

# On HUMAN Trafficking

The document *On Human Trafficking* was developed as a resource by the Committee on Migration of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was reviewed by the committee chairman, Bishop Gerald R. Barnes, and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

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The movement of people across boundaries is part of a collective human experience. There is an element of this experience that must be eradicated: the trafficking of human beings through the use of fraud, force, and coercion for the purpose of forced prostitution or forced labor.

Now, in the twenty-first century, this practice reaches every corner of the globe, from Asia and Africa to Europe and the Americas. It is also present in the United States, as vulnerable men, women, and children are trafficked into our country from other lands. Moreover, U.S. citizens and residents are trafficked within our country.

We, the Committee on Migration of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), call attention to this tragic reality to raise awareness among Catholics and others of good will about its devastating impact on vulnerable persons. We urge Catholics to work together to identify survivors of human trafficking and to help rescue them from their bondage.

## Catholic Teaching and Human Trafficking

The Catholic Church has condemned human trafficking and has developed social service programs to serve and protect its survivors.

During Vatican II, the Catholic Church reaffirmed its historic concern about forced labor, stating that “slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, [and] disgraceful working conditions where [people] are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons” are “infamies”<sup>1</sup> and “an affront to fundamental values . . . values rooted in the very nature of the human person.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 2006 annual statement on migration, entitled “Migrations: A Sign of the Times,” Pope Benedict XVI deplored the “trafficking of human beings—especially women—which flourishes where opportunities to improve their standard of living or even to survive are limited.” Similarly the Holy See emphasized related concerns in a recent address at the United Nations, stating that treating a woman “not as a human person with rights on an equal basis with others, but as an object to be exploited, very often underlies violence against women.” In this

context, “an increasing scourge is trafficking of women and girls, as well as various forms of prostitution.”<sup>3</sup>

Pope John Paul II, in a letter on the occasion of the International Conference on “Twenty-First-Century Slavery—the Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings,” stated that human trafficking “constitutes a shocking offense against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights. In particular, the sexual exploitation of women and children is a particularly repugnant aspect of this trade, and must be recognized as an intrinsic violation of human dignity and human rights.”<sup>4</sup>

The Catholic bishops of the United States and Mexico have also spoken out on the issue, calling upon the governments of the United States and Mexico to work together to apprehend traffickers and destroy trafficking networks: “Both governments must vigilantly seek to end trafficking in human persons. . . . Together, both governments should more effectively share information on trafficking operations and should engage in joint action to apprehend and prosecute traffickers.”<sup>5</sup>

The USCCB Committee on Migration reaffirmed the commitment of the Catholic bishops of the United States to end this abominable practice: “The Catholic Church . . . in the United States stands ready to work with our government to end this scourge. We cannot rest until trafficking in human persons is eliminated from the globe.”<sup>6</sup>



## The Reality of Human Trafficking

As many as 700,000 persons are trafficked globally each year—men, women, and children. Survivors of human trafficking are commonly linked by poverty and lack of opportunity. They are also connected by their desperation and their perception of migration as an accessible escape route. Often they seek to escape life in an oppressive slum, with the hope of finding opportunity and a brighter future elsewhere.



Combined with these economic root causes is a demand in developed nations for the services of the sex trade and forced labor. Human trafficking will never be truly defeated without eliminating the consumerism that feeds it and prosecuting those actors in receiving countries, including our own, that benefit because of the exploitation of vulnerable human beings.

It is in this “supply and demand” global environment that human traffickers flourish, promising unsuspecting victims an opportunity to travel to a foreign land for employment and housing. At the end of the journey, they find coercion, abuse, entrapment, and exploitation in a brothel, a massage parlor, an illicit factory, or an agricultural outpost. By the time they are discovered, if ever, they are traumatized by physical, mental, and psychological abuse in the roles of prostitutes, domestic servants, or manual laborers. Many become ill with disease or become infected with HIV. Some lose their lives.



This is not a problem that exists merely on faraway shores and in developing countries. It exists right here in the United States, where thousands of persons are trafficked each year for purposes of forced prostitution or forced labor.

It is estimated that as many as 17,500 human beings each year are trafficked into the United States. Men, women, and children have been forced to work in prostitution and have been forced into different types of manual labor, without pay or protection.

Trafficking in persons is a modern-day form of slavery, and it is the largest manifestation of slavery today.

## The Response to Human Trafficking

The global community, including the United States, is only beginning to comprehend the scope and impact of the selling of human persons in the world. As a result, humane responses to this phenomenon have been slow, and education of the public lacking. New efforts involving the entire international community are necessary to eliminate the root causes of it, to offer proper care and attention to its survivors, and to bring its perpetrators to justice.

In the United States, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 provides an important framework for responding to human trafficking. Sadly, however, it has not been implemented in a fashion that effectively protects survivors or holds accountable nations that do not apprehend or prosecute traffickers. This legislation should be re-authorized, adequately funded, and aggressively implemented.<sup>7</sup>

The federal government, in cooperation with state and local governments, should increase educational efforts so that all Americans become more aware of this problem. Similarly, emphasis should be placed on the recovery and care of victims and on providing them with legal protection and social services as soon as possible. This is particularly true for child trafficking victims, who are most susceptible to the long-term horrors of this crime.

We call upon Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform that would provide legal avenues for men, women, and their families to enter the country and work legally and safely. Undocumented persons eager to find work are easy prey for human traffickers.

The U.S. government must also work with foreign governments to eradicate human trafficking networks. Over the long term, the global community must work together to reduce the factors that make persons vulnerable to traffickers, such as the lack of economic opportunity in migrant-sending countries, especially for women.

## Call to Action

As a global institution that is present in source nations as well as nations that serve as markets for human trafficking, the Catholic Church is well positioned to identify and rescue survivors of human trafficking. In fact, the Catholic Church provides important social services to survivors in the United States and around the world.

Much more must be done. Catholics in our own country can help, particularly by educating fellow Catholics and others about the realities of this crime. Parishes can serve as a



meeting place to discuss this issue and as a center for action to help identify survivors and provide them support.

We call upon all Catholics to seek ways to assist dioceses and local governments in helping survivors. Catholics can also help educate fellow Catholics and others about the human consequences of this crime.

**HUMAN TRAFFICKING**  
is a horrific crime against the basic  
dignity and rights of the human person.

## Conclusion

It is hard to imagine that, in the twenty-first century, fellow human beings could be exploited and forced to work in the sex industry and other industries.

As Catholic bishops, we pledge to use the resources of the Church to help end this affliction. We also pledge to use our teaching authority to educate Catholics and others about human trafficking.

Human trafficking is a horrific crime against the basic dignity and rights of the human person. All efforts must be expended to end it. In the end, we must work together—Church, state, and community—to eliminate the root causes and markets that permit traffickers to flourish; to make whole the survivors of this crime; and to ensure that, one day soon, trafficking in human persons vanishes from the face of the earth.

## Notes

- 1 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966).
- 2 Pope John Paul II, Letter to Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran on the Occasion of the International Conference on “Twenty-First-Century Slavery—the Human Rights Dimension in Trafficking in Human Beings,” May 15, 2002.
- 3 Archbishop Migliore, “Rescuing Women from Abuse,” Statement to 3rd Committee of the 60th session of the UN General Assembly on the item “Implementation of the Outcome of the 4th World Conference on Women and of the Special Session of the General Assembly entitled ‘Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace in the 21st Century,’” October 17, 2005.
- 4 Pope John Paul II, Letter to Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran.
- 5 Catholic Bishops of the United States and Mexico, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003), no. 91.
- 6 Bishop Thomas Wenski, statement presented at the Press Conference on Launching of Anti-Trafficking Initiative in Central Florida, June 9, 2004.
- 7 The USCCB has consistently advocated for changes to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 to better protect child victims of trafficking and to ensure that all victims are more readily identified and provided with care.