

Father Jarek's 2015 "Human Trafficking" Catholic Faith Appeal Message



Historians may want us to believe that human bondage in this country ended with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862. Yet, the truth is that human trafficking, a modern form of slavery, is still

alive and flourishing. Thousands of people are victimized right here in the United States every year. And the sun does not shine brightly for everyone in Florida, as we have been identified as a hub for human trafficking activities, having one of the highest incidences of this crime in the country.

Trafficking involves the commercial exchange and exploitation of humans and affects all types of individuals, men and women, children and adults, citizens and foreigners. It is an exploding problem worldwide, recently rising to the second most common criminal activity, just behind the illegal drug trade. Traffickers often lure their victims with false promises of jobs, education, economic security and even love. Once trapped, they keep these victims from seeking help by confiscating their identity documents, using threats of violence against them or their families, or subjecting these victims to physical, psychological and sexual abuses.

Let me relate a typical story of a victim. Elena,* a minor from Guatemala, was kidnapped from her village by human traffickers and then smuggled into southwest Florida. Here, she was assaulted, drugged and dehumanized. Her captors kept her bound with several other women in filthy quarters and she often had to eat food thrown on the floor. After becoming pregnant, she was severely beaten and left on the street. Unlike others victims, however, she was one of the fortunate ones who made it to a hospital and was referred to the Catholic Charities Victim Assistance program. During the intake process, the case manager contacted the police and an investigation of the traffickers resulted in their arrest on Federal charges.

After getting housing, food, medical care and counseling, Catholic Charities enrolled Elena into their Refugee Employability Program. Because she had been smuggled into the country, she lacked the appropriate documentation, but after persistent efforts by Catholic Charities, she was finally granted her work authorization documents from the US government. Elena currently lives independently and dreams of getting her GED once her English language skills improve. Elena is our parishioner and she comes to this church. She prays in these very pews asking God to protect other victims and bless those who helped her begin a new life. Elena believes that Jesus, who saved her, will change one day the hearts of her oppressors.

Because of stories like this, **Pope Francis recently called on us to become aware of this repugnant offense**

which robs its victims of their fundamental rights and self-worth. He wants us to see that we are facing a global crisis which exceeds the competence of any one community or country to handle. In order to eradicate it, he believes we need a mobilization of prayer and awareness on a global scale equal in size to that of this abhorrent crime.

As our Pope encouraged us, only then can we effectively move from awareness and prayer to solidarity and concerted action, accepting nothing short of the eradication of this intrinsic violation of human dignity and human rights. **As a parish we can begin this battle right here and right now by offering our financial support to Catholic Charities through the Catholic Faith Appeal.** Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Venice runs one of the largest human trafficking assistance programs in Florida. Its team coordinates and provides services to survivors for not only their basic human needs, but educational placement, counseling, immigration assistance and legal representation. Your gift to the CFA on behalf of St. Leo will subsidize intensive case management services offered to the victims of human trafficking.

Helping human slavery victims is only a part of what Catholic Charities does. This arm of the Diocese of Venice is a leading provider of social services in the private sector. Just last year, for instance, Catholic Charities served more than 41,000 people in need in our Diocese. Ninety-two percent (92%) of every dollar contributed to this agency goes directly to its programs. It is also nationally accredited, assuring that it meets best practice standards.

Our parish has a reputation for exceptional generosity and compassion to those in need, and I offer my sincere thanks for what you have made possible in the past. I am confident today that you will once again open your hearts. Although every gift will be different according to your individual means, I hope that we can get full participation from every family. Please consider making a pledge to the Catholic Faith Appeal that can be paid throughout the year. You will not only help St. Leo to prudently meet our CFA obligation, but, most importantly, you will make a difference in the lives of so many people who suffer so unjustly from the grave sins against God's love.

*Certain identifiable facts have been modified to protect the victim's identity.

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