

Keynote Speech

COATNET Workshop: “Men, women, and trafficking”

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Please allow me to introduce this talk by thanking my colleague in Caritas Internationalis, Martina Liebsch, as well as the leadership of COATNET for your kind invitation to join you today and to share with you my reflections – as inexpert and incomplete as they may be – on perspectives of the Catholic Church with regard to the tragic phenomenon of Human Trafficking. I first became aware of this blight on the human family during the course of field visits related to the response of Caritas and other Catholic Church-related organizations to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic. Many of those visits were undertaken during the 1980s and 1990s together with Sr. Maura O’Donohue, MMM, who also has been an active participant in your network. I vividly remember times when Sr. Maura and I shook our heads in disbelief as victims of trafficking, also infected with HIV, told us their painful stories. We asked ourselves how we could best raise this newly-found issue within Church circles when we already were considered to be pushing the margins with our work on HIV and AIDS.

At the outset of these reflections, however, I must issue a “truth in advertising” warning about my expertise, or lack thereof, in undertaking

my assignment from the organizers of this workshop. I come not as an “expert” on human trafficking; nor as a professional theologian (even though I did spend eight years in undergraduate and graduate study of theology) and, least of all, can I presume to speak with the voice of authority in the Church. The authoritative teaching role in the Catholic Church is retained by bishops, in union with the Pope, and they are assisted in fulfilling that role by professional theologians (many of whom obtain a “mandate to teach” by their local bishops). So, when you return to your home countries, please do not cite Msgr. Vitillo as an “authoritative” source for any of the conclusions that you draw from this workshop. For my part, I will try to avoid offering my personal opinions and rather will attempt to share some of the long-held and well-articulated teachings of Church authorities with regard to the issue of human trafficking.

I will conclude this introduction by acknowledging that participants in COATNET come from different Christian approaches and structures within the overall faith tradition that follows the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I will focus my remarks on the Catholic Church’s beliefs and response in this regard, since this is the tradition in which I have been trained and in which I exercise my faith life. I hope that all of us here present will be able to recognize commonly-held Christian values and to discern common strategies for action

I was provided with a list of questions to address during this talk, so now I will try my best to focus on these complex topics within the limits of the very brief time that I was allotted – even though each of these questions could provide the basis for a lifetime of theological study, practical action, and expression of faith.

What is the view on the relationship between men and women in theology?

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*¹, the ancient Fathers of the Church distinguished between “theologia”, referring to the “mystery of God’s inmost life within the Blessed Trinity”, and “oikonomia”, referring to “all the works by which God reveals Himself and communicates his life” (1066). In a similar way, one could say that the answer to this question posed by the workshop organizers can be found, on the one hand, in our Christian belief about the nature of God as Trinity, or Three Divine Persons, who are distinct from one another and yet are in relation to each other. Moreover, the answer also could be found in our belief about one way in which God revealed Himself - that is, by creating women and men in His Divine image (Genesis 1:27) and by bestowing on them a special dignity² unique to each and every person but also that seeks to be relational, in imitation of the perfect love shared among the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity.

In the second chapter of the first book of the Bible, we read about the relationship between men and women that was willed by God, their Creator: “It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him (Gen. 2:18).” Thus the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “Man and woman were made for each other ... [God] created them to be a communion of persons, in which they can be

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994.

² St. Catherine of Siena wrote in her *Dialogue* 4,13 “On Divine Providence”: “What made you establish man in so great a dignity? Certainly the incalculable love by which you have looked on your creature in yourself! You are taken with love for her; for by love indeed you created her, by love you have given her a being capable of tasting your eternal Good.”

“helpmate to each other, for they are equal as persons ... and complementary as masculine and feminine.

More specifically, with regard to the relationship between man and woman joined by marriage, we again read in the Book of Genesis that, in addition to His concern that they mutually fulfill each other by forming “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24), God also instructed them to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28).”

There is little to be added to these ancient Scriptural texts that identify and define the relationship between man and woman as it was envisioned by God. The Bishops convened in the Second Vatican Council summarized these mysteries as follows: “This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons.”³

What does the Catholic Social teaching say about this?

Perhaps the first point to mention in response to this question is that Catholic Social Teaching is not some separate body of reflection or education that one can choose independently from or as a substitute for other doctrines of the Church. The Social Doctrine of the Church is an essential and inseparable part of all the Church’s teachings. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states quite succinctly:

The Church, the sign in history of God’s love for mankind and of the vocation of the whole human race to unity as children of the one Father, intends her social doctrine ... to propose to all

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 12, 4, as quoted in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #383.

men and women a humanism that is up to the standards of God's plan of love in history, an integral and solidary humanism capable of creating a new social, economic and political order, founded on the dignity and freedom of every human person, to be brought about in peace, justice and solidarity.⁴

The *Compendium* also offers a summary of the Church's Social Teaching on the relationship between men and women:

“Male” and “female” differentiate two individuals of equal dignity, which does not however reflect a static equality, because the specificity of the female is different from the specificity of the male, and this difference in equality is enriching and indispensable for the harmony of life in society (#146).

What importance does it have?

Once again the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* provides us with an insight: “These principles [of social doctrine] have a profoundly moral significance because they refer to the ultimate and organizational foundations of life in society (#16).”

What is the impact on people?

This *Compendium* further observes that “[i]n modern society, people are

⁴ The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, #19.

increasingly experiencing a new need for meaning,” and proposes that, through its Social Teaching, “the Church responds with the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ, which liberates the dignity of the human person from changing opinions and ensures the freedom of men and women as no human law can do (#576).”

In my own experience in representing different Church-based organizations at global and international levels, I have found that many policy- and decision-makers are quite interested, perhaps one might even say, “fascinated” by the Church’s Social Teaching, and some even try to incorporate these principles into their respective exercise of the secular functions of government and political power. Much depends, however, on the will of people to put this Teaching into action; thus the *Compendium* notes that the humanism promoted by the Church “can become a reality if individual men and women and their communities are able to cultivate moral and social virtues in themselves and spread them in society (#29).”

Does the relationship between men and women affect/fuel trafficking? How?

Surely, disordered relationships between men and women can affect or fuel trafficking. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states without any doubt: “Prostitution does injury to the dignity of the person who engages in it, reducing the person to an instrument of sexual pleasure (#2355).” Pope John Paul II passionately declared, “The trade in human persons constitutes a shocking offence against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights. It is an affront to fundamental values that are shared by all cultures and peoples, values rooted in the

very nature of the human person.”⁵ A Joint Pastoral Letter prepared by the Catholic bishops of the United States and Mexico delves more deeply into the social, political, and economic dynamics underlying this phenomenon: “Trafficking in persons – in which men, women and children from all over the globe are transported to other countries for the purposes of forced prostitution or labour – inherently rejects the dignity of the human person and exploits conditions of global poverty.”⁶

Let us be clear, however, it is not the relationship between men and women, as conceived and created by God that fuels the trafficking. This social ill is, in fact, the result of sin and human weakness that men and women do not always follow and put into practice the relationship of respect, love, and communion that God entrusted to them. Thus such distortions in male-female relationships fuel trafficking and other abuses against the dignity of the human person.

Is there a need for a specific approach for women?

One of the most eloquent and compelling attempts to answer this question was offered to us by Pope John Paul II in his letter written in anticipation of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing⁷. This Pope of blessed memory recalled his earlier statement affirming that

⁵ Letter Of Pope John Paul II to Archbishop Jean -Louis Tauran, on the Occasion of the International Conference, "Twenty -First Century Slavery -The Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings", Vatican City, 15 May 2002, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_20020515_tauran_en.html

⁶ “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,” Joint Pastoral Letter of the Catholic bishops of United States of America and of Mexico, November 2002.

⁷ Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women of the United Nations, 26 May 2006, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19950526_mongella-pechino_en.html

“when women are able fully to share their gifts with the whole community, the very way in which society understands and organizes itself is improved.”⁸ He insisted that [i]t is far from the Holy See’s intentions to try to limit the influence and activity of women in society.” He recognized that “women’s contribution to the welfare and progress of society is incalculable.” Finally, he stated unequivocally that “[t]he Church looks to women to do even more to save society from the deadly virus of degradation and violence which is today witnessing a dramatic increase” and that “[t]here should be no doubt that on the basis of their equal dignity with men ‘women have a full right to become actively involved in areas of public life, and this right must be affirmed and guaranteed, also, where necessary, through appropriate legislation (World Day of Peace Message, 1995).’ ”

With regard to a specific approach to women victimized by trafficking and prostitution, the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, had this to say:

Who is the victim? She is a human being, in many cases crying for help because selling her body on the street is not what she would choose to do voluntarily ... Each person has a different story, mainly one of violence, abuse, mistrust, low self esteem, fear, lack of opportunities. Each has experienced deep wounds that need to be healed. What are they looking for? They seek relationships, love, security, affection, affirmation and a better future for themselves and for their families. They want to

⁸ John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 1995*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121994_xxviii-world-day-for-peace_en.html

escape from poverty and lack of opportunities and ... build a better future.⁹

How is empowerment seen in theology? What, do you think, is the Church's mission in the empowerment process? How can the Church and faith communities create a space for transformation?

I smiled when I read the first of this series of questions, since I just spent several months of late-night research, reflection, and writing in order to prepare a chapter on the Church's Empowerment Role, to be included in a special book commemorating the centennial observance of the founding of Catholic Charities USA. My first temptation was to refer you to this chapter, but it will be not published for another year. I would like to share with you, however, a working definition of Empowerment that was developed by Catholic Charities some ten years ago:

Empowerment is a process of engagement that increases the ability of individuals, families, organizations, and communities to build mutually respectful relationships and bring about fundamental positive change in the conditions affecting their daily lives.¹⁰

I find this definition to be quite relevant to the discussion at hand with regard to human trafficking, most particularly as I increasingly encounter in United Nations meetings the tendency of some governments to include,

⁹ Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, Report on First International Meeting of Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street, held in Rome, on 20-21 June 2005, as appeared in www.zenit.org, ZE05071120.

¹⁰ Catholic Charities USA (n.d.) *A Catholic Charities Framework for Empowerment*, Alexandria, Virginia, USA

in their official delegations, women (and even a few men) who self-proclaim as “commercial sex workers”. These rather assertive speakers insist that they have freely chosen their “vocation” and that governments could solve the challenges they encounter simply by legalizing their trade and including them in social insurance and pension schemes. With all due respect to the dignity of these speakers, I question how representative they are – do they speak for the women, men, and children who are served by your network of COATNET? Do their legal and economic solutions conform to the definition of empowerment articulated by Catholic Charities USA or to the principles of Catholic Social Teaching that I have tried to outline during this brief reflection.

In contrast, I believe that the story of the Catholic Church’s engagement in the empowerment of peoples, especially of the poor and vulnerable is rooted in the Holy Scriptures, in the model of equity and equality advanced by the first Christians, and in the lived Tradition of the Church’s social ministry. Far from limiting the efforts of marginalized people to empower themselves, the Church has fostered and promoted such initiatives, with the simple proviso that such efforts be founded on respect for the dignity of the human person, on the value of community, on the goal of the common good, and on principles of partnership and non-violence.

How is gender and stereotypical “genderized” roles within faith communities linked to our inability to promote new power paradigms?

In all honesty, I must confess that I struggled the most with this question; in fact, I was tempted to exempt myself from putting forward an answer

with the excuse of time limitations for the session. The source of my confusion results from ways in which formerly straightforward anthropological terms, such as “gender”, have become politicized and manipulated to the point of denying the value and dignity of the very sexual identities of men and women which this term originally was meant to describe. Thus, with your permission, I will use the terms of “men” and “women” in my answer and avoid the terms of “gender” and “genderized”.

In some ways, I already tried to address this question when I shared both my own personal opinion and my understanding of Church teaching that it is not the differences between men and women, nor even their respective roles in the family, in society, and in the Church, that may give rise to disrespect and abuse of power in the dynamics between men and women. The ultimate cause is the imperfection and sinfulness that continues to burden the human family and to cause such tragic suffering, most especially among women. In a Letter addressed to the women of the world, Pope John Paul II strongly condemned such abuse and insisted that it be addressed and prevented from future recurrence:

... when we look at one of the most sensitive aspects of the situation of women in the world, how can we not mention the long and degrading history, albeit often an "underground" history, of violence against women in the area of sexuality? At the threshold of the Third Millennium we cannot remain indifferent and resigned before this phenomenon. The time has come to condemn vigorously the types of *sexual violence* which frequently have women for their object and to pass laws

which effectively defend them from such violence.¹¹

The final part of this question was concerned with “new power paradigms” – again, in all honesty and fully cognizant that I speak from the privileged position of being a man and an ordained priest, but also in all sincerity, I must question whether “new power paradigms” are needed or whether, to the contrary, we simply need to improve our imitation of Christ by following in his footsteps of respect, and concern, and unselfish love for the women who entered into His life. I will end with one final quote from Pope John Paul II’s Letter to Women since it recalls the power of women in the history of the Church and anticipates such energy and force in the future:

... the Church's two-thousand-year history, for all its historical conditioning, has truly experienced the "genius of woman"; from the heart of the Church there have emerged women of the highest caliber who have left an impressive and beneficial mark in history. I think of the great line of woman martyrs, saints and famous mystics. In a particular way I think of Saint Catherine of Siena and of Saint Teresa of Avila, whom Pope Paul VI of happy memory granted the title of Doctors of the Church. And how can we overlook the many women, inspired by faith, who were responsible for initiatives of extraordinary social importance, especially in serving the poorest of the poor? The life of the Church in the Third Millennium will certainly not be lacking in new and surprising manifestations of "the feminine genius".¹²

¹¹ Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women, 29 June 1995, #5, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women_en.html

¹² *Ibid.*, #11.