



Theological Reflection on Human Trafficking

Definition of trafficking: “the recruitment and transportation of human beings through deception and coercion for the purposes of exploitation.” (Cameron and Newman 1)

Facts to consider as we reflect on this problem:

- The market for trafficked humans is approximately seven to 12 billion a year. (Cameron and Newman 133)
- One estimate is that 800,000 individuals are trafficked internationally each year, with 80 percent being women and girls who are trafficked into sexual slavery. (Parrot and Cummings 27)
- “Pornography, which has always been a highly profitable business, has taken hold online with over \$9 billion spent on live sex shows, pornographic cable, magazine, and computer-generated images.” (Parrot and Cummings 8)
- In China women are trafficked as brides and baby boys are trafficked for adoption. (Cameron and Newman 39)

Gathering Prayer: Mark 5:1-20 (The Gerasene Demoniac)

- Where is my heart led as I reflect on this story?
- When am I the man? When am I Jesus? When am I the crowd?
- What does Jesus ask of me in this story?

The Story of Inez

Before I came to the United States, I lived in a small town near Veracruz, Mexico. Sometime in 1997, a woman named Maria Elena set up a meeting with two men. At the meeting, the men confirmed that they had job openings for women like myself in American restaurants. They told me that they would take care of my immigration papers, and that I would be free to change jobs if I did not like working at restaurants.

In 1997, I was brought into the United States through Brownsville, Texas. Maria Elena traveled with me. We were both transported to Houston, Texas, where a man named Rogerio Cadena picked us up and took us to a trailer in Avon Park, Florida. In Avon Park, I met a girl named Sue who lived in the trailer. She asked me if I knew why I had come to Avon Park. I said I was going to work in a restaurant. She told me that I was actually going to be selling my body. She said it would not do anybody any good to complain. I was going to have to do the work anyway, since I had a smuggling debt to pay off. Maria Elena also warned me, “If you escape, Abel Cadena will go after your family because you owe him money.”

Some of the other girls in the house also warned me that if I tried to escape, the men would find me and beat me up or abuse me. Rogerio Cadena said I had no place to run anyway, because my family was very far away and each trailer was located in a very isolated area. Rogerio then bought some tight clothes for me to wear when I worked and I was subsequently transported to a trailer in Ft. Pierce, Florida. I learned that every 15 days, I would be transported to a different trailer to keep working.

There was no way out. I began “working” in the trailers. The work was demeaning and frightening. I never had a moments rest. On the weekends, I would often have to see around 32 or 34 men, for \$15 each. I would get myself drunk before the men arrived, so that I could stand

the work. At the end of the shift, I would fill a bathtub with hot water and lay in it, drinking and crying. I would smoke one cigarette after another, and then go to bed drunk because it was the only way I could fall asleep (Parrot and Cummings 12-13).

Reflection process:

- What feelings and images arise in you as you listen to Inez's story?
- What is broken and sorrowing in the image?
- What possibilities for newness and for healing are present or implied?
- How does Inez' story connect to your story?
- How does her story connect to our larger faith story? (O'Connell-Killen and De Beer 88-89)

From the U.S. Catholic Bishops:

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 is to reduce the factors that make persons vulnerable to traffickers, such as the lack of economic opportunity in migrant-sending countries, especially for women.

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. 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. (USCCB "On Human Trafficking")

From the Documents of Vatican II:

Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men (and women) are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer

from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator. (Flannery Gaudium et Spes 27)

- How does Inez's story intersect with Church teaching?
- What is the heart of that intersection?
- What might we as individuals feel called to do around the issue of human trafficking?
- How might we engage our friends, parishioners, co-workers, and students to take action?



Cameron, Sally and Edward Newman, eds. Trafficking in Human\$: Social, Cultural and Political Dimensions. New York: United Nations University, 2008.

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O'Connell-Killen, Patricia, and John de Beer. The Art of Theological Reflection. New York: Crossroad, 1996.

Parrot, Andrea and Nina Cummings. Sexual Enslavement of Girls and Women: Worldwide. Westport: Praeger, 2008.

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "On Human Trafficking." 2007.
www.usccb.org/mrs/trafficking/docs/OnHumanTrafficking.