

HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING
Weekly Column by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
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“[T]oday there are millions of women and children around the world enslaved without a voice in situations of forced labor and sexual exploitation from which they cannot free themselves. This horrific phenomenon is the third largest crime in the world, behind only the illicit sale of drugs and arms.”

-- James Nicholson, former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, 2004

“Prostitution is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the existence of a global and complex trade that exploits situations of poverty and vulnerability that many women find themselves in, and exports [these women] into the sex industry.

“In Italy, there are an estimated 50,000-70,000 women and girls from East Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe who are prostituted on streets, in nightclubs and in private brothels. Some 30 percent to 40 percent are minors. They typically have no documents, because traffickers seize their passports and papers in order to control them. Upon arrival, traffickers and pimps often tell women they must work off a huge debt, which they had not heard about before leaving home.

“To pay back this debt bond set at 40,000-70,000 Euros [\$54,000-\$94,000], Nigerian women must undergo at least 4,000 sexual encounters. On top of this, they are charged for food, lodging and even the space on the sidewalk where they stand.”

-- Consolata Missionary Sister Eugenia Bonetti, anti-trafficking activist, 2007

James Nicholson is probably best known as a successful businessman, attorney and former U.S. secretary for veterans' affairs. But he also served with distinction as our country's envoy to the Holy See. One of the issues he championed during his tenure, working closely with the Vatican, was the global fight against human trafficking – the lifeblood of modern forced labor and sexual exploitation.

Officially, worldwide slavery ended more than a century ago. Unofficially, it's a growth industry. Hundreds of thousands of women and children – some estimates place the number as high as 1.2 million – are trafficked every year. Many come from poor countries and end up as prostitutes in the developed world. Others are forced to work for little or no money in hotels, sweat shops, massage parlors and in agriculture. Some are simply abducted. Some are homeless runaways. For many others, well-organized criminal recruiting rings promise young people in the developing world an opportunity for marriage, good jobs or a better life in Europe and United States. Then they break down their victims' dignity with rape, blackmail and beatings, and use them as objects for labor and sex until their health collapses.

In many countries, traffickers bribe the police to look the other way. But even in places where the authorities vigorously attack human trafficking, laws are often inadequate, and victims are often too frightened or ashamed to step forward.

All of this sounds barbaric, and of course it is; a word like “barbaric” frankly understates the bitter suffering involved. The Holy See, religious communities and many other people of good will – Consolata Sister Eugenia Bonetti has given global and heroic witness on this issue -- have worked to publicize the plague of human trafficking for years and to mobilize government action against it. The reason is obvious. If every human being is made in the image of God and loved infinitely by his or her Creator, then human trafficking is a kind of blasphemy, a sacrilege; a crime against God himself. The same reverence for human life that drives Christians to speak out for the poor, the disabled, the immigrant and the unborn child should lead us to work against human trafficking and to help its victims.

What we need to realize as we end this column this week is that human trafficking isn't something that only happens “out there” in some faraway foreign country. Many thousands of women and children are victims of trafficking *right here in the United States* every year. That includes Philadelphia, our home; our own backyard. And I hope that in the year ahead, more and more of our people in the Catholic community will become aware of human trafficking and get involved to end this kind of contempt for human dignity.

A good place to start is by contacting Mr. Hugh Organ, associate executive director of Covenant House Pennsylvania, at 215.951.5411, x2118. Covenant House is a member of the Philadelphia Anti-Trafficking Coalition, and Hugh is a dedicated and well-informed source on the local dimensions of the human trafficking issue. Or contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center directly at 1.888.3737.888.

God created men and women to be his sons and daughters, not property; not trash; not chattel. The way to end this ruinous evil is through good people fighting it now.

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