

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Address to the Special Conference held at the UN on the combatting of human trafficking and modern slavery

United Nations Headquarters, New York, 7 April 2016

Mr President, Your Excellencies, Sisters, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to address you this afternoon on this most important topic which is increasingly demanding not only our attention but that of the entire world. I address you behalf of the Santa Marta Group, an international network of cooperation and initiatives, active in this work against human trafficking and modern slavery. I speak, therefore, in the name of the Catholic community which today again wishes to make clear its unequivocal support for all who undertake this work and its willingness to take part in it.

In asserting this commitment of the Church, I emphasise the foundations from which we act: a radical commitment to the dignity of every human person, a dignity which has to be protected and promoted in every circumstance and time; a dignity which does not depend on the abilities or status of a person but which is rooted entirely in the inner depth of the person's existence, in the gift of human life which always comes from the Divine Creator who has shown himself to be our loving Father.

Human trafficking and slavery radically strips a person of this fundamental dignity, reducing them to the status of a commodity. It is an evil crying out to heaven. That there are over 20 million people callously held in modern slavery in our world today is a mark of deep shame on the face of our human family that no words alone can remove. The challenge that the eyes of faith see before us today is to work to our utmost to rescue, protect, assist and serve the poorest of the Father's children who have been sold into slavery even as Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers 'in the beginning' (Gen 37.32).

More personally I stand before you because of three key moments in my life.

The first was four years ago when I listened, for the first time, to the witness of a young woman who had been betrayed into the slavery of enforced prostitution. Her story was heart-wrenching. But what added a particular depth to my shock was the fact that she was a young English woman, trafficked from England into slavery in Italy.

The second moment was occurring about the same time. I began to witness a remarkable partnership being built in London between religious women and London police force, Scotland Yard. This partnership transformed the effectiveness of operations to rescue victims, care for them and pursue to prosecution the perpetrators of this horrendous crime. I realised then the effectiveness of such partnerships, especially between unlikely partners. Religious women, working on the street, did not instinctively trust the law enforcement agencies who they understood, with good reason, were in all likelihood going to prosecute the very women the Sisters were trying to protect. Yet over time the partnership was established. It was the fruit of the hard work of building trust, a work made up of many demanding practical steps, requiring change in mindsets and procedures. For one thing, it was essential that the police gave to the Sisters the assurance that the victims of trafficking would not be prosecuted, but rather they would be helped.

The third moment came two years ago when, at the end of our first Santa Marta Conference in Rome, Pope Francis turned to me and asked me to keep this work going. That is an order that cannot be refused!

The Santa Marta Group brings together the leaders of law enforcement agencies from an increasing number of countries - 36 at the last count - and the resources of the Catholic Church, in order to fashion shared alliances of effective action in the fight against human slavery. There have, to date, been three major international gatherings: in Rome, London and Madrid. Results are emerging, with a growing number of countries putting together effective partnerships in this work. Strong examples can be given - in Edu State, Nigeria, - for example, where a detailed four year programme is being put into effect. Similarly, a North Atlantic Maritime initiative is emerging to tackle the problems of unjust working conditions in the fishing industry. Other initiatives involving the Catholic community have emerged in Argentina and Lithuania and requests for initiatives have come in from the Philippines, South Africa and Mozambique.

The core of the vision and work of Santa Marta, then, is to foster a symbiotic relationship between law enforcement and the resources of the Catholic Church in this great fight.

I offer this brief sketch of this work because the new Sustainable Development Goals now express the official commitment of every UN member state to work, in this period, for the eradication of human trafficking and modern slavery. The core proposal of this day is that this goal cannot be achieved without effective, international cooperation at many levels, one of which is indeed the Santa Marta Group, open to all who see the importance of its insight and wish to take part in its processes.

Such international partnerships require not only a shared motivation but also some clear key aims. For us they are univocal: the well-being of every victim of human trafficking, for it is the victim who must always be central to our efforts; the enhancement of the work of law enforcement: the breaking up of criminal networks, the arrest and prosecution of the perpetrators; and thirdly the strengthening of the legal frameworks within which this work is carried out.

For me, and I am sure for many of you, Pope Francis remains a central and inspiring figure. He is direct and blunt in what he expects of us - something far more than words: effective action on the ground which frees prisoners, comforts the victims, serves their well-being and generates new hope in a world in which there is far too much suffering, poverty and grief.

When he was here at the UN in September last year Pope Francis talked about the importance of having 'the will to put an end as quickly as possible to the phenomena of social and economic exclusion' mentioning first 'human trafficking and slave labour.' He called on us to create institutions which 'are truly effective in the struggle against these scourges.' He asked us to remember always that we are responding to 'real men and women', sons and daughters of our one Eternal Father' and who are therefore truly our brothers and sisters. In their plight we are complicit. In their freedom we will rejoice with a joy no other satisfaction can give.

I hope and pray that this important Conference will mark a vital step in the work not only of our individual nations and agencies, working in new and effective partnerships, but also in the role of the United Nations itself, an institution which, in the words of Pope Francis, is 'an appropriate juridical and political response to this present moment of history.'

I thank you for your attention.

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