



February 8, 2017

International Day of Prayer & **Awareness Against** Human Trafficking

In his 2017 Message for the World Day of Peace, Pope Francis speaks of “piecemeal” violence that pervades our world, violence of different forms and levels that causes great suffering globally. Human trafficking is one such source of suffering, but it is also true that trafficking itself is the bitter fruit of deeper forms of interconnecting violence in our social, cultural, economic and environmental realities. In this prayer, we invite you to reflect on the violence that permeates many of our social, cultural, economic and environmental arenas, which increases vulnerability to human trafficking.

Reflection Questions

This prayer for the feast of St. Josephine Bakhita includes time for personal reflection and communal sharing, commitment and prayer. We suggest that you spend time before the communal gathering with each of the Voices of Vulnerability stories that follow, considering the following questions:

- Where do you perceive social, cultural, economic or environmental violence in these stories? Where and how do these forms of violence interact in the stories or in your own experience?
- How do these various examples of violence increase vulnerability to human trafficking?
- Where do you see social, cultural, economic or environmental realities creating vulnerability to human trafficking in the society in which you live? How might we unconsciously be contributing to these realities by our choices?
- How does understanding the social, cultural, economic and environmental seeds of human trafficking impact our response?

Voices of Vulnerability

I am Akosua. My family has fallen on hard times. Traditionally, our people relied on extended family for support, but now, as poverty forces us into the city, our old ways are fading.

We had many hopes when we came to Accra (Ghana), but my father lost his job, and we children could no longer go to school. Papa could not find work again, so my sisters and I had to find ways of supporting our family. For girls, especially the young who are without skills, there are few options.

There are many children living and working in the streets of Accra today. Some are beggars, and many girls and women—like my sisters and I—work as *kayayei*, female head porters who transport goods to and from the markets for customers. Each day, my young sisters and I work many, many hours. The work is hard, and we make very little money in the best of times. We *kayayei* are paid whatever the customers believe we deserve. This keeps us poor, susceptible to illness and vulnerable to violence. Sometimes the clients abuse us, and the streets can be dangerous at night. Girls even disappear. I fear for the little ones. Who will protect us?



For as long as we can remember, we have lived by our land and farmed for our food. Now, our weather is changing, and the waters are rising. Land is scarce. The soil here is no longer as good as it once was. I am Sachh, and I am responsible for my wife and two young daughters.

When the floods came, I had to borrow what money I could in order to make repairs to our land and home. We hoped that, if we were very careful, our new crops would sustain us and allow us to repay our debts. When the floods came again, we lost all hope.

Our choices are grave: Though our eldest daughter Shoma is just 13 years old, already she has received a very good offer of marriage. Shoma fears such an arrangement, but her dowry could mean the difference between life and starvation for our family. Or, perhaps I could leave my family and migrate to Dhaka (Bangladesh), as many others have done. If all goes well, I could send for them later. But farmers do not always fare well in the city, and the working conditions can be deadly there. I have heard that some workers are treated very badly—threatened and beaten—and I do not know what might happen to my wife and daughters while I am gone. What will become of us and our land?



My name is Adriano, and, like my father and grandfather before me, I am a farmworker. When the poverty in my area became unbearable, I was desperate for a way to support my family. One day, I was approached by one of the *gatos*—labor brokers—whose job it is to find laborers for the coffee plantations. He promised me good pay and told me that I would have lodging and meals provided. I felt blessed to have such an opportunity. Coffee is the lifeblood of my country's economy, and it is an everyday part of our Brazilian culture.

A group of laborers and I traveled a great distance by bus to the plantation. None of us were sure of our destination. When we arrived, we soon saw that the living conditions were poor and unsanitary. Nothing was as we were promised.

Immediately, we were told that we must repay the owner for the cost of transporting us, as well as for food and lodging. The working conditions are no better: the hours are long, and the pay is very little. We are charged even for the protective equipment that our work requires. Most of us are being crushed by this debt, and we have no hope of getting out of it. Some would say that slavery died when my ancestors became free, but today, those of us who have no education and whose families have been poor for generations are still at risk to suffer such indignities. Who will see us?



I am called Luz. Drugs and the gangs that peddle them have filled our city with fear and hopelessness, marked by incredible poverty. They took our father from us, and my mother feared that my brother Carlos would lose his life in the same way. Assured that my brother and I would be able to go to school once we reached the United States, my mother paid her life savings to the smugglers to take us there.

The travel through Guatemala and Mexico was rough and dangerous, and there were many times that we thought we might die or be killed. The men who were smuggling us into the United States were armed at all times. They instructed us what to do if we were caught by authorities and told us what we should say. Always there was the threat that we or our families could be harmed if we said or did the wrong things. We lived in constant fear.

When at last we crossed the border into the United States, we were filled with gratitude. Finally, it seemed our nightmare was at an end. But my brother and I were soon detained by the immigration officers and housed as unaccompanied minors. We did not know what might happen to us, and we feared being sent back to Honduras.

Carlos and I were relieved to find that we had been sponsored by fellow Hondurans, who claimed to be family friends. Finally, it appeared that we would be reunited and protected. Instead, our sponsors sent us to work on a poultry farm with many other young people like us. We work day and night in horrible conditions. We live in filth and are constantly abused by the armed men who guard us. We have no one to protect us. Who will speak for us?

Personal Reflection

After reflecting on the stories, choose one of the four arenas—social, cultural, economic, environmental—and commit to a specific action you will take to lessen vulnerability to human trafficking in that particular arena. These commitments will be shared at the communal gathering.

Communal Reflection and Discussion

Gather, using appropriate music if desired. Meditatively read each of the stories aloud, then share insights from your personal reflection. When this discussion is complete, share individual commitments made. A suggested response to each commitment follows.

Response: Proverbs 31:8-9 (New Living Translation)

⁸ Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves;
ensure justice for those being crushed.

⁹ Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless,
and see that they get justice.

Closing Prayer

Close with excerpts from Nan C. Merrill's interpretation of Psalm 72 below.

Psalm 72:1-4; 12-14

Bring justice to the peoples, O Beloved,
and your mercy to all generations!

May the people be known for mercy,
rendering justice to the poor!

Let their spirits soar as the eagle,
let joy abide in every heart!

May we heed the cry of the poor –
the young and the old,
helping to free all those in need,
awakening the souls of oppressors!

For You heed the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no friend.

You have compassion on the weak,
the downtrodden,
giving them strength and hope.

From injustice and oppression,
You redeem their life;
And precious are they in your Heart.

*Nan C. Merrill, Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness
(New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2007) 136-137*



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