. Instead of using the law to make the community stronger and to welcome those who might be excluded, the law was used to legitimate exclusion. The same scandal is evident today. Because of the negative experiences suffered at the hands of bosses and users many children and young people no longer believe in adults and lose their faith in God.

In the face of this situation Jesus reacts in two ways. On the one hand, he tries to strengthen the quality of the life of the community because the community is the basis of all social living, the protection of families and individuals and the vehicle on which the traditions of the people are carried. To defend the community is to defend the covenant. It is the concrete way both of incarnating the love of God in the love we have for our neighbor and of avoiding scandal.

On the other hand, Jesus denounces scandal. He stands on the side of the little ones and defends them. He welcomes the children and defends them against the misdoings of adults. (Mk 9:37; Mt 10:42; 18:10; 25:40). Mothers and children come to him to ask his blessing. The apostles try to send them away. Jesus corrects the adults and welcomes the mothers with their children, touches them and blesses them; *"Let the children come to me, do not send them away."* (Mk 10:13-16; Mt 19:13-15).

In line with the customs of the time, both the mothers and their children lived in a state of permanent legal impurity. To touch them meant becoming impure. Jesus is not worried. When children are criticized by the chief priests and the scribes, Jesus defends them and draws on the Scriptures to do it. (Mt 21:16). He has a great concern for children (Mk 10:13-16; Mt 19:13-15; Mk 10:15; Lk 9:46-48). He identifies with them (Mk 9:37; Mt 25:40). Whoever welcomes a child, welcomes Jesus (Mk 9:37). *"Everything that you did to these little ones you did it to me"* (Mt 25:40). But woe to the ones who are a cause of scandal to these little ones. This is their sentence, to have a millstone put around their neck and to be thrown into the sea. We might ask then, What will Jesus say about the attitude of people who take away the innocence of children who become child soldiers and sex slaves?

## 2. An Awful Home-Coming

Sr. Florence, an aid worker, is about to tell her parents that their daughter Joyce is coming home soon. They live in a house in Benin City, Nigeria, that was built with money that Joyce sent home. "Joyce is not doing well," Sr. Florence says, "she's been staying in a psychiatric institute." The parents reaction is hostile. They scream and shout. "Let her stay in Switzerland. We don't want her." "Your daughter needs you," Sr. Florence replied, "I beg you, welcome her home." The mother leaves the room and goes into the kitchen. She returns with an empty pan and drops it in front of Sr. Florence. "We don't even have a wok, not even a bit of meat or fish to put in our soup." Later, when Joyce comes home and is admitted to the hospital her father goes to visit her, to ask if she has any money to give to her parents. [Transactions, 14(July 2009)]

What is life like in Joyce's home where her parents live?

Poverty de-humanizes people. What evidence do we see of this in our own environment?

What future is there for Joyce and girls like her?

What will people do when they are desperate?

What will happen if the family or neighborly network in towns and villages breaks down?

Where can victims turn after they have left the clutches of the traffickers and the bosses.

### The Word of God

Lk 15: 8-10: Parable of Divine Mercy

"What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

### Commentary:

Joyce's parents no longer have the ability to welcome the return of their daughter who was lost. In their poverty they have lost the ability to protect her. Poverty is the cause of many people losing themselves to trafficking and to the promises of a better life that the traffickers offer. All Joyce's parents could think about was their own survival. Very often the poor keep their great sense of humanity and their hope in spite of their poverty. The ultimate tragedy in this story is that Joyce's parents have lost even that and are of no help at all to their very needy daughter. Not for them the joy of gathering the neighbors to welcome their daughter home.

## 3. Forced to Leave Home

Maria lived in inland Brazil. She was tired of working on the land. She encountered many difficulties and there was never much prospect of things getting better. She was getting more and more tired, disappointed and unhappy. As a result she decided: I'm going to leave this country. A friend has told me that I can earn a lot of money and life is much better. She sold the little she had, borrowed money from a number of people and set out for Europe. She went to live in Rome where her friend lived. She had no idea that the cost of living could be so high. In this country the only job she could find was as a housemaid.

After three months, her tourist visa was running out of date and she became a clandestine, subject to deportation. She had no idea of the difficulties of the life of the undocumented migrant, always on the move and sought by the police. After a few months, she was on the street again looking for a job because she could not take the humiliation and the exploitation of being cheap labor. Up to that point she had been earning barely enough to survive. She went from house to house, working oftentimes sixteen hours a day, being threatened and sexually molested. She was losing her zest for life. That's the way it was for a number of years. In the end having tried everything and now feeling depressed about it all, and with all the disappointment of a dream that could not come true she decided to go home to her own family and people.

## **The Word of God**

Mt 2:13-15: Forced Migration into Egypt

We are going to listen to a passage from the Gospel according to Matthew that describes how Joseph and Mary were forced to leave their home and flee to Egypt. As we listen to the reading we will pay attention to the attitude and the suffering of the family of the child Jesus.

### **Commentary:**

Today forced migration is very prevalent. People are compelled by the political situation, the need for money, for employment, racial hatred, having no land, to help the family survive, because of drought, because of rain, hunger, exile. The reasons are many. We looked closely at the story of Maria from inland Brazil who felt forced to emigrate and ended up in a foreign country, with no documents, unprotected, with not defense.

All of these reasons for forced migration were there also at the time of Jesus and a number of them were part of the life of Jesus himself. His family was forced to flee to Egypt for fear of Herod who wanted to kill the child. In this way a poor household in the middle of Palestine, without any way of defending itself from the brutal power of the king, had to flee to a foreign land. We do not know for how long, but it was at least for one or two years.

This was neither the first nor the only time that Jesus was forced to migrate. You might say that Jesus was a migrant and the son of a migrant. When the Romans organized the census in order to get a better yield from their taxes, Joseph, the father of Jesus, who lived in Nazareth, in the north, had to travel to Bethlehem in the south in order to sign on. The two of them traveled, he and his wife Mary, now nine months pregnant (Lk 2:1-5). This meant that Jesus was born away from home (Lk 2:6-7).

While they were in Bethlehem, the family of Jesus was forced by the political ambitions of Herod to flee to Egypt (Mt 13-14). When Herod died, the way was clear for them to return to Bethlehem (Mt 2:19-20). But when Joseph learned that Archelaus was the king in Judaea replacing Herod, the thought came to him that it would be better to go to Nazareth. (Mt 2:22-23). Archelaus was both violent and dangerous. The historian, Flavius Josephus relates that Archelaus on the day he became king killed more than 3000 in the piazza of the temple.

Jesus was raised and grew up in Nazareth (Lk 4:16), but when he was thirty years old he moved again and went to live in Capharnaum (Mt 4:13). Perhaps he did this in view of his mission as a traveling preacher, since Capharnaum was on an intersection of roads that made it easier to communicate with the various towns and villages round about.

When his family and relations realized that Jesus was working so much that he had no time to eat, they thought that he had gone mad and they wanted to take him by force back to Nazareth (Mk 3:21), but Jesus paid little attention to what his family was saying (Mk 3:31-35). When later on he returned to Nazareth to proclaim the Good News the people rebelled against him and wanted to cast him out and kill him (Lk 4:28-29).

The life of Jesus, like the life of Maria in Brazil, was the life of a migrant with no fixed abode. Even during the three years of his traveling through Palestine, he was forced on more than one occasion to flee or to hide from the threats of the authorities (Mk 11:18-19; 12:12; Jn 8:59; 10:39; 11:8; 12:36).

### III Intercessions

We pray for all who suffer the results of human trafficking, those who are sold into slavery and the families they leave behind.

Lord, grant a safe return home, a healing of wounds and brokenness, strength to be able to resist the offers of traffickers, strong families and communities, good employment and education.

Lord, help us in our different countries to be more vigilant and less tolerant of crime. Guide the work of lawmakers and law enforcers. Teach us how to share our goods so that no one is left in need.

Lord, speak to the hearts of traffickers, users and bosses. Grant them a change of heart, a realization of the damage they are doing, an acceptance of the prospect of another way of life and the painful exit from their present way of life, including the punishment that their crimes deserve. Grant them forgiveness and a new beginning.

**Reader:** Around the world, many women dream about working abroad, earning a lot of money in order to be able to help their families, but they end up being sold into prostitution.

**Response:** Jesus, our Saviour, awaken us to this suffering in our world and give us the will to work for justice and for the conversion of the exploiters.

**Reader:** Women are trafficked because of poverty and also because of a culture that sees them as inferior. No one would ever dream of living in prostitution and, even more, no one would dream of seeing their sons or daughters ending up in prostitution.

**Response:** Holy Spirit, enlighten us in your ways and help us to bring women back to their full dignity in the Reign of God. Be our strength in breaking the chains of domination and subjection.

**Reader:** In different places there are projects that offer support and attention to the women and children who have been sexually exploited.

**Response:** Through the intercession of Mary, may all the women and children who have been enslaved and whose lives have now become inhuman come to know the freedom of the daughters and sons of God.

*Other prayers of intercession and response may be added.*

**God of Justice, free us from all that prevents us from living life to the full.**

## **IV Commitments**

Be informed and aware of what is going on. The reality is that the crime of trafficking may not be all that far from where you live —

Support organizations that offer: refuge to victims, support and education for potential victims, vigilance in relation to the beneficiaries —

Put pressure on politicians and the forces of law and order to make good laws and to implement them --

Pray earnestly for an end to this awful suffering —

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world are attempting to confront the trafficking of humans, through activities such as prevention, prosecution, protection, rescue, reintegration, and repatriation. NGOs often work with few resources yet can be effective in complimenting the activities of governments, or even in the absence of government efforts. [CarneNGO 2(2009)2] —

To rally public opinion against human trafficking, the UN is launching the Blue Heart Campaign. By wearing the Blue Heart you raise awareness of this crime and join the campaign to fight it. The Blue Heart represents the sadness of those who are trafficked while reminding us of the cold-heartedness of those who buy and sell fellow human beings. The use of the blue UN color also demonstrates the commitment of the United Nations to combating this crime against human dignity —

*Picture Credit: Kay Chernush for the U.S. State Department*



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