

Pope Francis: World Day of Peace Message

Since 1967, on January 1, popes have issued reflections on the “signs of the times” and peace in the modern world. The World Day of Peace, 2015, was marked with Pope Francis’ **papal message on modern-day slavery**, which encompasses a range of situations that impact on human dignity and freedom; humans in such situations include trafficked persons, global laborers in slave-like conditions, migrants, forced soldiers and others “deprived of freedom and forced to live in conditions akin to slavery.” Francis’ 2015 message is entitled “No Longer Slaves, but Brothers and Sisters,” referring to St. Paul’s Letter to Philemon and to the story of Cain and Abel, with the implication that we are, indeed, our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.



The Many Faces of Slavery

In the first section of his message, the Pope reminds us that while slavery has been “formally abolished throughout the world” there are still millions of people, including children, who are deprived of their freedom and forced to live in conditions that are a form of modern-day slavery. These include workers in domestic, agricultural, manufacturing, and mining industries where regulations to protect the dignity and safety of workers are lacking or ignored.

Pope Francis focuses on **migrants and immigrants** and looks at their living conditions, lack of freedom and the physical and sexual abuse many endure. “I think of those among them [migrants] who, upon arriving at their destination after a grueling journey marked by fear and insecurity, are detained in, at times, inhumane conditions. I think of those among them who, for different social, political and economic reasons, are forced to live clandestinely. My thoughts also turn to those who, in order to remain within the law, agree to disgraceful living and working conditions, especially in those cases where the laws of a nation create or permit a structural dependency of migrant workers on their employers.”

The Pope also reflects on the **human trafficking** of women, men, and children for sexual slavery: women who often at a very young age, forced into marriages are mentioned. The message goes onto recognize people trafficked for the sale of their organs, those recruited by force for soldiering, begging, production and sale of narcotics, or illegal cross-border adoption. The final group mentioned is **hostages**. These human beings and their situations are the current “signs of the times” that demand our attention.



The Root Causes of Modern Forms of Slavery

Looking at the causes of these problems, Francis reminds us that the rejection of the Other's humanity is a primary and recurring issue. And Francis also reminds us of the **economic side** of this situation: it is linked to "poverty, underdevelopment and exclusion. . .and a lack of access to education and to employment opportunities." The "corruption of people willing to do anything for financial gain" exploits those in poverty. Then the Pope reminds us of a central tenet of Catholic Social Teaching: "This occurs when money, not the human person, is at the center of an economic system....when the person is replaced by money, a subversion of values occur" which result in the situations which degrade human beings. Violence in the form of armed conflicts, criminal activities, and terrorism also draws humans into situations which can enmesh and enslave them, denying them their inherent human dignity.

Modern Discipleship

Pope Francis reflects on the "general indifference" to the plight of those enslaved and to the causes of this human tragedy; he also recognizes this indifference as a sign of the times. While he notes the great contribution of women's religious congregations and others in responding to forms of slavery and trafficking, he notes that working with the victims is not sufficient to end these social and structural sins against humanity. Francis declares **that nation states, intergovernmental organizations, business, and organizations of civil society (church organizations and community groups, for example) must all play a role** in transforming the systems and structures that allow—and promote—forms of modern slavery.

Nation states, the Pope declares, must ensure through their policies and laws that the dignity of the human person is respected "in the areas of migration, employment, adoption, the movement of businesses offshore and the sale of items produced by slave labor." He emphasizes that there is "a need for just laws which are centered on the human person, which uphold fundamental rights and restore those rights when they have been violated. Such laws should also provide for the rehabilitation of victims, ensure their personal safety, and include effective means of enforcement which leave no room for corruption or impunity. The role of women in society must also be recognized, not least through initiatives in the sectors of culture and social communications."

Promoting international cooperation and collaboration on many levels, Francis asks intergovernmental organizations to coordinate efforts to deal with trafficking, both among themselves and with "national and international institutions, civil society and the world of finance." Organizations in civil society are tasked with awakening consciences and "promoting whatever steps are necessary for combating and uprooting the culture of enslavement." He encourages continued meetings and conferences on this issue.

The Pope also challenges businesses and reminds them they “have a duty to ensure dignified working conditions and adequate salaries for employees,” and to “be vigilant so forms of subjugation or human trafficking” are not part of production or distribution chains. Consumers are reminded that they have a social responsibility: “purchasing is always a moral act, not simply an economic one.”

Globalizing Solidarity

In the final section of this message, Pope Francis calls all to conversion, “which enables us to change the way we see our neighbors, to recognize in every person a brother or sister in our human family, and to acknowledge his or her intrinsic dignity in truth and freedom.” He mentions St. Josephine Bakhita, who endured slavery, as a witness of hope for all who respond to modern forms of slavery,



which are “an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ.”

Pope Francis invites everyone to respond in some way “in accordance with his or her specific role and responsibilities to those kept in a state of enslavement. Let us ask ourselves, as individuals and as communities, whether we feel challenged when, in our daily lives, we meet or deal with persons who could be victims of human trafficking, or when we are tempted to

select items which may well have been produced by exploiting others. Some of us, out of indifference, or financial reasons, or because we are caught up in our daily concerns, close our eyes to this injustice. Others, however, **decide to do something** about it, to join civic associations or to practice small, everyday gestures – which have so much merit! – such as offering a kind word, a greeting or a smile. These cost us nothing but they can offer hope, open doors, and change the life of another person who lives clandestinely; they can also change our own lives with respect to this reality.”

Since modern forms of slavery are “a global phenomenon which exceeds the competence of any one community or country, we need a mobilization comparable in size to that of the phenomenon itself.” Pope Francis appeals “to all men and women of good will, and all those near or far, including the highest levels of civil institutions, who witness the scourge of contemporary slavery, **not to become accomplices to this evil, not to turn away from the sufferings of our brothers and sisters**, our fellow human beings, who are deprived of their freedom and dignity. Instead, may we have the courage to touch the suffering flesh of Christ revealed in the faces of those countless persons whom he calls the least of these in Matthew, 25:40.45.”



REFLECTION

In his conclusion, Francis comes back to the theme of rejecting indifference: “We know that God will ask each of us: What did you do for your brother? The globalization of indifference, which today burdens the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters, requires all of us to forge a new worldwide solidarity and fraternity capable of giving them new hope and helping them to advance with courage amid the problems of our time and the new horizons which they disclose and which God places in our hands.”

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think Pope Francis has chosen modern day slavery as the focus of his message for the World Day of Peace?
2. What basic beliefs of the Church about the human person are the basis for a strong response to any kind of slavery?
3. The Pope singles out migrants and immigrants: what does he say about their lives that reveals his compassion toward this group? How does he see them enslaved?
4. What does Pope Francis believe to be the root causes for modern day slavery?
5. What challenges does Francis present to us as individuals and consumers, as member of groups and organizations, as citizens of nation states and as members of the global community?



Prayer

Lord, you gift us with freedom through your love and your mercy.
Grounded in this freedom, you guide us
To recognize the enslavement of so many in our world.

Grant us a conversion to compassion
For our sisters and brothers who endure the slavery of trafficking,
Who suffer in so many migrant and immigrant experiences,
And who are hostages, taken in violence.

May our growing compassion move us to reject indifference,
To give voice to the voiceless,
And to take on the long and difficult work of changing
The systems and structures that allow various forms of slavery.

We are thankful for your call to justice, so we may live more fully
As we live in solidarity with others struggling to live in dignity and fullness. Amen.

