

THE ROLE OF CHURCHES AND FBOs IN FIGHTING TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS: CATHOLIC INITIATIVES

European Parliament, Brussels, 14 February 2024

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On behalf of Santa Marta Group, thank you to COMECE for convening this meeting and to my fellow speaker and delegates for contributing to these discussions regarding this most appalling human rights violation and serious criminal offending.

At a time when multilateral bodies and human rights are often the subject of criticism, the EU continues to show leadership and respect for those within and outside of its jurisdiction. The world, with so many problems, can still rely for the most part on rational and balanced views from the EU.

However, that being so, EU member states do not implement all the measures required to defeat human trafficking as agreed in the EU Directive or the Council of Europe Convention on human trafficking.

My colleague Kevin Hyland will explain in his presentation, how the Santa Marta Group intends to re-energise and prioritise human trafficking prevention and responses.

Firstly, I will explain more about the background of the Santa Marta Group.

In 2010, London's Metropolitan Police established a new human trafficking unit. One of its important partners was religious women of the Adoratrices Sisters (Handmaids of the Blessed Sacrament). For over a century they worked across the world and their charism was to reach out and offer accompaniment to some of the most vulnerable women and girls.

In London the Adoratrices deployed in the millionaires row's of Kensington and Chelsea, where young women were sexually exploited in affluent brothels, hidden behind a facade of wealth and respectability.

An EU-funded partnership between the Adoratrices Sisters, the police, the local authority and Dutch partners established a collaborative project to identify, respond and support some of the most vulnerable women, while police could investigate the serious crimes committed. This lay the foundations of a partnership in that area of London that continues to this day.

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In the lead to the 2012 London Olympics, London's Police collaborated with the Mercy Sisters, faith groups, the National Health Service, Social Workers and NGOs to provide a centre in the period ahead of the games until the end of the Paralympics.

With a fear that women working in prostitution would be subjected to oppressive policing in order to keep London looking 'respectable', the Metropolitan Human Trafficking Unit funded the Mercy Sisters to manage a facility where all partner agencies worked together to divert women exploited in street prostitution into support services, as opposed to the revolving door of the criminal justice system.

During this period, the police initiated a non-arrest policy for women who may be committing loitering offences under Street Offences legislation. Trust in London of the police, in partnership with faith groups and NGOs was at an all-time high. Brazil adopted this model for their 2016 Olympics; however, it is still not national policy in the UK.

The Bishops Conference of England and Wales became aware of the partnerships and, in 2012, held a meeting at the Dicastery for Justice and Peace in Rome, then under the leadership of His Eminence Cardinal Peter Turkson. During this event Pope Benedict XVI publicly praised the work in London.

Following this meeting in Rome, the Bishops Conference of England and Wales agreed that St Josephine Bakhita would be celebrated as the Saint for human trafficking. This won the support of the US Bishops Conference, who also adopted her feast day as a reflection of the suffering of those who are trafficked.

In 2014, Bakhita House, a refuge for women and their children, and the Bakhita Centre, within St. Mary's University, London, was established. Bakhita House was established to protect those not entitled to public recourse, and the Bakhita Centre would research solutions of how the Church could play a leading role in ending human trafficking and modern slavery, examining the lived experiences from residents of Bakhita House.

This unprecedented relationship between state actor, faith groups and NGOs was a significant feature in the drafting of the UK's Modern Slavery Act 2015. The Act was intended to focus on victims' support, increased prosecutions, business transparency, reparation, risk and prevention orders, it legislated for a statutory defence, and introduced an anti-slavery commissioner.

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The Santa Marta Group was formed in 2014 when police chiefs, government representatives, Bishops, religious sisters and NGOs from over 20 nations gathered at the Pontifical Academy of the Vatican. The meeting was in the presence of Pope Francis who endorsed the group and instructed His Eminence Cardinal Vincent Nichols to keep the work going. On completion of the meeting senior delegates signed a commitment to use their authority and resources to end human trafficking and modern slavery.

The name the Santa Marta Group was chosen as delegates were invited to stay in Casa Santa Marta, the chosen home of Pope Francis.

The Modern Slavery Act was greatly anticipated to be a key instrument to improving responses in the UK, and initially did so. But failure by a row of Secretaries of State to implement areas such as section 50 for victim identification and support, has led to a less than satisfactory approach. This is now exacerbated by the Illegal Immigration Act and the much-debated draconian Rwanda Bill. Both these pieces of legislation remove the right to be supported as a victim and will significantly impede responses to modern slavery in the UK.

Yet, despite the domestic challenges in the UK, Santa Marta Group has continued to develop its network and influence the global prioritisation of human trafficking and modern slavery. It now has over 40 nations participating in its activities, from Australia in the South to Iceland in the North. It has provided advice to countries and developed a six-pillar plan to set clear objectives. This plan can be achieved through the influence of the EU especially in the setting of the G20 and G7, which Kevin will explain shortly.

I will focus on one area of the plan, pillar six, which I feel I should and indeed must emphasise.

Pope Francis has spoken of human trafficking and modern slavery as ‘a scourge on society’ and called for us to ‘break the veil of indifference.’

In this, the Pope calls for us to show moral leadership and strength in breaking the indifference that allows the crimes of human trafficking and modern slavery to flourish.

During the first Santa Marta Group, as Pope Francis spoke to police, government leaders, NGOs, Bishops and Religious Sisters, he stated this would require strategies that are built on the gospel, ones where people are protected and no longer commodified.

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Leadership is crucial, but especially from those with authority or in decision making position. Whether a politician, business leader, police officer, prosecutor, clergy, NGO or leaders in communities, how we behave and what we say, can and does set the agenda.

To reiterate, pillar six of the Santa Marta Group plan is moral leadership. This is the foundation on what all the others pillars must be built, so that our words are supported by leaders who truly believe and will drive for the end of human trafficking and modern slavery.

The EU itself has recently demonstrated its collective moral leadership with the new proposals for the Directive. Including forced marriage, illegal adoption, and surrogacy to the definitions of the Directive will ensure more vulnerable women and children have protection from those who trade in exploiting people as commodities in the most awful ways.

Moves to prohibit companies using forced labour from obtaining public procurement contracts is a welcomed move. However, as you will hear shortly, there is still a great deal to do to promote prevention, to strip the assets and benefits of human trafficking.

It is of great concern that the EU Directive, the Council of Europe Convention, the UN Palermo Protocol, or the many ILO Conventions dating back to the 1930's have not been properly implemented. For example, the 1999 ILO Convention on the worst form of child labour defines using children for drugs or coerced crime as forced labour. Yet, in many countries no legislation exists to view these children as victims. For example, in Ireland new legislation creating an offence of grooming a child for crime does nothing to identify them or assist them as a victim and furthermore reduces penalties, inconsistent with international commitments.

Santa Marta Group is a catalyst, working to bring partners together or to identify opportunities to eradicate human trafficking and modern slavery.

The Santa Marta Group Global Strategy Director, Kevin Hyland, will explain how the Santa Marta Group is working with partners for the G20 to deliver a model designed to break the norms of human trafficking in our society. This is the best chance we have of delivering the notion of Sustainable Development Goal SDG8.7 by 2030.

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We must make sure as we enter the next iteration of global goals in 2031, we are firmly on track towards the eradication of human trafficking and not merely amelioration of the problem.

Thank you for inviting us all to present to you here today, and we must remember, our words have to move to action so we can do our part to improve and save the lives of many millions for generations to come. Morality is never just about good intentions; it always has to be fulfilled in action.