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Audience with the participants in the International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking

At 12.15 today, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father received in audience the participants in the International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking.

The following is the text in the form of questions from some attendees, and answers from the Pope:

Questions and answers of the Holy Father

1. Monday Joy [in English]

Holy Father, first of all we would like to thank you for your constant and benevolent attention and concern for all migrants and victims of trafficking. We have experienced many difficulties and sufferings before arriving in Italy. After arriving in Italy, we struggle to integrate, and finding a decent job is almost impossible. I would like to ask you a question: do you think that the surprising silence on the vicissitudes of trafficking is due to ignorance of the phenomenon?

Holy Father:

Certainly on the topic of trafficking there is a lot of ignorance. But sometimes it seems there is also little willingness to understand the extent of the problem. Because? Because it touches our consciences closely, because it is scabrous, because it makes us ashamed. Then there are those who, despite knowing about it, do not want to talk about it because he is at the end of the “consumption chain”, as a user of the “services” offered on the street or on the internet. Finally, there are those who do not want to talk about it as they are directly involved in the criminal organizations that derive their profits from the trafficking. Yes, it takes courage and honesty, “when, in our daily lives, we meet or deal with persons who could be victims of human trafficking, or when we are tempted to select items which may well have been produced by exploiting others”.[1]

The work of sensitization must start from home, from ourselves, because only then will we be able to raise awareness in our communities, stimulating them to make efforts to ensure that no human being may be a victim of trafficking.

For young people this seems to be an easier task, since they are less structured in thought, less obscured by prejudices, freer to reason with their own heads. The voice of young people, more enthusiastic and spontaneous, can break the silence to denounce the nefariousness of the trafficking and propose concrete solutions. Adults who are ready to listen can be of great help.

For my part, as you have noted, I have never lost an opportunity to openly denounce trafficking as a crime against humanity. It is “a true form of slavery, unfortunately more and more widespread, which concerns every country, even the most developed. It is a reality which affects the most vulnerable in society: women of all ages, children, the handicapped, the poorest, and those who come from broken families and from difficult situations in society”.^[2]

I also said that “What is called for, then, is a shared sense of responsibility and firmer political will to gain victory on this front. Responsibility is required towards those who have fallen victim to trafficking in order to protect their rights, to guarantee their safety and that of their families, and to prevent the corrupt and criminals from escaping justice and having the last word over the lives of others”.^[3]

2. Migliorini, Silvia [High School in Via Dalmazia, Rome]

Holy Father, many of us young people want a better understanding of trafficking, migration and their causes. Yes, we want to commit ourselves to making this world more just. We would like to address issues such as this with the youth of our society, also using social networks, given their considerable potential for communication. Dear Pope Francis, in parish groups, in youth movements, and in Catholic educational institutions, sometimes there are not adequate and sufficient spaces to deal with these issues. Furthermore, it would be good to organize activities to promote social and cultural integration with those who are victims of trafficking, to make it easier for them to overcome their tragedy and rebuild their lives. What can we young people do? What can the Church do?

Holy Father:

Young people occupy a privileged position for meeting the survivors of human trafficking. Go to your parishes, to an association near your home, meet people, listen to them. From there, a response and a concrete commitment on your part will grow. I see the risk of this becoming an abstract problem, but it is not abstract. There are signs that you can learn to “read”, which tell you: here there could be a victim of trafficking, a slave. We need to promote the culture of encounter that always brings with it an unexpected richness and great surprises. Saint Paul gives us an example: in Christ, the slave Onesimus is no longer a slave but much more, he is a very dear brother (cf. *Philemon* 1: 16).

You, the young you can find hope in Christ, and you can also meet Him in migrant people who have fled their homes and remain trapped in the nets. Do not be afraid to meet them. Open your heart, let them in, be ready to change. The meeting with the other naturally leads to a change, but we must not be afraid of this change. It will always be for the best. Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Enlarge the place of your tent” (cf. 54: 2).

The Church must promote and create meeting spaces, for this reason I have asked parishes to be open and to welcome. We must acknowledge the great effort made in response to my appeal, thank you! I ask you here today to work to promote of openness to the other, especially when he is wounded in his own dignity. Be promoters of initiatives that your parishes can host. Help the Church to create spaces for sharing experiences and integrating faith and life.

The social networks also represent, especially for the young, an opportunity for encounter that can seem

endless: the internet can offer more opportunities for meeting and solidarity among all, and this is a good thing, it is a gift from God. However, for every tool that is offered to us, what man decides to make of it is fundamental. The communicative environment can help us to grow or, on the contrary, can disorient us. The risk inherent in some of these virtual spaces must not be underestimated; through the net many young people are enticed and dragged into a slavery from which it is beyond their ability to free themselves. In this context, adults, parents and educators – even the slightly older brothers and companions – are called to supervise and protect children. You must do the same with your relatives and companions, to perceive and report particular vulnerabilities, suspicious cases on which we must shed light.

So, use the internet to share a positive story of your experiences of meeting with our brothers in the world, to recount and share good practices, and to trigger a virtuous circle.

3. Outuru, Faith [in English]

Holy Father, I am one of the many young people from a distant country, with different cultures, with different living conditions and experiences of the Church. Now I am here and I want to build my future here. But I think of my country, of so many young people who are deceived with false promises, deceived, enslaved, prostituted. How can we help these young people not to fall into the trap of illusions and into the hands of traffickers?

Holy Father:

As you said, we must ensure that young people do not fall “into the hands of traffickers”. And how horrible it is to realize that many of the young victims were first abandoned by their families, considered as waste by their society! Many were then led to trafficking by their own relatives and so-called friends. It also happened in the Bible: remember that the older brothers sold the young Joseph as a slave, and so he was taken into slavery in Egypt!

Even in conditions of extreme hardship, education is important. It is a tool to protect against trafficking, in fact it helps to identify dangers and avoid illusions. A healthy school environment, like a healthy parish environment, allows young people to denounce traffickers without shame and to become bearers of the right messages for other young people, so that they do not end up in the same trap.

All those who have been victims of trafficking are an inexhaustible source of support for new victims and are important informative resources to save many other young people. It is often false news, received by word of mouth or filtered by social media, which traps the innocent. Young people who have encountered organized crime can play a key role in describing the dangers. Traffickers are often unscrupulous people, without morals or ethics, who live on the misfortunes of others, taking advantage of human emotions and despair to subjugate people to their will, making them slaves and succubi. Just think how many young African women arrive on our shores hoping to start a better life, thinking of earning a living honestly, and are instead enslaved, forced to prostitute themselves.

It is essential for young people to construct their own identity step by step, and to have a point of reference, a guiding light. The Church has always sought to be beside those who suffer, especially children and young people, protecting them and promoting their integral human development. Minors are often “invisible”, subject to dangers and threats, alone and easily manipulated; we want, even in the most precarious situations, to be your beacon of hope and support, because God is always with you.

Courage and hope are gifts of all, but they are particularly suited to the young: courage and hope. The future is certainly in the hands of God, the hands of a provident Father. This does not mean denying difficulties and problems, but seeing them, yes, as provisional and surmountable. Difficulties, crises, with the help of God and the good will of all, can be overcome, conquered, and transformed.[4]

4. Rossi, Antonio Maria [High school in Via Dalmazia, Rome]

Holy Father, we young Italians are faced with a context increasingly characterized by a plurality of cultures and religions. It is an open challenge. Often the lack of respect for diversity, the culture of waste and corruption from which trafficking originates, seem normal. Pope Francis, please continue to encourage our rulers to combat corruption, arms sales and the throwaway culture; and encourage all religious leaders to guarantee spaces where different cultures and religions can know each other and mutually value each other, so that all share the same spirituality of acceptance. I would like to ask you, Holy Father: what can we do here, so that the scourge of trafficking may disappear definitively?

Holy Father:

When countries are prey to extreme poverty, violence and corruption, then the economy, the regulatory framework and basic infrastructure are inefficient and fail to guarantee security, goods and essential rights. In these contexts, the perpetrators of these crimes act with impunity. Organized crime and the illegal trafficking of drugs and human beings choose their prey among the people who today have scarce livelihoods and even less hope for tomorrow.

The answer, therefore, is to create opportunities for integral human development, starting with quality education from early childhood, subsequently creating opportunities for growth through employment. These two modes of growth, at different stages of life, represent the antidotes to vulnerability and trafficking.

What I have repeatedly referred to as the “throwaway culture” is the basis of behaviours that, in the market and in the globalized world, lead to the exploitation of human beings at all levels. Poverty, needs, and the tragedies of many people end up becoming normality.[5]

Some states promote, within the international community, a particularly harsh policy in wanting to defeat human trafficking; this attitude is in itself misleading because, due to the economic interests behind it, they do not wish to tackle the root causes. Furthermore, the position at international level is not always consistent with domestic policies. I really hope you can send a message to leaders at every level of government, business and society, asking for access to quality education and thus to just and sustainable employment.

A strategy that includes a greater knowledge of the topic of trafficking, starting from a clear terminology and concrete testimonies from protagonists, can certainly help. The real awareness on the subject, however, pays attention to the “demand for trafficking” that lies behind the supply (chain of consumption); we are all called to reject hypocrisy and face the idea of being part of the problem rather than turning the other way, proclaiming our innocence.

Let me tell you, if there are so many girls who are victims of trafficking who end up on the streets of our cities, it is because many men here – young, middle-aged, elderly – require these services and are willing to pay for their pleasure. I wonder then, are traffickers really the main cause of trafficking? I believe that the main cause is the unscrupulous selfishness of so many hypocritical people of our world. Of course, arresting the traffickers is a duty of justice. But the real solution is the conversion of hearts, the elimination of demand so as to dry up the market.

5. Savini, Maria Magdalene

Pope Francis, in your message addressed to the mayors of large cities gathered at the Vatican, you said that “to be truly effective, the common commitment to the construction of an ecological conscience and to combating modern slavery – trafficking in human beings and organs, prostitution, illegal labour – must start from the peripheries”. [6] We young people often find ourselves in the periphery and suffer exclusion, insecurity for not having employment or access to quality education, living in situations of war, violence, being forced to leave our lands, belonging to ethnic and religious minorities. Above all, we women are penalized and are the main victims. What space will be given in the Youth Synod to young women and men who come from the peripheries of marginalization caused by a now-outdated model of development, which continues to produce human degradation? How can these girls and boys be the protagonists of change in society and in the Church?

Holy Father:

I hope, for those who are true witnesses to the risks of trafficking in their countries of origin, that they may find in the Synod a place to express themselves, from which to call the Church to action. Therefore, it is my great desire that young representatives of the “peripheries” be protagonists of this Synod. I hope that they can see the Synod as a place to send a message to the rulers of the countries of origin and of arrival to request protection and support. I hope that these young people will launch a global message for a world youth mobilization, to build together an inclusive and welcoming common home. I hope that they will be an example of hope for those who go through the existential drama of despair.

The Catholic Church intends to intervene in every phase of trafficking in human beings: she wishes to protect them from deception and enticement; to find them and free them when they are transported and enslaved; to assist them once they are released. Often people who have been trapped and mistreated lose the ability to trust others, and the Church often turns out to be the last anchor of salvation.

It is absolutely important to respond concretely to the vulnerabilities of those at risk, to then accompany the liberation process, starting by saving their lives. Church groups can open spaces of security where necessary, in places of recruitment, on the trafficking routes and in the countries of arrival. My hope is that the Synod may also be an opportunity for local Churches to learn to work together and to become “a network of salvation”.

Finally I would like to conclude by quoting Saint Josephine Bakhita. This great Sudanese saint “is even today an exemplary witness of hope for the many victims of slavery; she can support the efforts of all those committed to fighting against this “open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ”.[7] May she inspire us to perform acts of brotherhood with those who are in a state of submission. To let ourselves be challenged, to let us invite to the encounter.

Let us pray:

Saint Josephine Bakhita, as a child you were sold as a slave
and you had to face untold difficulties and sufferings.
Once freed from your physical slavery,
you found true redemption in the encounter with Christ and His Church.
Saint Josephine Bakhita, help all those
who are trapped in slavery.
In their name, intercede with the God of Mercy,
so that the chains of their captivity can be broken.
May God Himself free all those who have been threatened,
injured or ill-treated by trafficking and trafficking in human beings.
Bring relief to those who survive this slavery
and teach them to see Jesus as a model of faith and hope,
so that their wounds may heal.
We beg you to pray and intercede for us all:
so that we do not fall into indifference,
so that we open our eyes and can look
at the miseries and wounds of many brothers and sisters
deprived of their dignity and their freedom
and listen to their cry for help.
Amen.

[1] *Message for the XLVIII World Day of Peace 2015: “No longer slaves, but brothers and sisters”*, 6.

[2] *Address to a group of new ambassadors on the occasion of the presentation of their credential letters*, 12 December 2013.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Address to young people in the dioceses of Abruzzo and Molise*, 5 July 2014.

[5] *Catechesis*, General Audience of 5 June 2013.

[6] *Address to participants in the Workshop “Modern Slavery and climate change: the commitment of the cities”*, promoted by the Pontifical Academies of Science and Social Sciences, 21 July 2015.

[7] *Message for the XLVIII World Day of Peace 2015: “No longer slaves, but brothers and sisters”*, 6.
