

Seeing through Glitter to Confront Human Trafficking Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

First published in San Bonaventura Informa, the monthly magazine of the Pontifical Theological Faculty of St. Bonaventure ("Seraphicum") – seraphicum.org

From time to time, the Lord breaks into my life with uncomfortable clarity. Such was the case when I was assigned to minister at Franciscans International, the NGO for the Franciscan Family at the United Nations in New York. On a September morning in 2011, I received a call from some friends in New Jersey. They were coming up to the city and had an extra ticket for an evening show on Broadway. Since I had to attend a late afternoon meeting on human trafficking at the UN, I agreed to meet them at the theatre.

The UN meeting was powerful. The United States Special Ambassador for Human Trafficking walked us through a newly designed website that would help to measure our "slavery footprints." We all understood the phrase "carbon footprint" and the varied ways individuals and communities could measure that dynamic, but a "slavery footprint" was something new.

Essentially, Slavery Footprint uses a survey format to help the user ask and respond to the question, *How Many Slaves Work For You?*¹ The website describes how, "That smart phone... that t-shirt, computer, cup of coffee...that's stuff we buy, and that's stuff that comes from slaves."² Today, slaves are found in fields, mines, and in the processing of raw materials. In the supply chains for products we use and depend upon every day, there exist more slaves than at any other time in history.³

That year's conversation around issues of human trafficking began to take a turn. Groups of people renewed their efforts to not only raise awareness about the issue, but also to actively change the lives of people through adjusting purchasing habits. One such group is the Franciscan Federation, an organization of men and women religious in the United States who follow the Third Order Rule of St. Francis.⁴ At the Federation's annual conference in July 2012, the members overwhelmingly approved a resolution entitled, "Trafficking of Human Beings: Our Response as Franciscans."⁵ This resolution affords us all the opportunity to reflect on five specific responses to human trafficking:

1. What does it mean to uphold human dignity in the tradition of St. Francis and St. Clare?

For Franciscans, the answer to this question leads us to Greccio, a small Italian town, where in 1223 St. Francis led a live re-enactment of the Nativity. His purpose was to make the birth

¹ Slavery Footprint – Made in a Free World. <https://slaveryfootprint.org> (accessed June 9, 2019).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Franciscan Federation. <https://franfed.org> (accessed June 9, 2019).

⁵ Trafficking of Human Beings: Our Response as Franciscans, summer 2012.

<http://www.gbfranciscans.org/news/news/human-trafficking/> (accessed June 9, 2019).

of Christ real for the people, not something theoretical or far away in a distant time and place. Francis wanted to show the people that since Christ was born like us, we too are good. Through the grace of God, humanity is blessed with a holiness, a special dignity. For Francis, the Incarnation of Christ calls us all to rejoice and be glad that God is happy to become one of us.

The artist Giotto captured this Franciscan understanding of human dignity, rooted in the Incarnation, in his fresco of Francis' Christmas in Greccio. The people of 14th century Assisi would look at this fresco and see Christmas happening in their town, not in Bethlehem. The setting, emotions, and actions were familiar to them, and they rejoiced to know that through the love of the Incarnation, God was present and real in their everyday lives. This insight has come down through the centuries to the Christmas crèches found in our homes today, which hopefully remind us all of our inherent human dignity, created in the image and likeness of Christ. As God became vulnerable among us as a little babe, so we should also protect the goodness, the dignity, of the vulnerable among us.



2. How can we denounce all forms of human trafficking?

By our promoting human dignity in a Franciscan manner, we can work to contemporize the stories from our Christian past in the spirit of Francis and Giotto, thereby denouncing human trafficking through the good example of Christian people whose lives can inspire people today.

For example, in many countries the celebration of St. Nicholas Day on December 6th has become an opportunity for children to leave a shoe outside their bedroom door in hopes of finding gifts and candy the following morning. When we look deeper into the story of St. Nicholas (Santa Claus), we find a legend of an early Christian bishop who saved three poor young girls, in absence of a dowry, from becoming sex slaves. His generous gift of three bags of gold, left on the windowsill of the three girls, has been translated into a modern giving of chocolate and other candies that are more than likely produced through slave labor.⁶ Here we find an opportunity to transform this custom in the spirit of Greccio, with the giving of fair-trade chocolate to children, accompanied with an age appropriate lesson on past and modern forms of slavery through the legend of St. Nicholas, an advocate for victims of human trafficking.

3. How can we work towards elimination of human trafficking and its causes?

⁶ Washington Post: Cocoa's child Laborers, June 10, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/business/hershey-nestle-mars-chocolate-child-labor-west-africa/?utm_term=.b625646d4054 (accessed June 10, 2019).

The website for Slavery Footprint made the shortlist for the Guardian Award for Digital Innovation 2012 in the category of “Technology for Social Change.”⁷ Its retention rate is considered one of the highest of any website at 8.5 minutes.⁸ To work to eliminate human trafficking and its causes, we need to be aware of the facts of how we personally fit in to the picture of modern forms of slavery. *How many slaves do you own?* Go to slaveryfootprint.org and find out, then invite your friends and family to do the same. If we hope to ever eliminate human trafficking and its causes, everyone who “has” slaves today has to be involved.

4. How can we advocate for rescue, safety, and justice for trafficked persons?

We can do this by supporting groups like Franciscans International and Franciscan Action Network in their work to bring about justice. There are countless other groups who also work for the rescue and safety of vulnerable men, women, and children who are trafficked. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has a very comprehensive Anti-Trafficking Program.⁹

Individually we can work to form awareness groups in our own communities. Such groups can engage the local tourist industry, airlines, hotels, and sporting complexes to sign a code of conduct. Such initiatives concretely help their employees to recognize human trafficking and respond in a way to better help rescue trafficked persons and bring them to safety.

5. How might we demand prosecution of perpetrators?

Once the problem of human trafficking is brought to light within a community, the work can begin to pass legislation to not only protect the vulnerable, but also to prosecute the perpetrators. While this is often a slow and difficult process, it is an essential part of combating human trafficking. In the United States, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act 2000 continues to be reauthorized. It might serve as a model in other parts of the world.



In the Church, we remember the life of St. Josephine Bakhita, who was a slave for many years and whose story includes the names and backgrounds of her masters. Bakhita’s feast day on February 8th affords us the opportunity to name and talk about the many forms of slavery. In the same way the United Nations promotes July 30th as the World Day against Trafficking

⁷ The Guardian: Guardian Awards for Digital Innovation- winners 2012.

<https://www.theguardian.com/megas/winners-2012> (accessed June 9, 2019).

⁸ Slavery Footprint. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_Footprint (accessed June 9, 2019).

⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Anti-Trafficking Program. <http://www.usccb.org/about/anti-trafficking-program/> (accessed June 9, 2019).

Persons.¹⁰ In marking these days each year, we can look to better coordinate local, national, and global efforts to bring about justice and uphold human dignity.

Back to New York in September 2011...

After the UN meeting on trafficking, I somberly made my way across town to the Theatre District thinking about contemporary forms of slavery. One of the thoughts that strangely stuck in my head that night was the fact that glitter is produced through child labor.¹¹ While I can no longer remember the name of the Broadway show, or what it was about, I do remember that the performance used an inordinate amount of glitter. The thought of the show having seven performances a week left me in a haze. I made my way home that night only to turn on my computer (likely made with the labor of slaves) and click on slaveryfootprint.org. In roughly 8.5 minutes I stared unbelievably at the number of slaves in the world that keep me, personally, in my lifestyle. I turned off the computer and took that number with me to the chapel, where with uncomfortable clarity I asked God for forgiveness and began to live differently.

¹⁰ United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/events/humantrafficking/index.shtml> (accessed June 9, 2019).

¹¹ Vice: The Glitter in Your Makeup Could Come from Child Labor, February 24, 2017.

https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3k8d5n/glitter-makeup-india-mica-mines-child-labor (accessed June 9, 2019).