



Setting Captives Free: A Pastoral Letter on Human Trafficking

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THE DIOCESE OF
HARRISBURG

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I. Introduction

In every human heart God has placed a longing to know the true freedom that comes from Him alone. Indeed, as Saint Paul reminds us, “For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). Each year’s celebration of the seasons of Advent and Christmas revives in us this yearning for freedom and for the Savior of the world who has come to ransom us from our captivity. It was Paul’s concern that, having tasted freedom, we might once again become enslaved by the yoke of sin. We know that enslavement of sin not only affects our own spiritual lives, it also spills over into our society and the world in which we live.

For this reason, I bring to your concern the slavery of human trafficking in our midst today. This problem afflicts countless



individuals throughout the world and is a great concern for us in central Pennsylvania. I was shocked and appalled to find that within our own Diocesan territory – the fifteen counties of south central Pennsylvania – there are networks of human trafficking, particularly along the main corridors of travel, enslaving many individuals through illicit indentured servitude.

Now is the time for Catholics to raise our voices anew in solidarity with the voiceless victims and survivors who suffer the indignity of human enslavement. In our neighborhoods and along our ways of commerce, they often go unheard and unnoticed. As people who champion a culture of life, we are called to respond with compassion and advocate on their behalf, recognizing that the evil of human trafficking does not occur in a vacuum. The issues of immigration, refugee resettlement, unjust labor practices, drug addiction, and pornography all foster an anti-culture that enables human trafficking to go unchecked.

Embarking upon this Jubilee year of grace, my hope is that the Catholics within our Diocese will join our brothers and sisters of good will throughout the region to increase awareness of the problem of human trafficking, recognize the ways in which we might be unknowingly complicit in its causes, cooperate with law enforcement to promote the dignity of human life, and help the victims and survivors who are frequently forgotten. With God's grace, we can take on the spiritual vision of "setting captives free" as we reach out to help those who are entangled in the snare of human trafficking.



II. Hope for the Jubilee Year

Since 1300 when Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed the first Holy Year or Jubilee, it has become the custom of the Church to celebrate a special time of the Lord's favor every twenty-five years and on special occasions. The sacred text of Leviticus lays out the spirit of this time of jubilee:

You shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his family. This fiftieth year is to be a jubilee year for you: you will not sow, you will not harvest the un-gathered corn, you will not gather the untrimmed vine. The jubilee is to be a holy thing to you, you will eat what comes from the fields. (Leviticus 25: 10-14)



And so, it comes to us as we enter the year 2025, to hear the invitation of Pope Francis to embrace this coming year as a holy year, a time of jubilee. In establishing this special time, Pope Francis writes, “Now the time has come for a new Jubilee, when once more the Holy Door will be flung open to invite everyone to an intense experience of the love of God” (*Spes Non Confundit*, 6). He explains in the Bull announcing the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025 that we are at a moment in history in which “heedless of the horrors of the past, humanity is confronting yet another ordeal, as many peoples are prey to brutality and violence” (*ibid.*, 8). Therefore, all Christians are called to become *pilgrims of hope*. The theological virtue of hope originates in the abundance of God’s grace and mercy poured out upon us. Reading the signs of the times, we must strive to reclaim “the yearning of human hearts in need of God’s saving presence ... to become signs of hope” (*ibid.*, 7) to the peoples of the world.

There are many ways in which we are called to embody hope for our world, especially throughout this holy time. Prayer and conversion rank among the most important. We recognize that each of us contributes to the good of the Church and to the world in a profound way when we actively pursue the path of personal holiness. I am reminded of a famous quote from Saint Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) who once preached, “Bad times, hard times – this is what people keep saying; but let us live well, and times shall be good. We are the times: such as we are, such are the times” (Sermon 30.8). To live well and help to



shape our times and culture, we must intentionally choose the path of holiness, turning away from sin and cooperating with the grace of the Lord. To do so buoys up the whole of humanity and makes us instruments of God's love and mercy in our world. Through our embracing of this challenge we become, in Pope Francis' words, signs of hope as pilgrims of hope.

Sometimes we can think that holiness means cutting ourselves off from the world and ignoring the practical needs of those around us. The prophet Isaiah explains that the pursuit of holiness should not be self-referential yet broader in scope. Ultimately, his words remind us that to be "holy" means to be like God and to be concerned about what concerns God. The prophet speaks to us:

*Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke;
Setting free the oppressed,
breaking off every yoke?
Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry,
Bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house;
Clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your own flesh?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed;
Your vindication shall go before you,
and the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
(Isaiah 58: 6-8)*



Isaiah helps us to see that holiness is not self-referential but imitates the love of God that is always being poured out for the good of others. To be like God means that our hearts burn with love for whatever God loves. We are able to do this because of our intimacy with Christ who shares with us His mission and the grace to continue that mission in our own time.

At the start of His public ministry, after His Baptism and subsequent temptations in the desert, Jesus enters the synagogue at Nazareth, according to Saint Luke's account. There, He proclaims a passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah and applies it to Himself: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord"* (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6). Jesus declares that He Himself is the Jubilee – the expression of God's favor and grace. Holy Baptism bestows upon us the imperative to follow Jesus' mission in setting captives free and bringing God's healing love to those who are most in need. Thus, the pursuit of personal holiness leads us to act justly and compassionately in the world.

Far from antiquated social problems of the ancient world, this mission of Jesus bears great relevance for us today. We live in a society that is blinded by agnosticism and indifference. We live in a time when men, women and children are exploited through



the oppression of modern-day slavery and human trafficking. We share a common home with neighbors who have become increasingly isolated from one another and cut off from the concerns of those with whom they share their daily lives. During this Jubilee year, we are called to become more attuned to the needs of those we meet every day and whose needs are far greater than we could ever imagine. The practices of penance and self-sacrifice sensitize us to the suffering of others in ways that we might otherwise fail to see.

I have learned in the last year and a half as your Bishop, that the problem of human trafficking throughout the counties of the Diocese of Harrisburg is far more serious than many of us want to recognize. Along our highways and interstates, in our communities, and among our neighbors, there are persons enslaved to labor without the means of paying off imposed debts, forced into acts that degrade the sacred dignity of their humanity, and treated as chattel. They are often hidden, but their suffering cries out to heaven. Now is the time for us to raise up our prophetic voice as God's anointed people and proclaim their liberty, their dignity, and their hope for a new life while striving to become the instruments of God's mercy and justice that sets those captives free.



III. Rooted in the Church's Teaching

With the Universal Church, we affirm the dignity of every human person from the moment of conception until their natural death. To build a culture of life, as Pope Saint John Paul II inculcated into the mission of the contemporary Church, means that we rise in protest against the sins of abortion and euthanasia, against the devaluing of human life through inadequate access to education and healthcare, against the scourge of racism and bigotry, against the exploitation of women and children, against every form of indignity that afflicts humanity from the womb to the grave.

In recent times, the Church has reaffirmed her commitment to addressing human trafficking and helping to bring those enslaved to wholeness. In a declaration on human dignity, the



Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith teaches clearly, “Human trafficking must also be counted among the grave violations of human dignity. While it is not a new phenomenon, it has taken on tragic dimensions before our eyes” (*Dignitas Infinita*, 41). Pope Francis has denounced strongly this “grave violation of human dignity”:

I reaffirm here that the “trade in people” is a vile activity, a disgrace to our societies that claim to be civilized! Exploiters and clients at all levels should make a serious examination of conscience both in the first person and before God! Today the Church is renewing her urgent appeal that the dignity and centrality of every individual always be safeguarded, with respect for fundamental rights, as her social teaching emphasizes. She asks that these rights really be extended for millions of men and women on every continent, wherever they are not recognized. In a world in which a lot is said about rights, how often is human dignity actually trampled upon! (Address to Participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (24 May 2013)).

At another time, Pope Francis vividly explained the complexity of the plight of those who are trafficked:



The sin of human trafficking reveals a multi-headed beast whose faces include the marketing of human organs and tissues, the sexual exploitation of boys and girls, slave labor, including prostitution, the drug and weapons trade, terrorism, and international organized crime. Such is the magnitude of these situations, and their toll in innocent lives, that we must avoid every temptation to fall into a declarationist nominalism that would assuage our consciences. We need to ensure that our institutions are truly effective in the struggle against all these scourges” (Pope Francis, [Address to the United Nations Organization](#), New York, 25 September 2015).

The Holy Father reminds us that it is not enough to lament the situation. We must be ready to put our righteous anger and our faith into action.

Ultimately, “Trafficking profoundly disfigures the humanity of the victim, offending his or her freedom and dignity. Yet, at the same time, it dehumanizes those who carry it out” (Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Conference on Human Trafficking, 11 April 2019). As such, this sin diminishes the dignity of the entire human race. For, as we know, the sacred dignity of humanity derives from the unique manner in which God has created us, “in His image and likeness” (cf. Genesis 1:26-27).



Our concern for the victims and survivors of human trafficking is a reflection of our deep appreciation for the beauty of the human person that God has fashioned to be like himself. The Psalmist sings forth, *“I praise you, so wonderfully you made me; wonderful are your works”* (Psalm 139:14). For Christians, the beauty of humanity is a reflection of Christ in everyone we meet, particularly in those who are suffering. And so, when we look with compassion upon those who are most in need, we see the very reflection of Christ who identifies with the lowliest, *“Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me”* (Matthew 25:40). To love them is to love Christ.





IV. Our Current Situation

Still what exactly is human trafficking? The Pennsylvania Courts define it this way: “Human Trafficking is a type of human rights abuse where people profit from the exploitation of others – mainly using force, fraud or coercion to manipulate victims into engaging in sex acts or labor/services in exchange for something of value.”¹ With this broad definition, we see that some of the commercial enterprises that surround us could, in fact, be fronts for human trafficking; some of the people we see every day could be trapped without a way out.

¹ The Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania, “Human Trafficking,” The Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania, <https://www.pacourts.us/learn/human-trafficking> (accessed December 12, 2024).



Let me stress, this is not a problem that only happens somewhere else. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, in 2023 Pennsylvania ranked in the top 15 states for the most reported cases of human trafficking. Perhaps more shocking is data reported in an article in [The Mercury](#) citing statistics released by the Administrative Office of the Pennsylvania Courts for the five-year period between 2017-2021. During this time period, Lancaster led the state in the number of human trafficking offenses with Dauphin County ranking third. The remaining top 10 counties with the highest percentage of human trafficking-related offenses filed between 2017 and 2021 were: Philadelphia (5%); Monroe (4%); Delaware (4%); Blair (4%); and York (3%).² As distressing as these numbers may be, they do not paint the full picture as, according to law enforcement agencies in our Diocese, human trafficking is underreported. But who are these victims? They are men and women, adults and children, U.S. citizens and foreign nationals alike. Victims and survivors include every demographic, and they are being abused and exploited right here in our Diocese, in our neighborhoods.

The Human Trafficking Hotline, when analyzing data specific to Pennsylvania, listed the top venues where human trafficking occurs around us. They include home residences (often used for

² Carl Hessler, Jr., "Montgomery, Berk and Chester counties among leading counties in PA filing human trafficking charges," *The Mercury*, <https://www.pottsmmerc.com/2023/01/10/montgomery-berks-and-chester-counties-among-leading-counties-filing-human-trafficking-charges/> (accessed December 12, 2024).



commercial sex), illicit massage parlors, escort and delivery services, and others.³ Victims are sold locally through online advertisements and exploited through locally generated pornography. Human trafficking is in our Diocese, and scared and exploited men, women, and children are forced into labor and degrading acts so that some people can make money, and others can take advantage of them for free or cheap labor and/or sexual gratification.

We also recognize that human trafficking can appear benign when it does not involve sexual exploitation; yet it nevertheless diminishes the dignity of those who are afflicted. This happens in the exploitation of workers who are unable to pay their debts, or whose salaries are so low they cannot support their families despite working very long days. It occurs when immigrants come to this country through legal means and are trapped by unfair labor practices and immoral supervisors whose primary concern is profit with little attention paid to those whose work feeds their greed.

In our Diocese, there are legal migrant workers whose living conditions and salary are not commensurate with the daily labor that helps to pick the apples and peaches grown in some areas. Too often they live in squalor and send their poor paychecks to family members in their home countries to help them survive.

³ National Human Trafficking Hotline, "Pennsylvania," National Human Trafficking Hotline, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/statistics/pennsylvania> (accessed December 12, 2024).



The interconnectedness of fair labor practices with a greater awareness of the means by which we benefit from the work of others helps us to see that slavery in our contemporary world does not always involve shackles. Instead, coercion, fear, and intimidation are tactics used to exploit men, women, and children alike to keep them constrained in ways that are not befitting their dignity and our society.



V. Challenging Our Complacency

This sounds like a bleak assessment, and it is. The more I have learned about this, the more I am deeply troubled. Now, I call upon all people of good will to remove the blinders from our eyes and educate ourselves about this scourge. We can no longer be complacent through denial. There is no one fix to this problem. It will take all of us. Through the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, Pennsylvania's Bishops have been advocating a myriad of ways to attack this scourge for years. We have worked with others to successfully advocate for passage of legislation to assist victims and survivors, to hamper the operation of traffickers and their patrons, to bring about more education in our communities, and to assist law enforcement and those in the legal profession to bring these perpetrators to justice.



But this is not nearly enough. We will continue education efforts in our Diocese to bring this problem to light. We will reach out through Catholic Charities, and all our ministries, to assist victims and survivors and to partner with other local organizations who do the same. But still, this is not enough.

This is a societal problem. This is a moral problem. We must all work harder to turn away from forces that dehumanize and tear down our brothers and sisters rather than build them up. This includes turning away from media that glorifies violence and sex over peace and true intimacy. We must turn away from all forms of pornography that infect our minds and our souls like cancer. We must find ways, every day, to fight this scourge simply by changing the ripples of influence we create through our day-to-day interactions. We are all brothers and sisters of Christ.

The U.S. Department of Labor and Dauphin County District Attorney's Office provides some clear indicators to help us become aware of the possibility of human trafficking in our midst:

- Living with employer
- Poor living conditions
- Malnourishment
- Clothing that is inconsistent with the weather or situation
- "Branding" tattoos, which could include crowns and male names on females



- Multiple people in a cramped space
- Inability to speak to individual alone
- Answers appear to be scripted and rehearsed
- Employer is holding identity documents
- Signs of physical abuse
- Submissive or fearful
- Unpaid or paid very little
- An adult or child who is a commercial sex worker⁴

While this does not exhaust the list, and not every person will be easily categorized, such indicators help us to keep alert to the needs of those who are around us, especially when they are not able to speak up for themselves.

Inconveniencing ourselves to inquire about the wellbeing of those around us is an exercise of Christian charity that prevents us from becoming indifferent and isolated from the greater community. We are our brother's and sister's keepers (cf. Genesis 4:9). We are responsible for one another. Not only are we called to pay attention to the indicators of human trafficking, we are called to act upon what we see and hear.

The Dauphin County District Attorney's Office gives us sound advice and recommends:

⁴ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, "What is human trafficking?", U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/resources/trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking> (accessed December 27, 2024).



- Call 911 if you think someone, especially a child, is in imminent danger or is being trafficked.
- Ask the individual if they need help, feel safe or need any basic necessities. It is good to ask for their name and to use their name during the conversation. However, do not ask leading questions; allow law enforcement to complete the interviews associated with their investigation.
- If an adult, empower them to have a voice and choice in seeking assistance. Inform them that there are organizations that can help them and ask if you can call on their behalf or help them find a place to stay. Stressing that these organizations have confidentiality and are not law enforcement should also be done. If the victim/survivor wishes to make a report to law enforcement, you may offer to call on their behalf. Regardless of the choices the victim/survivor makes, honor their request.
- If the adult does not want help, try to provide them with the contact information for local resources, letting them know the organizations will be there for them when they are ready.
- Understand that in trafficking situations, attempting to investigate or rescue an individual can do more harm than good. In these situations, showing care, compassion, and, if possible, helping with basic needs will plant the seeds for the individuals to seek help in the future.



VI. Putting Faith into Action

Rooted in our common baptism, we are called to put our faith into action and become instruments of hope that set captives free. Saint James reminds us in rich terms that faith has to be lived out in our personal lives, by our choices, and how we respond to others. He writes,

So speak and so act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. For the judgment is merciless to one who has not shown mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace,



keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Indeed someone may say, “You have faith and I have works.” Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works. (James 2:12-18)

Pope Francis has challenged us to “avoid every temptation to fall into a declarationist nominalism.” Put simply: actions speak louder than words. There must be something we can do. I propose five practical ways to help free these captives from the scourge of human trafficking.

(1) The first is a spiritual task that extends to all of the Fridays of the year. I invite all Catholics to be more intentional about joining themselves to the suffering of Christ, particularly Christ suffering among the victims of human trafficking. In addition to abstinence from meat, which remains a longstanding practice in our Catholic faith, I call upon you to make an intentional fast to join yourself to those individuals suffering because of the sin of human trafficking and with the petition to God to end human trafficking. Let us consecrate our sacrifices to help set people free.



(2) The second is a moral challenge to uproot from within ourselves and our families the sins of pornography, online prostitution, massage parlors, exotic dance clubs, and the like. Those engaged in commercial sex are often victims of human trafficking who keep little of the funds paid for their services. Patronizing these establishments helps to keep the trafficking trade in business. Let this Jubilee year be a time when we collectively and personally resolve to lay aside those sins which directly erode the dignity of others, objectify our brothers and sisters in the world, and fuel human trafficking. Since these sins afflict young men at a greater percentage than young women, parents should have conversations with their sons and help them by setting up restrictions for the use of the internet and social media. Fathers are asked to set good examples for their sons, especially in how they speak about women. Parents should speak to their children about their God given dignity, empowering the next generations to recognize when a trafficker may be attempting to groom them.

(3) I ask parishes to take time to reflect on the scourge of human trafficking with resources provided through the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, the Diocesan Office for Life & Dignity, and Catholic Charities. Knowledge is critical to making an informed and integral response. Together, we



can learn about the way this affects families and local communities and what we can do to help those in need. Then, that knowledge needs to be put into action as we advocate for those who are suffering, particularly in those counties where illicit activity and the exploitation of workers indicates the presence of human trafficking and modern-day servitude.

(4) We must directly engage our local elected officials and let them know that human trafficking is an issue we care about. In January the State Legislature will start a fresh legislation session with a brand-new host of proposed new laws. The scourge of human trafficking is one that takes many forms and needs to be addressed both with tougher criminal penalties and with state programs that help the victims heal and recover. It is time to speak with our legislators and tell them that this is a serious issue that needs to be addressed as we seek to build a culture of life.

(5) At a Diocesan level, I will pursue the initiative to raise awareness with monthly stories in *The Catholic Witness* about human trafficking in our area and highlight the good individuals who are working hard to serve those who are afflicted and to help set them free. By keeping this concern before our eyes, it will not be far from our minds and hearts.



VII. Conclusion

Like every New Year, it is a time of resolutions, so I challenge all of us to eliminate our old habits while initiating new ways of engaging our faith lives. Joined to the spirit of the Jubilee year, I pray that we will be able to be the instruments of grace and mercy who help to set captives free – not simply by talk alone, but by actions that begin with our own personal path of conversion that spills over into the conversion of our times and our society. By allowing God’s grace to permeate every facet of our lives, we become the means through which that grace can transform society. This means casting off the yoke of slavery to the sins of consumerism, greed, and self-seeking that can lead to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals all around us. This means turning away from those ways of immorality that have



become commonplace and acceptable in contemporary times that enslave the poor.

Our nation, built upon the principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, continues to bear the responsibility to safeguard those principles. We, as pilgrims of hope and as citizens of this land, recognize that upholding such principles falls upon our shoulders as we seek to put our faith into action and respond to the problems of our times with the grace that comes from the Gospel and from our baptismal call to declare a time of the Lord's favor, proclaim good news to the poor, and to set captives free.



Loving Father,

We seek your divine protection for all who are exploited and enslaved.

For those forced into labor, trafficked into sexual slavery, and denied freedom.

We beseech you to release them from their chains.

Grant them protection, safety, and empowerment.

Restore their dignity and provide them a new beginning.

Show us how we might end exploitation by addressing its causes.

Help us reach out in support of victims and survivors of human trafficking.

Make us instruments of your spirit for their liberation.

For this we pray through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen

(From USCCB handout for World Day of Peace 2015)



VIII. Resources

U.S. Department of State:

<https://www.state.gov/identify-and-assist-a-trafficking-victim/>

National Human Trafficking Hotline:

Call 1-888-373-7888 | Text HELP or INFO to 233733

National Human Trafficking Local Services Directory:

YWCA Greater Harrisburg (serves Dauphin, Cumberland, Perry, and Franklin counties)

24-hour crisis hotline: 800-654-1211 | www.ywcahbg.org

She's Somebody's Daughter

717-489-2002 | shessomebodysdaughter.org

PO Box 1279, Chambersburg, PA 17201

Greenlight Operation

717-743-2767 | greenlightoperation.org

PO Box 229, Lemoyne, PA 17043



VIII. Resources

Hope Inspire Love

hopeinspirelove.org

PO Box 10995, Lancaster, PA 17605

Sexual Assault Resources & Counseling Center, Lebanon
County, Lebanon

Hotline: 717-272-5308 | <https://sarccheals.org/>

North Star Initiative, Lititz (nationwide referrals for female
survivors)

717-568-2701 | www.northstarinitiative.org

If in Immediate Danger: Call 911

