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THE CHURCH'S VISION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MODERN DAY SLAVERY[1]

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The Situation

In this conference, we have heard how grave the problems of human trafficking have become. We are lulled to believe that slavery is of the past. I hope that this conference has made us realize that human trafficking is the modern-day version of slavery. It has the same basic motivation: *pangangalakal ng tao*—people, fellow human beings, are being used as merchandise. And it is not a small merchandise. There are more slaves today than ever before in human history—approximately 20 to 30 million slaves in the world today. Globally, the average cost of a slave is Php 3,700.00. Thus, in our time, slaves are cheaper than they have ever been in history. The population explosion has created a great supply of potential victims, and globalization has made it easy to reach and entice people who are vulnerable and easily enslaved because of ignorance and poverty. Hence, human trafficking has now become the second largest international criminal industry (behind illegal drugs and tying up with arms trafficking). It reportedly generates a profit of Php 1.3 trillion every year! Of that number, Php 650 billion is made in industrialized countries. A 2003 study in the Netherlands found

[1]Talk delivered at the University of Asia and the Pacific on February 28, 2014.

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that, on average, a single sex slave earned her pimp at least Php 15.5 million a year! That is how lucrative it can be.

Trafficking primarily involves exploitation which comes in many forms, including:

1. Forcing victims into prostitution.
2. Subjecting victims to slavery or involuntary servitude.
3. Compelling victims to commit sex acts for the purpose of creating pornography. Cyber-sex is a new phenomenon and a rapidly growing market. It is said that the Philippines is the 10th biggest source of cyber-sex.
4. Misleading victims into debt bondage.
5. People, especially children, are also trafficked for organ harvesting.
6. The Taliban buys children as young as seven years old to act as suicide bombers. The price for child suicide bombers is between Php 300,000.00 to Php 600,000.00. That is very big money that can blind poor families!
7. Less shocking but nonetheless equally reprehensible are the 300,000 children younger than 18 years old estimated to be trafficked to serve in armed conflicts worldwide. These are the so-called child-soldiers. We have cases of them in the conflicts in Mindanao.
8. Human traffickers are trafficking pregnant women for their newborns. Babies are sold on the black market, where the profit is divided between the traffickers, doctors, lawyers, border officials, and others. A mother might receive as little as a few thousand pesos for her baby.
9. Sex trafficking plays a major role in the spread of HIV. It is estimated that 80% of trafficking involves sexual exploitation, which easily transmits HIV.

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10. It is when people are most vulnerable that they are easily trapped by human traffickers. When people are hit by calamities, like typhoons and earthquakes, confusion ensues. Many are disoriented when deaths occur in their families and their means of livelihood are destroyed. Children and women are vulnerable to promises of work or schooling, or just simply to get out of the chaos. They are easily enticed by human traffickers.

Invitation by the Pope

This information is staggering. The Church cannot close its eyes to this reality. In his address to new diplomatic representatives on Dec. 12, 2013 at the Vatican, Pope Francis commented that there are millions of victims of forced labor, of the trade in persons for the purposes of manpower or for sexual exploitation, and he exclaimed,

> [T]his cannot continue; it constitutes a grave violation of the human rights of the victims and an offence to their dignity, as well as a defeat for the global community. All persons of good will, whether they profess a religion or not, cannot allow these women, these men and these children to be treated as objects, deceived, violated, often repeatedly sold, for various purposes, and at the end either killed or ruined physically and mentally, to end up discarded and abandoned. It is shameful.
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> The trafficking of persons is a crime against humanity. … It is necessary to accept our common responsibility, and demonstrate more decisive political will to be victorious on this front. We have responsibility towards those who have fallen victim to trafficking, to protect their rights, to ensure their safety and that of their families, and to prevent the corrupt and criminals from eluding justice and having the last word. Adequate legislative action in the countries of origin, transit and arrival, also in order to facilitate the regularity of migration, may reduce the problem.[2]

[2]See http://visnews-en.blogspot.com/2013/12/human-trafficking-is-crime-against.html (accessed January 15, 2014).

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To fight this scourge is the responsibility of each one of us. Pope Francis invites the diplomats—and ourselves—to examine our consciences, asking ourselves

> how many times do we accept that a human being is considered as an object, displayed to sell a product or to satisfy immoral desires? The human person must never be bought and sold like merchandise. Whoever uses and exploits human beings, even indirectly, becomes complicit in their oppression.

"I wanted to share with you my reflections on a social wound of our times, because I believe in the value and the strength of concerted commitment in combating it," the Pope explained.

> Therefore, I exhort the international community to adopt an even more unanimous and effective strategy against human trafficking, so that in every part of the world, men and women may no longer be used as a means to an end, and that their inviolable dignity may always be respected.

Basis of Our Christian Convictions

Together with the Holy Father, we are appalled at the merchandise of persons. It is not just an economic activity. We cannot take this as normal. It is a grave abuse. Why? Because of our belief that each human person has an inviolable dignity. On what is this dignity based? It is not based just in a human convention or agreement. For us Christians it has a much deeper root—the very intention of the Creator. No one of us wills to be, to exist. Our existence is a gift. God has willed us, each one of us, and according to St. Paul, "He chose us before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). God created each person in the image and likeness of himself! "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). Each is therefore unique, and loved from the first moment of his/her existence.

But not only that. Each is redeemed by Jesus. Christ did not suffer and die for a collectivity, for the human race in general. He lived, suffered, died, and rose again for each and every one of us! Each is

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worth the price of his blood. That is how important each person is. Because I am important, you are important, she is important, then all of us are equally important. The Incarnation of the Son of God shows the equality of all people with regard to dignity: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

There is a third reason for the inviolable dignity of each person: each is called to be with God forever in heaven. Each is destined for eternity! This is the grand plan of God for us all. If we are all to share heaven together, should we not respect and care for each other here on earth?

From the Christian point of view, then, "in no case … is the human person to be manipulated for ends that are foreign to his own development, which can find complete fulfilment only in God and his plan of salvation: in fact, man in his interiority transcends the universe and is the only creature willed by God for itself."[3]

Our Christian Response

As Christians, we simply cannot be indifferent to this great injustice done to the weak and ignorant members of our society. This is the reason for this conference. We are made aware of this grave situation and we discuss how we can properly respond to this as followers of Christ.

Our first response is to make ourselves and to make others aware of this problem of human trafficking and modern-day slavery, of the gravity of the problem, and of the seriousness of this evil in our midst. As all evil, human trafficking thrives in darkness. As long as the problem is not recognized, the evil doers can continue and expand their activities. Truth, then, is our powerful weapon. Let us talk about this problem, warn families of the dangers in entrusting their young children to people they do not fully know, and make the young aware

[3]Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 133.

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so that they would not be easily enticed. Most especially, let us make our faithful value their human dignity and not be carried by material desires. Not a few take chances because of the lure of material gains without valuing their dignity as persons.

Awareness is already a great help to preventing human trafficking. Prevention strategies, however, should still be set in place. Let us tell our people to protect one another. Instruct them to inquire when people who behave strangely enter their communities. Let them check on youngsters and women who blindly and innocently follow certain people. Tell them to report to the police suspicious behaviours. We should be concerned. Let us not allow this evil to happen in our midst.

An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of remedy. But remedies have also to be applied since the plague has spread. So let us help in the prosecution of the abusers. If we happen to be in a position to help in the prosecution process, let us not shrink from this responsibility. As good citizens, let us also know the law: the Philippine Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act or Republic Act 9208. This will equip us to address the problem legally.

Justice is not simply prosecuting and punishing the offenders. It also calls us to give aftercare and rehabilitate the victims. People, and especially youngsters, are deeply affected by abuse. It takes a lot of protection, understanding, and love to give them back their dignity. In some cases, they have to be reconciled back to their families. They are also to be helped to be productive members of society—hence provision for education and job training.

Prevention, prosecution, and protection. These are key words in our response to this menace. We add another P—Partnership! Yes, the problem is all encompassing. It is too great for any one person or any one group to address. Fortunately, when we look around we see that already there are many people and many groups who are concerned and who are doing something. There are Sisters who are running homes for abused girls. There are groups advocating protection for minors. There are journalists who are concerned and readily report on this issue. There are government officials who go out of their way to be

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effective in addressing this plague. There are faith communities and churches who are active in making awareness programs. We partner with all these initiatives so that all these small streams can become a river that can sweep away this evil. Hence, the buzz words for our response are the 4P's—Prevention, Prosecution, Protection, and Partnership! This is the same paradigm that is outlined in the United Nations Protocol on Trafficking in Persons (UN TIP).

Where Do We Go From Here?

It is not my task to summarize what has been shared in this conference. So mine is not a definitive word. I just venture a few suggestions on what we can do from here on as Church.

1. Let us continue the work of awareness making. As much as possible, this conference has gathered representatives from all the dioceses in our country. All of us here should pass on what we have heard to our dioceses and organizations. Let us share the materials we get to as many people as possible. Catholics have to be engaged and made responsible. When God asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?", his answer was, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). May this answer never enter our mind and our heart! We are to take care of one another!

2. When we go back to our dioceses, let us map out our resources. Are there groups there who are engaged in various aspects in the fight against human trafficking? Let us team up with them. Identify the government agencies in your area that can help or are tasked by law to fight this scourge.

3. Organize fora and conferences in schools and parishes to bring out the problem of human trafficking and our Christian response to it.

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4. Make use of the structures of the Church and our society for your advocacy. There is the Episcopal Office for Women, the Episcopal Commission on Youth, the National Secretariat of Social Action (NASSA) of the CBCP, the Episcopal Commission on Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, the Philippine Interfaith Movement against Human Trafficking (PIMAHT), and the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) of the government, among others. Be in touch with them; get information and materials from them. You can even get resources from them.

5. Let us organize prayer and reflection sessions that raise awareness of human trafficking. In our churches and chapels let us include, time and again, prayers for the victims and conversion of the perpetrators. As men and women of faith, let us not belittle the power of prayer. We need heavenly aid in this fight.

6. Let us be responsible consumers. If we are not discerning enough, we may be contributing to the enslavement of peoples. We may buy products that are cheap because they have been made by enslaved children in another country. Do not patronize consumer goods made from bonded labor.

7. Let us never stop fighting poverty by improving the lot of the poor and fighting structures and processes that impoverish people, like corruption, patronage politics, and abuse of the environment. Poverty is the breeding ground of human trafficking. Many are pushed to this crime because of great material need.

Conclusion: The Cry of the Poor, the Cry of God

In a few days' time, we shall start again the season of Lent. It is a season of penance, prayer, and almsgiving. This season of grace will remind us of these passages from the Sacred Book:

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> Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow. (Is. 1:16–17)
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> This is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. (Is. 58:6–7)
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> Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27)

All these texts tell us that the true practice of our faith calls for responsibility to those who are in need and are oppressed. In our midst, we have brothers and sisters—human beings like us—who are being sold and used as objects. Can we keep quiet as if everything is alright?

Pope Francis is not quiet. He voices out a strong appeal, a cry that comes from a heart that truly feels:

> I have always been distressed at the lot of those who are victims of various kinds of human trafficking. How I wish that all of us would hear God's cry: "Where is your brother?" (Gen. 4:9). Where is your brother or sister who is enslaved? Where is the brother and sister whom you are killing each day in clandestine warehouses, in rings of prostitution, in children used for begging, in exploiting undocumented labour? Let us not look the other way. There is greater complicity than we think. The issue involves everyone! This infamous network of crime is now well established in our cities, and many people have blood on their hands as a result of their comfortable and silent complicity.[4]

Let me end with these simple words from the Word of God:

> Open your mouth, decree what is just, defend the needy and the poor! (Prov. 31:9)

[4]Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* 211.

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