

Address to the Lithuanian Seimas on combatting human trafficking and modern slavery.

26 June 2017: Vilnius

Honourable members of the Siemas, your Excellencies, Sisters, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to address you today. Thank you for the invitation and for your commitment in the fight against the evil of slavery.

I come here to represent the Santa Marta Group, an international network that brings together the Church and leaders of law enforcement in a campaign of joint action to combat human trafficking and modern slavery. I speak, therefore, in the name of the Catholic community and our partners to make clear our determination to do everything in our power to oppose those who traffic in human misery and to address the vulnerability that opens people to exploitation.

In making this commitment I want to focus on the foundations from which we act: a radical commitment to the dignity of every human person, a dignity which has to be protected and promoted in every circumstance and time; a dignity which does not depend on the abilities or status of a person but which is rooted entirely in the inner depth of the person's existence, in the gift of human life which always comes from the Divine Creator who has shown himself to be our loving Father.

Human trafficking and slavery radically strips a person of this fundamental dignity, reducing them to the status of a commodity. It is an evil crying out to heaven. That there are over 20 million people callously held in modern slavery in our world today is a mark of deep shame on the face of our human family that no words alone can remove. The challenge that the eyes of faith see before us today is to work to our utmost to rescue, protect, assist and serve the poorest of the Father's children who have been sold into slavery even as Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers 'in the beginning' (Gen 37.32).

More personally I stand before you because of three key moments in my life.

The first was five years ago when I listened, for the first time, to the witness of a young woman who had been betrayed into the slavery of enforced prostitution. Her story was heart-wrenching. But what added a particular depth to my shock was the fact that she was a young English woman, named Sophie, trafficked from England into slavery in Italy.

The second moment was occurring about the same time. I began to witness a remarkable partnership being built in London between religious women and London's police force, Scotland Yard. This partnership transformed the effectiveness of operations to rescue victims, care for them and pursue to prosecution the perpetrators of this horrendous crime. I realised then the effectiveness of such partnerships, especially between unlikely partners. Religious women, working on the street, did not instinctively trust the law enforcement agencies who they understood, with good reason, were in all likelihood going to prosecute the very women the Sisters were trying

to protect. Yet over time the partnership was established. It was the fruit of the hard work of building trust, a work made up of many demanding practical steps, requiring change in mindsets and procedures. For one thing, it was essential that the police gave to the Sisters the assurance that the victims of trafficking would not be prosecuted, but rather they would be helped.

The third moment came three years ago when, at the end of our first Santa Marta Conference in Rome, Pope Francis turned to me and asked me to keep this work going. That is an order that is difficult to refuse!

The Santa Marta Group brings together the leaders of law enforcement agencies from an increasing number of countries - 36 at the last count - and the resources of the Catholic Church, in order to fashion shared alliances of effective action in the fight against human slavery. There have, to date, been four major international gatherings: twice in Rome with Pope Francis, London with the then Home Secretary and now Prime Minister Theresa May and in Madrid with HM Queen Sophia. Results are emerging, with a growing number of countries putting together effective partnerships in this work, such as:

- In Edu State, Nigeria, - where a detailed four year programme is being put into effect;
- In Mozambique where significant work is being done to counter the trafficking of human organs;
- In Argentina where the federal police and Church work together closely
- Similarly, In Ireland a North Atlantic Maritime initiative is emerging to tackle the problems of unjust working conditions in the fishing industry.

In my own country we have focused on building local partnerships between dioceses and police forces, the Border Force, Customs and Excise and the National Crime Agency to:

1. Raise awareness and intelligence gathering

2. Care pastorally for victims, (for example in my diocese we have created a refuge called Bakhita House) and help them reintegrate into society through the help of volunteers such as doctors and lawyers

3. Develop best practice and knowledge by opening a Centre for the Study of Modern Slavery at St Mary's University in London

4. Work with our national Safeguarding agency to use its network of paid and volunteer staff to identify potential victims. We also liaise with our agency for seafarers, The Apostleship for the Sea/Stella Maris, to give specific support to the crews of ships entering British ports.

5. Another essential network is our wide range of chaplains to national and ethnic communities. This work is taking shape with many groups, including Lithuanians, in dioceses such as Salford, East Anglia, Southwark and Westminster.

Another area of growth that has come out of the Santa Marta Group's network is the remarkable work of Commissioner Kevin Hyland in helping establish trafficking as one of the United Nations' new Sustainable Development Goals and thus the official commitment of every UN member state to work for the eradication of human trafficking and modern slavery.

Such international partnerships require not only a shared motivation but also some clear key aims. For Santa Marta they are: the well-being of every victim of human trafficking, for it is the victim who must always be central to our efforts; the enhancement of the work of law enforcement; the breaking up of criminal networks, the arrest and prosecution of the perpetrators; and thirdly the strengthening of the legal frameworks within which this work is carried out.

All this work depends on one essential quality – trust. That trust takes time to build up and effort to sustain but once established it allows both law enforcement and the Church to be work together effectively and within their areas of expertise. For the Church that is caring for vulnerable people and for police officers it is their honorable vocation to deter crime and prosecute lawbreakers. Together this in some ways unlikely partnership is making a real contribution to the common good.

For me, and I am sure for many of you, Pope Francis remains a central and inspiring figure. He is direct and blunt in what he expects of us - something far more than words: effective action on the ground which frees prisoners, comforts the victims, serves their well-being and generates new hope in a world in which there is far too much suffering, poverty and grief.

When he came to the UN in September 2015 Pope Francis talked about the importance of having 'the will to put an end as quickly as possible to the phenomena of social and economic exclusion' mentioning first 'human trafficking and slave labour.' He called on us to create institutions which 'are truly effective in the struggle against these scourges.' He asked us to remember always that we are responding to 'real men and women', sons and daughters of our one Eternal Father' and who are therefore truly our brothers and sisters. In their plight we are complicit. In their freedom we will rejoice with a joy no other satisfaction can give.

Thank you for your attention

Cardinal Vincent Nichols - Archbishop of Westminster and President of the Santa Marta Group