

Pope praises police-church network to stop trafficking, meets victims

By Carol Glatz Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Meeting four victims of human trafficking, dozens of religious sisters and senior police chiefs from 20 countries, Pope Francis praised their coordinated efforts to fight against a "crime against humanity."

"Human trafficking is an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ," he said.

The pope spoke at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences April 10 to participants in an international conference on combating human trafficking, which was organized by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster.

Human trafficking "is a crime against humanity" that requires continued global and local cooperation between the Catholic Church and law enforcement, Pope Francis said.

The twin strategies of police cracking down on the criminals behind trafficking and church and social workers aiding victims "are quite important," he said, and "can and must go together."

Pope Francis called the Vatican meeting "a gesture of the church and of people of good will who want to scream, 'Enough!'"

The April 9-10 gathering of 120 people representing national and international police agencies, women and men religious and humanitarian workers aiding victims was the second international conference on trafficking hosted by the U.K. bishops at the Vatican.

Three of the four victims attending the conference also spoke to the assembly about how they fell into in the snares of criminal gangs and escaped from their ruthless traffickers.

A woman from Hungary told attendees how her own sister had sold her into slavery. She was separated from her 2-year-old daughter and was even "traded for a car" by her traffickers.

She was abused, beaten and bullied by the family housing her, including the family's 3-year-old boy, she said. She was forced to prostitute herself "24 hours a day," seven days a week for three years.

The conference focused on showcasing a joint initiative between police and the church that began in London three years ago; it's a model the British bishops hope will be copied and adopted around the world.

Detective Inspector Kevin Hyland of Scotland Yard's trafficking and organized crime unit explained in his talk April 9 how, when the police conduct raids on suspected brothels and potential crime scenes, they have group of nuns speak with the women found inside because the women often don't want to talk to the police, but they do open up to the sisters.

The sisters pass on to police additional testimony they receive from the women while they are living under the sisters' care.

Disclosures of rape and other crimes "led to immediate arrests" and the identification of perpetrators as well as brought down a major trafficking ring, he said.

Sacred Heart Sister Florence Nwaonuma of Nigeria told the conference April 10 that because the world's religious sisters are on the ground with the people, "We know exactly what is happening" when it comes to victims, clients and traffickers.

"But we need the empowerment to challenge these unjust structures that are pushing our women out of Nigeria," and they need more vocations to religious life "so we can continue our work."

Another Sacred Heart sister from Nigeria, identified as Sister Antonia, asked participants to think of ways the church can help the men seeking prostitutes. "Most clients are Catholics and family men, even teenagers," she said. She called for approaches that would help men see "that they are using these girls and that they are not objects."

She and other religious said as long as nothing is done to amend the poverty and injustice that is rendering people more vulnerable to traffickers, the supply of people for sale will never end.

At the end of the meeting, "The Santa Marta Group," an international group of senior law enforcement chiefs, was formally established.

The group -- named after the Domus Sanctae Marthae residence where the conference participants stayed and where the pope lives -- will be led by Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, commissioner of London's Metropolitan Police Service.

More than 20 police chiefs signed the new group's declaration of commitment April 10 and pledged to meet again in London in November to share expertise, training and "practical things we can do" to fight human trafficking.

Hogan-Howe challenged the police chiefs, saying "the test" of the new initiative's success will be seeing if "we all (will) be there in London if the Holy Father is not there," a comment met with laughter from the people in the conference hall.

Ronald Noble, secretary-general of Interpol, said modern-day slavery is a huge business. The United Nations estimates 2.4 million people are trafficked at any given time and generate \$32 billion in annual profits for criminals.

But he said, it's the real human being, "a name, a face, a voice crying for help," that should move people into action, not the statistics.

"Police and spiritual leaders have different roles, but walk the same streets" and need to work together, he said.

Cardinal Nichols said, "Only 1 percent of people in slavery are identified and rescued." Even while one life is saved, there are still millions of women, men and children in the grips of traffickers, he said.

"We need legislation, concrete action and robust funding" to do more, he added. Hogan-Howe said more also needs to be done to encourage victims to not be afraid or embarrassed to come forward and denounce their oppressors to the police.

Auxiliary Bishop Patrick Lynch of Southwark, England, urged the world's bishops "to have the confidence to approach the local chief of police" and urged local police chiefs "to have the confidence to contact the bishop" and find ways to work together.

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