



NORTH ATLANTIC MARITIME PROJECT

Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, 10 - 11 May 2016

PROFESSOR MICHAEL A. HAYES

President, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick

Distinguished guests, friends and colleagues, good afternoon. I warmly welcome you to our Santa Marta Conference in Mary Immaculate, Limerick.

My involvement with the Santa Marta Group began when I attended its second Conference in London in 2014. The keynote speaker on that occasion was Theresa May the British Home Secretary. She is very committed to combating modern slavery, has introduced an anti-slavery Bill to Parliament which passed into law in March 2015. She also appointed Kevin Hyland as the first Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner.

Coming in cold as it were to that meeting, I was amazed to discover that Human Trafficking ranks as the second most profitable criminal enterprise after the illegal arms trade, and that its victims can be found in the world's restaurants, fisheries, brothels, farms and homes among other places, you might say hidden in plain sight.

Victims themselves often do not realise that they are victims. They are drawn into a spiders web of promises and threats where they feel trapped and see no way out. As Pope Francis says "they are held by invisible chains."

The big danger with all meetings is that they become talking shops and nothing happens. This was not the case with the London meeting and I would like to mention one positive outcome of the event. At that meeting Cardinal Nichols promised that the Archdiocese of Westminster would make a house available in London as a place of refuge for people when freed from modern slavery. I'm glad to say this has been done, a house has been made available and is staffed by people who are trained to deal with those who have been rescued, and are often traumatised by what has happened to them. The house, called Bakhita House, was opened in London on 30 June 2015. We will hear about the work of that House later in our conference. Just a word about the name - Bakhita - it's obviously not a cockney name!

Josephine Bakhita was born in the Sudan in 1869. When she was seven years old she was kidnapped by slave traders. She was so traumatised by the brutality of her captors that she could not remember her own name - and she was mockingly dubbed “bakhita” which means the lucky one! Over the next while she was bought and sold until finally she ended up in Italy. When the family who owned her had to go away on business they left Bakhita and their child in the care of a group of Religious Sisters in Venice. While in the convent, Bakhita asked to be baptised and was given the name Josephine. When the family returned to reclaim her Josephine refused to go with them, and her freedom was upheld in court since slavery was not recognised in Italian law. In 1896 she joined the Convent and spent the next 50 years living a quiet, prayerful life in the north of Italy. She died in 1947 and became the first Sudanese to be canonised in 2000.

Her Feast Day is the 8 February and last year, on that date, the Church held the first International Day of Prayer and Awareness of Human Trafficking.

Having had its first meeting in the Vatican and taking its name from the Papal Apartments it is no surprise that Pope Francis is a huge supporter of the Santa Marta Group’s work. Addressing the Vatican Conference the Holy Father described human trafficking as “an open wound on the body of contemporary society.”

The third meeting of the Santa Marta Group took place last October in Madrid. In his message and blessing for the success of the Madrid meeting the Holy Father said:

“I ask Almighty God to give you the grace to carry out this mission, which is so delicate, so humanitarian, and so Christian, of healing the open and painful wounds of humanity, which are also the wounds of Christ... with the help of God and your cooperation, this indispensable service of the Santa Marta Group will be able to liberate the victims of the new forms of slavery, rehabilitate the excluded, unmask the traffickers and those who create the market.”

The great value of such meetings, and of our meeting today, is that they allow all involved in anti-trafficking to share experiences and best practice, to discern the pastoral care victims need, and to raise awareness about the nature and scale of modern slavery. They facilitate the development of relationships among law enforcement agencies, the Church and NGOs. This networking is very important because it opens up channels that otherwise might not be available to us.

Some years ago when Henry Kissinger was American Secretary of State he famously complained that when he wished to talk to Europe he didn’t know who to call! Being involved in Santa Marta ticks that box.

A recent international survey by the Walk Free Foundation estimates that there are 35 million men women and children being held in modern slavery in 167 countries. They reckon that 300 of those are here in Ireland. Children account for a growing percentage of the modern slave trade. As you can imagine the present arrival of refugees into Europe provides an ideal opportunity for traffickers to ply their trade, especially the arrival of unaccompanied children.

What can the Church do to combat modern slavery?

Probably the most effective thing she can do is to use her global reach to get the word out, to make noise about modern slavery, to raise awareness of it. Communicating what we do is key to the work of Santa Marta, internally among ourselves and externally in the public arena.

William Wilberforce, the man chiefly responsible for the abolition of slavery in the 19th century used to say to the people of his time “you may choose to look the other way but you can never again say that you did not know.” We are in the business of making sure that people today will know about human trafficking, that they will know that trafficking is still sadly part of our world.

To put our work in perspective I would like to finish with a few lines from Psalm 137.

This psalm was written five or six hundred years before the birth of Christ and is called the Ballad of the Exiles because it describes the Jewish people’s time in captivity in Egypt. Those of us of a certain age will remember that a group called Boney M had a hit song some years ago based on this psalm, they called it *The Rivers of Babylon*.

The opening lines of the psalm are familiar and evocative:

By the rivers of Babylon
we sat and wept at the memory of Zion,
leaving our harps hanging on the poplars there.
For we had been asked to sing to our captors,
to entertain those who had carried us off;
‘Sing’ they said ‘some songs of Zion.’

Two and a half thousand years later people are still being asked to entertain those who have carried them off.

We in Santa Marta are privileged to be in a position to highlight this age old crime, a crime which prospers by being invisible.

May God bless us in our deliberations and in our decisions.

Amen.