



The Catholic Perspective on Slavery



JUSTICE PEACE OFFICE
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ANTI-SLAVERY TASKFORCE

Archbishop of Sydney, Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP

I take as my starting point that all decent Australians regard as abhorrent human trafficking, slavery and slavery-like practices such as forced labour or forced marriage, and domestic, sexual or other servitude....We would all want to know the extent to which such practices are occurring in our State and to see them eradicated, and we would all want to ensure that no activity within our State contributes to those practices elsewhere.

But it is not enough for groups such as churches to lecture or exhort the rest of the community in such matters. We must demonstrate our own willingness to act where we can. The Vatican has already committed itself to slavery-proofing all its procurement practices and supply lines. It is no small task to ensure that everything we use has been obtained ethically, that everything we obtain has itself been produced and supplied ethically and sustainably, and that those upon whom we rely or with whom we are affiliated are like-minded. It is no small task but we must try. As Pope Francis has pointed out, buying goods is not just a commercial matter; it has moral dimensions.

I will also ask my priests to preach and faithful to pray, do penance, educate themselves and their peers, and lobby and vote for justice in this domain. I also undertake to cooperate with our civic leaders to assist in every way we can to address this major social justice issue. Regarding contemporary slavery, Pope Francis has asked if our generation is simply going to look away. There he echoed William Wilberforce, who said to civic and church leaders, "You may do nothing about it, but at least now you cannot say you do not know." I have great confidence we will do far more than nothing about this great evil.¹

Pope Francis, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2015*

Today, as the result of a growth in our awareness, slavery, seen as a crime against humanity, has been formally abolished throughout the world. The right of each person not to be kept in a state of slavery or servitude has been recognized in international law as inviolable. ... *Businesses* have a duty to ensure dignified working conditions and adequate salaries for their employees, but they must also be vigilant that forms of subjugation or human trafficking do not find their way into the distribution chain. Together with the social responsibility of businesses, there is also the *social responsibility of consumers*. Every person ought to have the awareness that "purchasing is always a moral – and not simply an economic – act" [Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, 5].

[Slavery is an] "open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ"... Let us ask ourselves, as individuals and as communities, whether we feel challenged when, in our daily lives, we meet or deal with persons who could be victims of human trafficking, or when we are tempted to select items which may well have been produced by exploiting others. Some of us, out of indifference, or financial reasons, or because we are caught up in our daily concerns, close our eyes to this. Others, however, decide to do something about it, to join civic associations or to practice small, everyday gestures – which have so much merit! ...We ought to recognize that we are facing a global phenomenon which exceeds the competence of any one community or country. In order to eliminate it, we need a mobilization comparable in size to that of the phenomenon itself. For this reason I urgently appeal to all men and women of good will, and all those near or far, including the highest levels of civil institutions, who witness the scourge of contemporary slavery, not to become accomplices to this evil, not to turn away from the sufferings of our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings, who are deprived of their freedom and dignity.

¹ Address of the Archbishop of Sydney, Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, to the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of New South Wales on Human Trafficking - Parliament House, 28 March 2017.

Pope Benedict XVI

In this context it is necessary to mention trafficking in human beings - especially women - which flourishes where opportunities to improve their standard of living or even to survive are limited. It becomes easy for the trafficker to offer his own “services” to the victims, who often do not even vaguely suspect what awaits them. In some cases there are women and girls who are destined to be exploited almost like slaves in their work, and not infrequently in the sex industry, too...Though I cannot here closely examine the analysis of the consequences of this aspect of migration, I make my own the condemnation voiced by John Paul II against “the widespread hedonistic and commercial culture which encourages the systematic exploitation of sexuality” (*Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, 29 June 1995, n. 5). This outlines a whole programme of redemption and liberation from which Christians cannot withdraw.²

It is good for people to realize that purchasing is always a moral — and not simply economic — act. Hence *the consumer has a specific social responsibility*, which goes hand-in-hand with the social responsibility of the enterprise. Consumers should be continually educated regarding their daily role, which can be exercised with respect for moral principles without diminishing the intrinsic economic rationality of the act of purchasing.³

Pope John Paul II

The trade in human persons constitutes a shocking offence against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights. Already the Second Vatican Council had pointed to “slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, and disgraceful working conditions where people are treated as instruments of gain rather than free and responsible persons” as “infamies” which “poison human society, debase their perpetrators” and constitute “a supreme dishonour to the Creator” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 27). Such situations are an affront to fundamental values which are shared by all cultures and peoples, values rooted in the very nature of the human person. The alarming increase in the trade in human beings is one of the pressing political, social and economic problems associated with the process of globalization; it presents a serious threat to the security of individual nations and a question of international justice which cannot be deferred.⁴

Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 27

Furthermore, whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; 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 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 supreme dishonour to the Creator.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

The seventh commandment forbids acts or enterprises that for any reason - selfish or ideological, commercial, or totalitarian - lead to the *enslavement of human beings*, to their being bought, sold and exchanged like merchandise, in disregard for their personal dignity. It is a sin against the dignity of persons and their fundamental rights to reduce them by violence to their productive value or to a source of profit. St. Paul directed a Christian master to treat his Christian slave “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord.” (Philemon 16)⁵

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for the 92nd World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2006)*, 18 October 2005.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 66.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Letter of John Paul II to Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran on the Occasion of the International Conference "Twenty-First Century Slavery - The Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings"*, 15 May 2002.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (St. Pauls, 2nd ed, 1994) 2414.