



## Called to Action 'to Eradicate the Terrible Scourge of Modern Slavery in all its Forms' ([Pope Francis, 2 December 2014](#))

*A Reflection for the first World Day of prayer, reflection and action against human trafficking, 8 February, 2015*

Aleksandr Solzhenitzin, awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970 for his ethical force in revealing the reality of the Soviet forced labour camp system, spoke in his acceptance lecture, of violence. *.. 'as brazenly and victoriously striding across the whole world'.* Indeed, violence has always stalked the earth, but never as graphically as now when images through social media, television and print media incessantly besiege our minds and numb our hearts. Before Christmas it was the Taliban killing spree in the military school in Peshawar and the horror of the hostage crisis in Sydney. Presently, we have the ISIS linked terrorist assassinations in Paris, and the Boko Haram slaughter and displacement of thousands of people, mainly women and children, in north eastern Nigeria.

Last year there was a constant stream of images of decimation from the war in Syria, estimated to have cost 7000 lives in 2014, and of refugees in camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Burka clad, Nigerian schoolgirls, kidnapped victims of Boko Haram, and of their mothers crying for their children, not knowing whether they were alive, or dead, sold into slavery or forced into marriage, became familiar. They were followed by images and stories of the atrocities to which Yazidi people and Iraqi and Syrian Christians were subjected to by ISIS- people murdered en masse; women and children, kidnapped, raped, tortured, sold into sexual slavery or given as gifts to ISIS fighters, forced into marriage; children taken as child soldiers or used as suicide bombers; human organs taken from captives or dead soldiers and sold on the international black market. As human trafficking provides a major source of funding for terrorist operations, terrorism and human trafficking are becoming inextricably linked.

Alternative images and stories, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize, shared by Pakistani activist, [Malala Yousafzai](#), the youngest recipient ever, for her struggle for the right of all children to education and [Kailash Satyarthi](#), Indian children's rights advocate and activist against child labour; Martin Place in Sydney bestrewn with flowers; and the million marchers in Paris led by world leaders with linked arms, bespeak the strength and resilience of the human spirit in defence of peace, freedom, justice and compassion .

There are socio political commentators, such as Sudanese, [Amir Ahmad Nasr](#), who assure us that even if ISIS were to be defeated other medieval, anti modern expressions of Islam will continue to surface and that this war *'animated by a seventh century mindset and waged with twenty first century weaponry'* is truly frightening in terms of its possibilities and potential longevity.<sup>ii</sup> For as Solzhenitzin indicated: *'Ideology-...is what gives evil doing its long sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination ...which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and*

*others eyes*'.<sup>iii</sup> Thus there would seem to be no immediate end to human trafficking and slavery associated with terrorism.

The 8<sup>th</sup> February this year, the feast day of St Josephine Bakhita, canonised in 2000, has been designated as a world day of prayer, reflection and action for victims of human trafficking and modern slavery. Born in Southern Sudan in 1869, kidnapped from her large family and village, sold into slavery, tortured mercilessly she was resold several times. Bought in 1883 by the Italian consul in Khartoum who treated her humanely, she returned with his family to Italy where she became nanny to the daughter of one of his colleagues. It was in this capacity that she made the acquaintance of the [Canossian Sisters](#) who were instrumental in having an Italian Court establish her status as a person free to determine her own destiny. The family she was with returned to the Sudan, she chose to remain in Italy, was baptised and confirmed in 1890, joined the Canossian Sisters in 1893 and lived for most of her religious life in the town of Schio. She was noted for her life of contemplative intimacy with God, the warmth of her connection with many people and her resolve to free girls and women from oppression and violence. In the latter part of her life she was asked to write her memoirs and her life was powerful testimony to so many of her contemporaries of the reality of her human and spiritual transformation.

Her life is an inspiration, particularly, for women who have been trafficked or enslaved and for those who work with them in the often, long, slow, painful journey of healing and rehabilitation. This important work emanating from so many safe houses can lead to trafficked people assuming their own agency and effecting change for others. However there are others, demoralised, tortured, diseased, drug addicted, devastated psychically, spiritually and physically, dumped and disposed of, who resort to suicide, slide back into slavery or never recover.

On this world day of prayer, reflection and action we enter into the pathos of God who in the Book of Exodus is depicted as seeing the suffering, of hearing the cries and knowing the pain of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. We enter into the pathos of Jesus who journeying to Calvary admonishes the grief stricken women who accompany him to weep not for him, but for themselves and for their children. Our prayer on this day becomes one of lamentation for the millions of women, children and men trafficked across the globe into human slavery.

Part of the appeal of Pope Francis is his capacity to imagine what a '*Church of the poor for the poor*' might look like and to act decisively on its behalf. He has consistently excoriated the evil of human trafficking and the culture of indifference which enables the demand for cheap labour, cheap goods and cheap sex to flourish. In November 2013 he commissioned a preparatory workshop at the Vatican which brought together experts in the field of human trafficking. The Statement at its conclusion spoke of '*our moral imperative to make ours the last generation that has to fight the trade in human lives*'.<sup>iv</sup>

In March, 2014, a new organisation, [the Global Freedom Network](#), was formed to galvanise global action to eradicate modern forms of slavery and human trafficking by 2020. Led by Pope Francis, Archbishop Justin Welby of the Anglican Communion, the Grand Imman of Al Azar University in Cairo and Andrew Forrest, head of the Walk Free Foundation, it aims to work through faith communities and business organisations. It was followed on 2 December, the International Day for the Elimination of

Slavery, by a Declaration against Slavery signed by leaders of the world's major religions, Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Christian, Judaic, Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu, gathered at the Vatican. Pope Francis speaking on behalf of those assembled said: *"Inspired by our confessions of faith, we are gathered here today for an historical initiative and to take concrete action to declare that we will work together to eradicate the terrible scourge of modern slavery in all its forms ...On behalf of them all (the victims) our communities of faith are called to reject , without exception , any systematic deprivation of individual freedom for the purposes of personal or commercial exploitation ...Let us call to action all persons of faith and their leaders, governments, businesses, all men and women of good will , to lend their unwavering support and to join the movement against slavery in all its forms".*<sup>v</sup>

For the World Day of Peace on 1 January this year, Pope Francis' World Day of Peace Message was entitled: ["Slaves no more, but Brothers and Sisters"](#). In his message he detailed the modern faces of human enslavement whose deepest cause lies in the rejection of a person's humanity, his/her treatment as an object, as a means to an end, as source of financial gain when *'money, not the human person is at the centre of the economic system'*. All are called to social responsibility, individuals as consumers, as well as businesses and communities, in the forging of a new worldwide movement of solidarity and fraternity in a context of indifference. The Holy See itself, *"attentive to the pain of the victims of trafficking and the voice of the religious congregations which assist them on the path to freedom, has increased its appeals to the international community for cooperation and collaboration between agencies in putting an end to this scourge"*. For the Church, *"is charged with showing to all the path to conversion, which enables us to change the way we see our neighbour, to recognize in every other person a brother or sister in our human family, and to acknowledge his or her intrinsic dignity in truth and freedom"*.<sup>vi</sup>

Is it realistic to think that slavery could be ended in our lifetime? There are researchers who believe that we are at a tipping point and that with adequate resources for research, public awareness campaigns, law enforcement, rehabilitation and the political will both locally and globally to make it a priority, human trafficking into human slavery could be overcome. They indicate, that the moral and legal arguments have already been won, that while human trafficking is a profitable criminal activity its monetary value in the world economy is small and while estimates of 27 million enslaved people constitute the greatest number of people enslaved at any one time in history they constitute but a small proportion of the global population in the twenty first century. Furthermore it is not as large or as intractable an issue as global warming or global poverty. Nevertheless, these scholars insist that there is still much that we do not know about human trafficking and its entrenchment in social and economic structures both globally and locally.<sup>vii</sup>

Members of religious communities since 2001 have been at the forefront of combating human trafficking on every continent, providing human and financial resources for raising public awareness, direct service of trafficked people, advocating for legislative change and law enforcement, co operating and collaborating with other non government and government agencies.

Combating human trafficking constitutes a priority issue for Mercy International Association, because it is an issue confronting women, the poor and the vulnerable, because Sisters of Mercy in every continent

are significantly engaged in combating human trafficking and because MIA has the capacity to influence the European Union and the United Nations through the working group MIA Global Action has established to take the issue forward.

For each Sister, Associate, and those who partner with us, this day of prayer, reflection and action can be an opportunity to learn about trafficking globally and locally, to pray for the victims of human trafficking and for an end to slavery, to commit to buying fair trade products where possible and to advocating for legislation to protect victims of human trafficking.

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- <sup>i</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Nobel Lecture in Literature", 1970, section.6  
[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html)  
See also. The Gulag Archipelago, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, Cancer Ward
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://medium.com/@AmirAhmadNasr/ISIS>; <https://medium.com/matter/isis-isnt-the-real>
- <sup>iii</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, Ch 4, p.173
- <sup>iv</sup> Statement on Trafficking in Human Beings, Vatican City, November 14, 2013,  
<https://ec.europa.eu/.../trafficking/.../antitrafficking>
- <sup>v</sup> <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches>;
- <sup>vi</sup> <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/index.html>
- <sup>vii</sup> See Kevin Bales, Ending Slavery: How We Free Today's Slaves, Univ. California Press, Berkeley, 2007; Siddarth Kara, Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008; and Siddarth Kara, Bonded Labor: Tackling the System of Slavery in South Asia, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012.

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