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A REFLECTION ON THE EXPERIENCE OF MISSIONING IN AREAS OF PROSTITUTION

James McTavish, F.M.V.D.

> Then the LORD answered me and said: Write down the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so that the one who reads it may run. For the vision is a witness for the appointed time, a testimony to the end; it will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late. (Habakkuk 2:2–3)

The first part of this essay, entitled "Experience," will focus on various experiences of missioning in the area of prostitution. The second part, entitled "Reflection," will attempt to deepen and seek some meaning and direction from these experiences, drawing some conclusions as to how to approach the issue of prostitution as well as giving some suggestions for a possible on-going ministry in this area.

Part 1: Experience

A Mustard Seed is Planted

Around two years ago, I received a phone call from a group of Sisters in Manila. They had begun to do some outreach for women involved in prostitution in KTV music bars near their house and wanted some advice about what to do. I told the Superior that I actually had no experience in this area. She said, "Isn't prostitution a

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moral issue?" "Yes," I replied hesitantly. "Well," she said, "if you are a moral theologian, and prostitution is a moral issue, then you are just the right person to ask. Anyway, our Sisters are causing quite a stir because when we arrive in our habits all the male customers seem to want to make a quick getaway!"

I have Heard the Cry of My People

I brought this episode to prayer. I remembered the moment in chapter 3 of Exodus when God spoke to Moses: "But the Lord said: I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:7–8). Perhaps the first thing we should do when confronted by challenging issues is to pray. When Jesus was moved by the large crowds who were lost and helpless, the first action he advised his disciples to do was not to go to them but instead to pray and ask for answers from the owner of the harvest (see Matthew 9:38).

Listening to the call of the Lord in this dialogue, I realized that the least I could do was to become more familiar with this reality. However, since I could find no up-to-date overview or "situationer" regarding prostitution and trafficking in the Philippine context, I resolved to write a simple overview of the reality, but first I would need to inform myself—theoretically but also practically. I began to read about the topic and to get a feel for the different organizations working to combat prostitution. Some NGOs seemed to be doing sterling work, but others appeared, to me at least, to be working in isolation from other groups. Various groups of religious Sisters were also involved but hardly any priests or male religious in general seemed to be working in these areas.

Organizing a Mini-conference

An idea came to organize a forum or mini-conference on prostitution and trafficking. Each year, the novices of Exodus (an inter-congregational group of around 80–100 religious novices from

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about 25 different countries) had a module called "Church of the Poor." It was felt that if young religious could become more aware of these issues, it might plant a seed in their hearts, helping them be more sensitive, and perhaps one day in the future this seed could grow into a full-fledged ministry. In 2011, the Verbum Dei community took charge of a whole-day session on prostitution. We asked Jonathan Nambu from Samaritana Transformation Ministries to share with us about rehabilitation of prostituted women, and Jean Enriquez of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women - Asia Pacific (CATW-AP) to discuss human trafficking in Asia. We also watched the interesting documentary film called "Born into Brothels" which is set in India. It follows the fascinating story of an American photographer who tries to empower children of prostituted women by teaching them the art of photography. The session was enjoyed by all and we were invited to host it again in 2012, but this time the session was extended to two days. We incorporated a talk by Mr. Sam Inocencio, the Field Office Director of International Justice Mission in Manila, on the legal efforts to break up trafficking rings. Another input was given by Prof. Simone Lorenzo of the Ateneo de Manila University on "Prostitution in the Light of Theology of the Body." One of the Verbum Dei missionaries gave a talk on chastity as the response of a consecrated person, two other missionaries organized a prayer vigil for victims of prostitution and trafficking, and I gave the closing homily.

Outreach to Contact the Reality

The theologian Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I., once said that good theology is not meant to be a safe non-contact sport. Theology needs to get bruised by reality, especially by suffering. Thus, different experiences of outreach helped me to know more about the extent and tragedy of this huge industry of selling flesh. The first outreach experience of mine was in Cubao with the CATW-AP where we met and talked to women involved in street prostitution. It was quite challenging to meet 14-year-old girls who sold themselves to make ends meet as their babies lay on sheets of cardboard on the street. What kind of evangelizer can keep quiet about such situations of injustice? "For Zion's sake I will not be silent, for Jerusalem's sake I

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will not keep still. Until her vindication shines forth like the dawn and her salvation like a burning torch" (Isaiah 62:1–2). It was Christmas time, and the streets were full of gleeful shoppers, the latest bargains stuffed under their arms. I was struck listening to the Yuletide songs blaring out over the loudspeakers with the lyrics "Christ our Saviour is born, Christ our Saviour is born." As I gazed upon the little baby on the ground, I realized that baby Jesus was not going to be born in the mall or in a comfortable manger in a house; instead, he was lying there on the street, sleeping soundly in his cardboard manger and worthy of all my love and attention.

A few months later, we went out on the streets with the Sister Adorer nuns in Malate. The nuns are very familiar with this area, having worked there for around 2–3 years already. We entered the bars and clubs with them at around 6pm, before the girls started work. When the girls realised that I was a priest and not a customer, they asked for my blessing. We listened to their stories, prayed a decade of the Rosary with them, and gave them small cards with Bible quotes written on them. One young woman, dressed to impress, read the words of Isaiah 54:10 on her card and started to cry: "Though the mountains may crumble and the hills be shaken, my love for you will never fail." I saw that they were so hungry for the Word of God that they were happy to eat "the crumbs falling from the table" (see Mark 7:28).

A Recollection for Prostituted Women

Later we had a Christmas recollection in the Malate and Baclaran areas of Manila. Around 30 women attended each activity which was held in conjunction with the Missionaries of Charity and the Sister Adorers. I gave them a talk in Taglish (Tagalog and English), and we had time for reflection as well as for Christmas carols, games, and gift giving. In the Baclaran recollection, two lay women volunteers from the Verbum Dei community joined me. The recollection lasted for around three hours. I heard that after the recollection, twenty of the women working in Baclaran KTV bars left their work in order to look for alternative sources of livelihood.

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We also did some outreach with the Mary Queen of Heaven Missionaries (MQHM) in the Cogon market area in Cebu, talking to the girls on the streets as well as the handlers ("pimps"). I enjoyed the experience with the MQHM. One Sister told me her vocation story. She was a student at a local university (USJR). She would walk to school and hear some young women offering mangoes or "mangga" in the local Cebuano dialect. The Sister noticed one day that there were no fruits to be seen. She asked the sellers where their fruits were. They told her that they were not selling mangoes but their bodies, and that "mangga" was short for "manggamit ka," meaning "you can use me," as a code word for prostitution. The future Sister was shocked not just because they were not selling fruit but because she had walked down that street so many times while oblivious to their cry.

Publishing an Essay on Prostitution

Earlier this year, as a fruit of my study on prostitution and pastoral exposure, an essay of mine on prostitution was published in *Landas*, the journal of the Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University. The essay was entitled "Prostitution in the Philippines—A Time for Change." I was also recently asked to give a talk on prostitution at the University of the Philippines. I took the opportunity to share with the thirty students or so the situation of prostitution in Europe and in the Philippines. Many of them were shocked to hear that many of the shocking scenarios that occur in Amsterdam are also taking place on streets not far from their University.

I have at times also attended workshops on human trafficking to which prostitution is tightly linked, seeing as most people are trafficked for sexual purposes. It was rare before to see any Catholics involved in these events. This is sad, seeing as the other Churches are so active. We as a Catholic Church need to start pulling our weight. I was delighted to see an impressive Catholic contingent led by Bishop Pabillo in the most recent major forum on trafficking (Freedom Forum, Sept. 5, 2013). This was jointly organized by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), and the Philippine Council of Evangelical

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Churches (PCEC), together with other partner organizations such as International Justice Mission (IJM).

From Red Light to Green Light

Following this, there was a workshop entitled "From Red Light to Green Light" involving an outreach to prostitutes and customers along P. Burgos St., Makati. I had previously done a prayer walk here, going down the street and praying for the various realities, but this event was actually an outreach activity. The event was organized by Glenn and Wendy, two British NGO workers based in Cambodia. They came to teach the participants how to do outreach in red light zones. Their 90-minute input was excellent.

Glenn shared an experience of outreach in a red light zone where he met a man who boasted of having been with one thousand women. Glenn decided not to tackle the man head on but with much tact asked him, "If tomorrow you were to wake up next to woman number one thousand and one, would you prefer she was just another one night stand or, instead, a faithful partner who would want to spend the rest of her life with you?" The man looked surprised and was taken aback. His face changed and he said with a tone of sadness, "I would love to meet the love of my life but who would accept me now after all I have done?"

Following a time of prayer, there was an hour of accountability where all the men (and the women, too, in a different group) shared where they were on their journey. This created bonding in the group and helped me to see that Jesus is not sending out supermen and -women but rather wounded healers. There were around nine male and eighteen female participants. Four of the group were Catholic but most were from the United Methodist Church. I must say that I was most impressed by the commitment of the latter group and their determined prayerful desire to reach out. I wondered why I had rarely encountered this in my own Catholic Church. The many recent exhortations of Pope Francis to get out of our comfort zones and stop being a Church that is so comfortable rang in my ears. Instead, he is asking us to get out there on the streets where Jesus is.

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For the outreach, we split into small groups of three—one male with two females—in order to balance numbers and for safety. We then headed out into the rain at 10 P.M. to do our street outreach. Walking along P. Burgos Street in the heart of the red light district, one sees a place so alive with a bustling flesh trade, massages being offered, club doors seductively held slightly open, and many men smiling and enjoying their night escapades, perhaps oblivious to the ruin they were doing to their souls. After one pass through the streets and not dialoguing with anyone, my team (with Ms. C and Ms. Ch) and I decided to talk to some women offering massage. The first two were young girls, siblings from Mindanao, aged 21 and 19 years old. They were very friendly when they realised I was actually a priest, and they shared about how hard their work was. Next were two ladyboys (males who appeared to be women) who again were so welcoming when they knew we were not there to buy them but to talk to them. One of them immediately recognized that I was British. "I have so many British clients, that's why I can recognize your accent so fast," he told me gleefully.

A Lonely Man

Further along the street, we met an Indian man. He seemed lonely and perhaps was there only looking for company. Nearby were three German men looking for fun. They did not have to travel far because near us, I was told, was a club offering full sex in front of all, where customers would watch live midget boxing and have sex with different women. Apparently the men were quite drunk and did not mind having physical intimacy in full view of other customers. Dear oh dear what a world we are in! An interesting evening to behold in our Catholic country, so please, let us work for a more humane Philippines! At 12:30 A.M., we went back, a bit tired and wet, to the meeting point for the 30-minute debriefing. Overall, the evening had been a positive experience for the participants, and we all came back safely. It strengthened my belief in the urgency of no longer ignoring this reality, of heeding the advice of our good Pope Francis and to get out there with Jesus on the streets. Amen.

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During a recent retreat, I gave a homily to priests wherein I made reference to the above experiences. Four priests told me afterwards that in their parish, literally outside their churches, there are many women involved in prostitution, and asked for my help and advice as to what to do.

Part 2: Reflection

Reaching Out to the Lost Sheep

My various experiences have strengthened my belief in the urgency of reaching out to this reality. The Church is called to imitate the Good Shepherd and reach out to the lost sheep. I have not seen any more lost than those men caught in the lure of the sex trade as well as the women who are selling themselves. The seriousness which groups such as the United Methodist Church take with this mission is commendable, and so lamentable is the indifference of many in the Catholic Church. To overcome the great social evil of prostitution, we need to work together as the Body of Christ. As Sr. Mary Pilar Verzosa, R.G.S., Foundress of Pro-Life Philippines, said, "No single organization, person, or entity can address single-handedly the issues hurled against the pro-life movement, much more to stop the assault against life. Let us all work together as one community."

As evangelizers, I think this reality should be on our radar screen. I question if our mission is only to wait in our centers or parishes for people to come to our activities. Pope Francis is calling each one of us, as individuals and as Church, to reach out.

The Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council was so clear in its condemnation of prostitution: "Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as … prostitution, the selling of women and children … are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practise them

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than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator" (*Gaudium et spes* 27). The Catechism of the Catholic Church is equally clear:

> Prostitution does injury to the dignity of the person who engages in it, reducing the person to an instrument of sexual pleasure. The one who pays sins gravely against himself: he violates the chastity to which his Baptism pledged him and defiles his body, the temple of the Holy Spirit. Prostitution is a social scourge. It usually involves women, but also men, children, and adolescents (The latter two cases involve the added sin of scandal.). While it is always gravely sinful to engage in prostitution, the imputability of the offense can be attenuated by destitution, blackmail, or social pressure. (CCC 2355)

All Christians need to be concerned about this reality, examine their conscience, and see what they can do to respond. Many Church groups would advance more in the Lord's favor if they turned away from selfish interests and turned their hearts, minds, considerable resources, and energies to combat this great evil. Let us stop washing our hands! Let us not waste more time!

Obstacles to Outreach—"Indifferent Christians"

At times, the indifference of many to this reality can make one feel somewhat frustrated. Upon reading the words of Pope Pius XII from 1948, I realized that this indifference is not new:

> The most formidable obstacle to your action [against prostitution] is neither the declared hostility of the enemies of God and souls, nor that of the libertines, nor that of the traffickers in the white slave trade who shamelessly enrich themselves. This hostility is completely understandable …. What is odd is that it is necessary to vanquish the careless, ironic, even indifferent Christians who believe themselves to be upright, convinced and practicing Catholics.[1]

[1]Pope Pius XII, from September 1948, quoted in Théodule Rey Mermet, *Moral Choices: The Moral Theology of Saint Alphonsus Liguori*, trans. Paul Laverdure (Liguori, Missouri: 1998), 120–121.

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Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street

In the First International Meeting of Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street, organized by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People and held on June 20–21, 2005, some of the recommendations for Church action were:[2]

1. A call for increased education and awareness about the reality of prostitution in order not to allow a sense of embarrassment to prevent such dialogue; rather, there is a need for renewed solidarity in the Church and among religious congregations, lay movements, institutions, and associations in giving greater "visibility" and attention to the pastoral care of women exploited by prostitution. The Church must prophetically denounce the injustices and violence perpetrated against women.

2. The need to form those in the Church, including priests, seminarians, religious, and lay, so that they have the skills and attitudes necessary to work compassionately with women and "clients" and to be effective pastoral agents in this area. The Church should endeavor to develop the Christian and social conscience of people through preaching the gospel, teaching, and various formation initiatives.

"All Will be Well"

One day, while praying about the relative indifference of many to this reality, I was reassured by the words of Jesus to Mother Julian of

[2]First International Meeting of Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents_1/rc_pc_migrants_doc_20210605_Iinc-past-don-strada-findoc_en.html (accessed October 10, 2013).

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Norwich: "All shall be well," and "You shall see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well." Mother Julian understood the former to refer to our daily realities and the latter to refer to the end times and the big social evils—that God is a just God and in his own time he will make all things well. But in the meantime, we still need to act. As the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

We are fortunate that we can always pray and seek wisdom from above. When we pray, we create a space in our hearts and minds for God to work. The next step is to be faithful to the light of the Spirit who will guide the way, asking us to take small steps. If we are faithful in the small, perhaps then we can be faithful in the bigger ones. And Jesus himself advised us to walk while we have the light (John 12:35). Challenges will come but Psalm 27 is consoling: "Though an army encamp against me my heart would not fear. Though war break out against me even then would I trust."

I believe that as we work patiently and trust in the paradox of the mustard seed, Jesus can slowly change, through us, the ethics and values of society in order to show that it is wrong to buy the body of another for pleasure. We also need to take care of our spiritual lives in order not to burn out or be overwhelmed with the task at hand. If I forget this (which I do sometimes!), the Lord reminds me that it is HIS work and that I am just a co-laborer. St. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God is the one who makes the seed grow (1 Corinthians 3:5–7). I remember reading about the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. A city was damaged by a strong earthquake and many went to help. But Mother Teresa instructed her nuns, in addition to helping the rescue effort, to spend some time in daily prayer and reflection in order to give them strength for the arduous work. She was highly criticized by many who wanted pure action. Mother Teresa continued to insist on that daily moment of prayer with Jesus to remind the nuns who they were working for. The work of rescue and rehabilitation in the earthquake zone was so hard that little by little many groups started to leave. After six months only one group remained—Mother Teresa and her nuns!

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Blessed Gennaro Maria Sarnelli, C.Ss.R.

In the challenge to curb prostitution, an inspirational character for me is Blessed Gennaro Maria Sarnelli, an Italian Redemptorist (1702–1744) who dedicated himself to stopping the spread of prostitution in Naples, Italy. St. Alphonsus Liguori, founder of the Redemptorists and the patron of moral theology, wrote a commentary on the concern of Gennaro for women caught up in this predicament:

> In Naples, his zeal on behalf of the prostitutes was well known; everyone spoke about how much he worked on their behalf. To free them from their shameful life, he collected alms and preached on this evil in order to lessen the number of prostitutes. Every feast day he would preach in the busy square opposite the Church of S. Matteo for this purpose. He also persuaded the archbishop's confraternity to engage in a retreat on this topic. As for himself, he held back nothing of his own, even to the point of exhaustion, to help these poor women caught in this sinful life or those in danger of falling into it. He helped many of them escape from it at his own expense. He looked everywhere there might be a chance he would find one of these pitiful women and free her. There were two for whom he gave special help for more than two years; he relocated them and provided them a place to live and even bought furniture for them. Besides these, there were many others for whom he found places to live. It was for this work that he sought donations in many homes, not only in religious places, but also at some houses where he was so unwelcome that he once said he felt like he would die. In all this, he suffered insults, doors slammed in his face, and the typical risks that come with asking for alms. He also suffered a great deal of persecution and personal injury.[3]

St. Alphonsus spoke further of the danger Gennaro exposed himself to in this mission:

> This work caused our Don Gennaro to often live in mortal danger, liable to being killed by the pimps of these poor women. Because of the danger, his parents kept trying to stop him out of fear of what might befall him, and perhaps the whole family. Nevertheless, he protested that he was ready to suffer any consequence and, in fact, would consider

[3]Ivel Mendanha, C.Ss.R., "Gennaro Maria Sarnelli," www.redemptoristspirituality.net/eng2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=383&Itemid=111 (accessed October 10, 2013).

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> it his good fortune if, for a work that gives such glory to God, he even had to lose his life![4]

Changing Attitudes in Society

Sarnelli also realized that to effectively combat the problem of prostitution, a change of attitude of society was needed. For this he armed himself with his pen and wrote two works to sensitize and assist in the conscientization of the public about the wrongness of permitting prostitution. In 1736, he published his first work, "Catholic and Political Reasons in Defence of the States Ruined by Blatant Prostitution." A year later, "Further Thoughts on the Particular Ways of Lessening and Permanently Maintaining a Brake on Prostitution," "On Rehabilitating the Repentant," "On Saving Young Girls in Danger," "On Keeping the State Forever Free from Carnal Dissolution," and "With Responses to Objections" followed.

Fr. Ivel Mendanha, C.Ss.R., commented that

> Fr. Sarnelli's efforts produced two important results. He changed the way the Church and civil society looked upon the problem of prostitution, and he drew everyone's attention to the degradation into which one is led by poverty, and by the exploitation of women. Further, Sarnelli's style of never giving up reminds us that we should not allow even impossible odds to defeat us.[5]

Gennaro's awareness of the necessity to go public, to focus on changing attitudes in society, is very consistent with today's movement to cut the so-called demand side of prostitution.[6]

Courage and Perseverance

An additional comforting thought is something I read about the fight for a culture of life in the world of today. The author, Kateryna

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[4]Mendanha, "Gennaro Maria Sarnelli."

[5]Mendanha, "Gennaro Maria Sarnelli."

[6]See James McTavish, F.M.V.D., "Prostitution in the Philippines—A Time for Change," *Landas* 24:1 (2010): 127.

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Fedoryka Cuddeback, said that when confronting big evils in society, they can seem so big as to be overwhelming. But she also did say that its big size is actually its weakness. I was very encouraged and enlightened! Meaning to say that if a problem or evil is vast, like the extent of the sex industry, then it can be "attacked" on many fronts: a prayer, one dialogue with a person, an outreach activity, the encouragement shared between us, one customer who is provoked to examine his conscience. Little by little, we chip away at the reality, and as the drops of water hit the stone, eventually, with time, a huge immovable rock can be split in two. We need much patience and a healthy dose of courage if we desire to change or work to transform structures of sin![7]

The Example of Sweden

I also like to believe and hope that as we change as individuals we help to change the world, and so a real task is to seek a humble daily conversion of ourselves, for the good of all. Change is possible—people's attitudes can change and so can the attitudes of nations. For example, ever since Sweden introduced legislation criminalising the buying of sex, there has been a marked change in public perception, with 80% of the public now viewing prostitution as unacceptable compared to 49% in 1999. Later in 2009, Norway and Iceland also criminalized the purchase of sex. Within one year, prostitution in Norway, both indoor and outdoor, was reduced by 50%.

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

Finally, when confronting any big challenge in society, I am comforted by the prayer of Oscar Romero.

> It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a

[7]Pope John Paul II wrote that to destroy structures of sin "and replace them with more authentic forms of living in community is a task which demands courage and patience" (*Centesimus annus* 38).

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way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

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