

Conference EP 14/02/2024

"My name is Father Patrick Gillard and I'm the founder of Sawa, a Christian association fighting in Belgium against human trafficking, especially prostitution.

My first encounter with prostitution took place in 1996. I was looking at people who were waiting to receive weekly parcels from a food aid association. A man drew my attention, he was accusing a woman of coming in a Mercedes car to ask for help. I defended this woman and learned that she worked in a champagne bar on a National Road. She was very indebted and began to work in prostitution to repay her debts.

The second encounter, in 1997, was initiated by the police. They asked for the protection of a prostitute who was being threatened by her family. She was then accommodated in our emergency shelter.

Later on, when I entered the novitiate, I had the opportunity to work in the world of prostitution in Strasbourg and Kehl in Germany. There, I discovered different types of prostitution and various nationalities. Upon my return to Belgium, I volunteered with different organizations in the field of assisting people living from prostitution.

I do not mention these events to talk about myself, but to help you to understand that addressing the issue of prostitution is not only theoretical, but the result of personal encounters.

In 2008, considering certain gaps in individual support, particularly in terms of human and spiritual support, I decided to propose the establishment of a new association that would take this dimension into account. It was under these circumstances that the nonprofit organization Sawa was founded in 2009. However, I did not anticipate the opposition I would face from the nuns who were involved in the association. They did not want the association to be Christian, celebrate Mass, invite prostitute women to church, or participate in pilgrimages, as we do today. Therefore, in 2013, we decided to amend the statutes to make the association definitively Catholic. It was consecrated to the Virgin Mary in 2014. Since then, a significant number of individuals have left prostitution with the assistance of the association. I can only witness to the effectiveness of God's grace through the intercession of the Virgin Mary. In the past, we had one or two exits from prostitution per year. Since Sawa's consecration to the Virgin Mary, 10 individuals have been leaving prostitution each year. In 2022 and 2023, over 50 people have left prostitution with Sawa's help.

The Sawa association is present in the French speaking area of Belgium (Wallonia), in Brussels, and since 2019 in the Dutch speaking area too (Flanders), in Saint-Trond. We interact with nearly 1000 different so called "sex workers" each year and provide effective support to about a hundred individuals per year. We have emergency and transitional accommodation facilities in Wallonia, Brussels, and Flanders. Street outreach and bar outreach work is carried out by Christian volunteers who form teams of two, working day and night to break the isolation of prostitute people. This allows us to gradually build a trusting relationship. We understand that trust is established, for example, when a woman shares her real name with us or shows us a photo of her son back in her home country. It is crucial to remember their names and demonstrate that we have listened to conversations that may have started even a month before. For instance, we may recall a family problem she had explained or her vacation with her family. People are not just numbers or cases to us; they are individuals whom we genuinely care for. How do we care for them? We strive to behave as Jesus would have done. But how can we know what Jesus would have done?

Choosing Jesus Christ as our model and including Him in our statutes prevents us from receiving subsidies from a neutral state. Paradoxically, the local church itself currently shows no interest in reaching out to those involved in prostitution and human trafficking. Therefore, the association is left to its own devices to bring Christ to those who have not yet encountered Him. This is a source of joy, and there is no bitterness in this statement. It is also a heavy responsibility. Preach at the borders, as Pope Francis says. However, the results speak for themselves: many women are now living a life outside of prostitution. Some have discovered Christ and regularly participate in Masses or pilgrimages. Others have returned to their countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania, the Dominican Republic, Italy, Spain, and other places. We sometimes maintain very good contacts, even a long time after they have left.

So we ensure a church presence in the streets, shop windows, and champagne bars of Belgium. The church has always been concerned about the poverty and destitution. Sawa follows this line. Some

prostitute call to ask a prayer or a medal. It's very common to pray in the shop windows. Some of them maintain their Window closed until we come to praise the Lord together. Others ask a confession, or to go to the Holy Mass, or to visit the sanctuary of Banneux,...

Now I would like to emphasize the fact that Christian action does not exempt anybody from being competent and participating in the debates that animate society. As for us, Sawa participates in a lot of meetings, prostitution platforms organized in Brussels, and recently, debates in the Brussels Parliament. We would now like to address four issues that we consider important.

The first is the issue of human dignity¹. Indeed, the Treaty of Lisbon, in its introduction, states the following: "the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy,..." The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in its preamble paragraph two, states the following: "conscious of its spiritual and moral heritage, the Union is founded on the indivisible and universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality, and solidarity." It is clear that the fundamental texts of the Union commit to protecting human dignity. Dignity is like a solid foundation for the Union's commitments. However, at the same time, it remains an abstract concept that is mostly defined by negation: what goes against human dignity is stated. For example, organ trafficking goes against human dignity, child prostitution goes against human dignity, human trafficking goes against human dignity. In a certain sense, positive definition of what human dignity is, is never provided. This difficulty in positively defining what it is prevents the translation of this concept into positive law in a clear and acceptable manner for all countries in the Union. This is why Germany or the Netherlands may defend the practice of prostitution in the name of the dignity of each person to act freely. This is also how Sweden or other countries will prohibit prostitution, considering it to be morally unworthy and not a dignified means of survival. The argument of human dignity is therefore interpreted in very diverse ways within the prostitution sector. The philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed a minimal definition that I adopt: "dignity is the prohibition of instrumentalization." Perhaps it is from this minimal definition that we should start in order to attempt to unify the positions of European states around a more concrete concept of human dignity.

The second issue is of a semantic nature: indeed, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the tendency to dissociate human trafficking from prostitution has become commonplace. Since then, this distinction aims to differentiate unacceptable forced prostitution (referred to as human trafficking) from voluntary prostitution, which is considered as acceptable. There is then only a small step towards the common acceptance of prostitution as just another profession. However, Sawa does not share this opinion.

The third issue: new semantic distinctions emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s. Indeed, various adjectives have been added to the word "prostitution": casual prostitution, barter prostitution, student prostitution, sexual assistance for disabled individuals, etc. This semantic distinction has the consequence of the general public perceiving prostitution as a temporary phase in life: the occasional prostitute will soon get out of it, the student prostitute will soon finish its studies, but this is not the case. Do disabled individuals improve their well-being by purchasing access to someone else's body? Prostitution is prostitution, with all its lifelong consequences.

The fourth issue: legislating calmly and sincerely. The topic of prostitution and human trafficking is a subject that sometimes stirs up strong emotions. As a result, lawmakers are sometimes forced to make decisions hastily, driven by the media pressures of the moment. Sawa's opinion aligns with that of Mr. Fernand Meert; he and his wife were pioneers in Belgium in fighting human trafficking in 1980, doing so in a Christian manner. He told me the following when he was still alive: 'The sense of responsibility and the common good should guide lawmakers, who should not simply align themselves with prevailing customs, especially when there is no consensus on the matter. It is not about imposing a particular morality, but rather as legislators, judging the most humanizing direction for society, striving to do better (and not just what is considered good enough).'

"I would like to conclude by attempting to offer a Christian perspective on prostitution, in a few points:

1 The whole paragraph is largely inspired by the following booklet : « *La dignité humaine – Perspectives dominicaines pour l'Europe - 8* », published by Espaces Network, 2012. See especially Kohl Bernard OP, « *La dignité humaine dans le contexte européen* », pp 4-13.

First point: The question of the body. Some individuals engaged in prostitution claim to use their bodies without being affected. But is it always true? The body is the first thing I know about a person. What the person thinks or feels, I will gradually get to know through the expressions of that body and regular interaction with that person. Gradually, the body can become expressive. But in any case, the body is oneself. Would I still be the same person if my soul were in my neighbor's body or vice versa? What makes us who we are today is also our bodies.

Second point: Our religion is the only monotheistic religion where God takes on a human body, not to discard it, but to carry it and bring it to heaven. Is it not written, 'the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit,' meaning the most sacred place, the place where God wants to dwell? Furthermore, did not Jesus say, 'Take, this is my body'? The bodily dimension is eminently present at the heart of Christianity, so that when we usually speak of the salvation of souls, we intuitively understand that the body has its rightful place. In first Corinthians 15, Christians asked Saint Paul about the destiny of this body, and Saint Paul answered with a sentence that may not make much sense at first; he speaks of a 'glorious body.' What does it mean "a glorious body"? A glorious body means that he perceives that glory is not promised only to a part of our being but to our whole being, including our bodies. To mistreat a body is to mistreat a soul. The question of Salvation is therefore present at the heart of prostitution, which cannot reduce the body to a mere depersonalized tool of work."

Finally, what should Christians do? Jesus said, "Prostitutes will enter the kingdom of heaven before you." He also said to the adulterous woman, "Go and sin no more." Finally, the sinful woman who touched Jesus at Simon the Pharisee's house, she may have been trampled upon by many men, but she knows that by weeping at Jesus' feet, she will no longer be trampled upon by anyone.

For the clients of prostitution, let us read the Gospel of Luke 15: a young man "squandered his wealth in wild living." It is not about money earned but received unjustly. The father who gave, still offers his forgiveness. For the pimps, who are criminals, Jesus opens his arms to those who repent, saying, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Sawa wants to be the messenger of the Salvation offered to all by Christ.

It's the reason why Sawa speaks to the pimps in prisons, the clients and all the people living from prostitution.

Everyone may enter in a different way than prostitution.

Fr Patrick Gillard op

Sawa asbl - president