



SEEING THROUGH GLITTER TO CONFRONT HUMAN TRAFFICKING
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Sometimes, the Lord breaks into my life with uncomfortable clarity. Such was the case when I was ministering at Franciscans International, the NGO of the Franciscan Family at the United Nations (UN) in New York. On a September morning in 2011, I received a call from some friends. They were coming 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: *SlaveryFootprint.org*. Essentially, Slavery Footprint uses a survey format to help the user ask and respond to the question, “*How many slaves work for me?*”

The website describes how, “*That smart phone, computer, t-shirt, cup of coffee...that’s stuff we buy, and that’s stuff that comes from slaves.*” Today, there are more slaves in the world than in any time in history. They are the labor force for the supply chains of products we use and depend upon every day.

The Franciscan Federation, an organization of religious in the United States who follow the Third Order Rule of Saint Francis, developed a reflection entitled, *Trafficking of Human Beings: Our Response as Franciscans*. Three of the questions they raise, afford us the opportunity to consider how we can both heighten awareness about this issue and actively change the lives of people caught in modern forms of slavery.

1. What does it mean to uphold human dignity in the Franciscan Tradition?

For Franciscans, the answer to this question leads us to Greccio, a small Italian town where, in 1223, Saint Francis conceived the idea of having a live re-enactment of the Nativity. He wanted the people of Greccio to know that Jesus was close to them. So, for 800 years, the Franciscan message of Greccio has been: *Because we are created in God’s image and likeness, we share the most important characteristic of God: Love.* Humanity is therefore 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 and even happier that we are like God.

The artist Giotto captured this Franciscan understanding of human dignity, rooted in the love of the Incarnation, in his fresco of Francis’ Christmas in Greccio. The people of 14th century Assisi would have looked at this fresco and seen 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 real and present in their everyday lives. This insight has come down through the centuries to the Christmas crèches found in our homes, which hopefully remind us of our inherent dignity, being created in the image and likeness of Christ. As God became vulnerable among us as a little babe, so we should also love and protect the goodness and 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 inspire us. One example comes from Saint Nicholas, a 3rd century bishop from modern day Turkey. He saved three young poor girls who had no dowry for marriage, by leaving three bags of gold on their windowsill. Without the Christian charity of Nicholas, the girls would have been sold into slavery, which we call child-trafficking.

In many cultures, on December 6th the feast of Nicholas, children leave a shoe outside their bedroom door, in hopes that Saint Nick will visit and leave them candy or a small toy. Ironically, the inexpensive gifts are more than likely produced through slave labor. Here we find an opportunity to transform this custom in the spirit and creativity of Greccio, with the giving of fair-trade chocolate or locally handcrafted gifts to children. Of course, this should be accompanied with an age-appropriate lesson on past and modern forms of slavery as seen through the legend of Saint Nicholas, an advocate for victims of human trafficking.

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

Many parishes and religious communities raise awareness and build programs in the name of the Patron Saint of Human Trafficking Victims & Survivors, St. Josephine Bakhita. She is a ray of hope that victims of modern forms of slavery can find healing and wholeness with the help of others.

Locally, we can work to form awareness and action groups. In this way we might better engage the tourist industry, airlines, hotels, and sporting complexes to sign a code of conduct. Such initiatives ensure the teaching of their employees to recognize signs of human trafficking and respond in a way that helps rescue trafficked persons and bring them to safety.

Back to New York in September 2011...

After the UN meeting, I walked across town to the Theatre District thinking about contemporary forms of slavery, and the disturbing statistic I learned about the production of glitter through child labor. While I don't remember the name of the Broadway show I saw that night, I do remember that the performance used an inordinate amount of glitter. The further realization that the show had eight performances a week, left me in a haze.

Returning home that night, I turned on my computer (likely made with the labor of slaves) and clicked on *SlaveryFootprint.org*. In less than ten minutes I was staring at the screen, looking at the number of slaves, real people, in the world that keep me in my lifestyle. I then took that number with me to the chapel where with uncomfortable clarity I recognized my sins, resolved to change my lifestyle, and prayed for those who are trafficked.

