

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS: THE 21ST CENTURY VERSION OF HUMAN SLAVERY

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for your warm welcome and thank you, each of you, for coming here today to learn and talk about one of the pressing issues of our time and one of the greatest threats to the dignity of mankind--trafficking in persons. Trafficking in persons--the buying and selling of women, men, and children for sexual exploitation or forced labor--the 21st century version of human slavery. This is an evil that we thought had been banished from the world, but it is back --alive and well and in countries on every continent, including the United States.

Before we get started, I want to offer a sincere word of thanks to the organizers of today's conference, in particular Michelle Gillen of CBS News Miami, whose powerful TV reporting has given a voice to victims of human trafficking right here in Florida. I would also like to thank St. Thomas University Law School for hosting our gathering. I want to convey my appreciation to my friend and colleague from Washington, Ambassador John Miller, who leads the U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons and is fearlessly calling on other governments worldwide to pass laws such as the U.S. has done making such abuses a crime. Allow me to thank our other presenters who will share their inval-

* United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Prior to his nomination to this position in December 2004, Mr. Nicholson had served, since 2001, as United States Ambassador to the Holy See. In Rome, Ambassador Nicholson became a well-known advocate for the elevation of human dignity, giving special emphasis to issues such as human trafficking, religious freedom, starvation and bio-tech food, HIV/AIDS, and international terrorism. He was knighted by Pope John Paul II in October 2003 for his work representing the United States to the Vatican, and he presented this lecture during his tenure and in his role as Ambassador to the Holy See.

able personal and professional experience in battling this 21st century version of slavery: Sister Eugenia Bonetti, who has been named an anti-trafficking "hero" by the Department of State for her extraordinary work in combating trafficking, as well as Mr. Francis Bok, Mr. Terry Coonan, and everybody else on our program today. I would also like to thank WFOR-TV, CBS Miami, The Miami Herald, the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), and St. Thomas University for their support of this event.

As unimaginable as it may seem, today there are millions of women and children around the world enslaved without a voice in situations of forced labor and sexual exploitation from which they cannot free themselves. This horrific phenomenon is the third largest crime in the world, behind only the illicit sale of drugs and arms. In the face of this suffering, free nations, led by the United States, that respect human rights and defend human dignity have started to fight back. President Bush has made this one of his top priorities, reflected in his decision to create an office in the State Department to lead the international battle, which is so ably led by Ambassador Miller, here today. Both President Bush and Ambassador Miller understand that this is a humanitarian crisis. They understand that the victims of trafficking see little of life before they see the very worst of life--an underground of brutality and lonely fear.

That is why President Bush has placed human trafficking front and center on the international agenda during his last two addresses to the United Nations General Assembly. His commitment to combat trafficking is also why he traveled to Tampa in July of this year to address the National Training Conference on Human Trafficking. The President has insisted that those who victimize innocent people and profit from their suffering must be severely punished. He has also warned that those who patronize this industry--the customers--both debase themselves and deepen the misery of others. President Bush has made clear that the world must show "new energy in fighting back an old evil." "Nearly two centuries after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, and more than a century after slavery was officially ended in its last strongholds," the President told the world community, "the trade in human beings for any purpose must not be allowed to thrive in our time."

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Today I am proud to say that the United States is meeting this challenge head-on. Ambassador Miller will talk about how the United States is working to build support worldwide for efforts to address trafficking and to ensure that countries take real action to put an end to trafficking. To combat this evil inside the United States, we are taking action in our own country with the PROTECT Act, which makes it a crime for any person to enter the United States, or for any citizen to travel abroad, for the purpose of sex tourism involving children. Under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the United States is also sanctioning governments who do not take human trafficking seriously. In all of this, the United States is determined, as the President said, "to show new energy in fighting back an old evil."

I would like to take a few minutes to discuss how I have sought to respond to this challenge on the front lines from our Embassy to the Holy See. Soon after presenting my credentials to Pope John Paul II on September 13, 2001, I decided that as U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, I could play a part in meeting this challenge. You might legitimately ask why the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See would be working with the Vatican to address human trafficking? The answer is first and foremost because the United States and the Holy See share a common vision--the pursuit, promotion, and protection of human dignity.

The United States and the Holy See agree that trafficking in persons is one of the greatest affronts to human dignity that the world has ever seen. So, the Holy See--like the United States--has been a powerful and consistent voice calling to eradicate this modern-day slavery in the international community. Secondly, despite the fact that the Holy See is clearly not in a country of origin, transit, or destination for trafficking, it has a moral megaphone that can influence actions in many countries. To enhance the reverberations from this megaphone in the international arena, I therefore made trafficking in persons a priority focus on my mission in order to build understanding within the Vatican. To this end, my Embassy has prioritized the awareness of trafficking in persons and developed initiatives to prevent it.

Beginning in May 2002, I approached the Holy See and secured their agreement to co-host an international conference dedicated to addressing the issue of trafficking in persons. The conference was attended by over 400 people from 35 different countries. The Pope sent a letter to open our conference in which he stated that human trafficking "is an affront to fundamental values which are shared by all cultures and peoples, it presents a serious threat to the security of individual nations and a question of international justice which cannot be deferred." "It must," the Pope said, "be recognized as an intrinsic violation of human dignity and rights."

That conference concluded by calling participants to action, so we turned our focus on ways to actively combat the problem. Working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), we funded and developed a training program specifically designed for women religious workers to provide them with anti-trafficking strategies and skills. Sister Bonetti, from whom you will hear shortly, has done extraordinary work in giving life to this project. The nuns in the first training session in Italy came from eight countries of origin or destination, and subsequent training programs took place in Romania, Albania and Nigeria. This course strengthened the commitment and capacity of people willing and able to combat this odious scourge. We are now planning for a second phase of our IOM training program that will extend the reach of the training to more countries and religious orders.

Following this initiative, my Embassy approached the Holy See's *nuncios* (or Ambassadors) stationed all around the world to encourage them to work with counter part American Embassies and local governments to join the fight against trafficking. The responses have been encouraging--many have written expressing their eagerness to join us in this fight and some have taken up contact with our Embassies to explore collaboration. We also hope that they will also work with us to bring the commitment and resources of local Bishops Conferences to bear on this issue.

In June of this year, my Embassy sponsored yet another conference which brought together international experts in the field of human trafficking to discuss how churches, faith-based organizations, the media and others can contribute. Michele Gillen, the or-

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ganizer of today's conference, spoke passionately at that conference about how the media must join the fight, exposing the breadth and *modus operandi* of traffickers and effectively giving voice to the voiceless victims. Michele's leadership and compassion are evident in the conference here today. She left Rome in June with a passion, might I say rage? This conference is a result, her creation. I pray that many of you attending will leave today similarly informed and similarly committed.

The fact that the U.S. Government is reaching out to religious communities and faith-based groups in countries throughout the world reflects the Bush Administration's broader realization that such groups can be extremely effective agents in the fight against trafficking, just as they are against HIV/AIDS, hunger, and other threats to human dignity. President Bush, in particular, has recognized the value of strengthening the partnership between governments and faith-based community groups that provide compassionate care and produce impressive results.

I am here today from Rome, because I believe there can be no let-up in the fight against trafficking in persons. We must continue to build on the efforts of governments, religious groups, private organizations, and courageous individuals such as Sister Eugenia Bonetti, who has traveled with me from Rome to talk to you about what she and her fellow women religious leaders are doing in Italy and elsewhere to battle trafficking. She leads nuns in Italy--and in two continents--to the front lines armed with their faith, compassion, and deep conviction that human dignity will prevail. But we need more soldiers in this battle: journalists, civic leaders, lawyers, prosecutors, advocates, educators, law enforcement officials. We each have a role to play in confronting this evil--because the battle is far from won, and it is going to take all of us to do it.

I think we, all of us here today, have a moral obligation to remove the shackles, the invisible chains that today keep millions of men, women and children from enjoying their freedom, their humanity. If we do so, we will all live better, fuller and freer lives. To quote Secretary Colin L. Powell, "We fight trafficking in persons not just for the sake of the victims and potential victims of these crimes;

we do it also for ourselves because we can't fully embrace our own dignity as human beings unless we champion the dignity of others."

As a former businessman, I know about the elements of supply and demand. It is useless to offer a service or a product that no one will pay for. And that is why I was pleased to explore the demand element of trafficking during our June conference in Rome, and know we will hit that issue here today. Those responsible for trafficking in persons are not just the criminals who operate the rings. Also responsible are the customers--those people whose demands make trafficking a lucrative business--the men who so willingly pay to sexually exploit women and children. Our law enforcement officials, some of whom are with us today, who seek to stem both the demand and supply on the streets, are truly on the front lines and are also heroes, we thank you. Your work is invaluable to putting an end to trafficking in persons and we salute you as well.

It would be too depressing if we looked at the evil of trafficking without hope. We will end our conference today with a panel entitled, "Putting lives back together." Indeed, there are many good people committed to anti-trafficking work. Our gathering today is proof of that. There are also many encouraging stories about people who have been rescued from slavery and who enjoy their newfound freedom. The press has covered some of this and it is helpful. Mr. Francis Bok is here today, and this afternoon he will tell us about his own personal walk from hell to freedom. There are growing numbers of communities of religious women and men who are taking victims into their facilities to offer them shelter, protection and hospitality. True heroes, like Sister Eugenia, and others from non-governmental organizations like Victims Services Center in Miami, or the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (CAST) in Los Angeles, that offer victims a second chance at life. Filmmakers and media organizations are increasingly coming to grips with this issue and are taking risks to bring to international attention the plight of trafficking victims and the nefarious ways of the traffickers.

We each have a role to play in confronting this evil. By your presence here today, you have demonstrated your willingness to join up. I want to thank all of you for being here today, and I encourage you to go away from here with a strengthened commitment to stop

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trafficking and to assist those who have suffered from its dehumanizing effects. Once again, I salute Michele Gillen and St. Thomas University for bringing us together today. You are showing how the personal commitment of a few can make a huge difference in the lives of many.

I would like to close by quoting William Wilberforce, the great British anti-slavery crusader of the late 18th and early 19th century. Wilberforce suffered many setbacks and endured danger and ridicule, but he would not give up in his quest for justice. In words that still echo with force today, Wilberforce argued in the British parliament:

Sir, when we think of eternity, and of the future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that should make any man contradict the dictates of his conscience, the principles of justice, the laws of religion, and of God? Sir, the nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance, we can not evade it; it is now an object placed before us, we can not pass it; we may spurn it, we may kick it out of our way, but we can not turn aside so as to avoid seeing it; for it is brought now so directly before our eyes.¹

That is our hope for today, that you, like Wilberforce, will not turn aside from our responsibility to end slavery in our time. Thank you.

¹ Excerpt from a speech in the House of Commons on May 12, 1789, in support of his own resolution condemning the slave trade, <http://www.bartleby.com/268/4/8.html> (visited March 23, 2006).