

Reflections on the Phenomenon of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation from a Biblical-Theological Perspective

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Introduction

The phenomenon of “human trafficking is an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ.”¹ This “open wound” challenges us as Christians and urges us to read this phenomenon in the light of the Word of God and to respond with concrete action.

From the point of view of our Christian Catholic faith, the sanctity of human life, from conception until natural death, and the inalienable dignity of each and every human being, constitute the starting point and the central focus of every initiative. The Bible teaches that every man and woman is created out of love and made in God’s image and likeness (see Gen 1:26).

This paper will delve on human trafficking from a biblical-theological perspective. We will reflect on its causes, which necessitate utmost attention and an active pastoral response. We will attempt to explore some questions: Does our faith have something to do with this degrading and inhuman situation?² Did such kind of phenomenon happen in the biblical times and how did the people of that time view such situations and what were their responses? What lessons and challenges can we draw from their situation? How and what should be our response to the situation of human trafficking and sexual exploitation?

What is human trafficking and sexual exploitation?

Human trafficking is an ancient phenomenon. The buying and selling of women, men and children for sexual exploitation is the most common form of slavery. Nobody knows exactly how large the number of victims is. However, it is clear that every year hundreds of thousands become victims of this trade. After the trade in weapons and in drugs, human trafficking is the third largest source of income for organized crime.

The United Nation defined it as “*the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.*”³

¹ Pope Francis, *Address to Participants in the World Day of Prayer, Reflection and Action against Human Trafficking*, 12 February 2018.

²Rico Ponce, "Transformative Spirituality and Mission", in Jooseop Keum ed., *New Milestone in Mission (International Review of Mission*, Vol. 101, November 2012) 323.

³ United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime, “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized

Many victims of human trafficking come from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia.⁴ The key words here are *force*, *fraud* and *coercion*. Human trafficking is an act of recruiting, transporting a person by *force*, which is *fraudulent*. Victims are most of the time *coerced* by infliction of pain (physical, mental) to get the desired response. Human trafficking is a dreadful phenomenon because the victims are reduced to a humiliating and tragic situation.⁵

As church and society, we cannot look indifferently and deny that unjust structures reduce people to second-class citizens. We are aware that women and children are the first victims of a variety of miseries led by poverty. When we fight this injustice, we gain a new missionary vocation: to enable women and children to reclaim their human dignity. Many people have joined this work against human trafficking and in particular, the trade in women and children. Many religious and lay people have been working in this new mission. We have an important role to play in this work.⁶

Learning from the Gospel according to Luke (7:36-50)

Our reflections will first focus on a passage from the Gospel according to Luke (7:36-50)⁷. Carlos Mesters points out that Jesus accepts a young woman, an outcast of society, despised as a sinner by the religion of the time⁸. Let us try to be attentive to the attitudes of the people in the story, especially to that of Jesus, towards the woman.

³⁶ A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, and he entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. ³⁷ Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, ³⁸ she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰ Jesus said to him in reply, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. ⁴¹"Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty. ⁴² Since they were unable to repay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon said in reply, "The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven." He said to him, "You have judged rightly."

⁴⁴ Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has

Crime", *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto*, 42, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf> . (accessed March 25, 2019).

⁴ Carlos Mesters, *Reflection and Prayer Guide on Human Trafficking* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2012), 1.

⁵ Rico Ponce, "Foreword", in Carlos Mesters, *Reflection and Prayer Guide on Human Trafficking* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2012) i.

⁶ Rico Ponce, *Ownership and Property: An Empirical, Theological, Ethico-Moral and Pastoral Approach* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012) 79-81.

⁷ All quotations are taken from the New American Bible.

⁸ Carlos Mesters, "Reflections on Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation," in Id., *Reflection and Prayer Guide on Human Trafficking* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2012) 3-6.

bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair.⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered.⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment.⁴⁷ So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

⁴⁸ He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹ The others at table said to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰ But he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace”.

Three characters stand out in the story: Jesus, the Pharisee and the woman. Three totally different people meet, probably for the first and the last time, at the home of the Pharisee. What would each of them be thinking about the other two?

The Pharisee, a devout Jew, was concerned about the faithful observance of the letter of the law of God and with moral behavior. He saw the woman as a sinner who deserved neither attention nor respect, and observed Jesus, perhaps to see if he was in fact what people said he was: *If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this is who is touching him (7:39).*

The woman was known in the city as a sinner. For her the Pharisee belonged to the elite of the city. She also knew that Pharisees had little regard for people who were considered sinners. In any case, she wanted to see Jesus! The text allows us to suppose, that in her mind, Jesus was someone she could trust. Without being invited, she had the courage to enter the home of the Pharisee during dinner, with the sole purpose of getting close to Jesus and honouring him with perfume on him. She must have been sure that Jesus would accept her. Otherwise she could never have had the courage to do what she did.

Jesus was seen in the city as a prophet. He was aware of the negative attitude of the Pharisee about the woman but he did not condemn such an attitude. Instead, he asked questions and used a parable to see if he could help the Pharisee see things differently: *“Which of them will love him more?” (7:42).* He used a very clear parable that required no explanation and that made the Pharisee answer correctly: *“The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven” (7:43).*

For Jesus, the woman was like a sister in need of help, tenderness, acceptance and understanding. In spite of everyone condemning her, Jesus saw deeper: her great ability to love. The woman came in, got down at the feet of Jesus, began to cry, wet the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair, kissed his feet and anointed them with perfume. Jesus did not draw back from or send the woman away. On the contrary, he accepted what she did. He accepted a person who could not be accepted according to the observant Jews of the time.

What attitude would this Pharisee have had towards women in situation of prostitution today? Jesus defended the woman against the criticism of the devout Jew. His message to the Pharisees of all times is, *the one who is pardoned the most will show the greatest love.* The Pharisees of yesterday and today believe that no one who observes the law is sinful. But this belief makes us self-righteous and very often prevents us from experiencing the gratuitous nature of God’s love and from seeing the acts of love of people who do not belong to our own circle.

In reality, however, what is important is the love with which we treat others and observe the law. Knowing that she was loved, accepted and forgiven, the woman was able to show her love and gratitude through tears, kisses and perfume. Referring to the symbols of love used by the woman,

Jesus challenged the Pharisee who considered himself at peace with God: *“When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment”* (7:44-46).

Jesus forgave the woman, saying: *“Your faith has saved you; go in peace”*. It was her faith that helped the woman to be renewed and to find herself again in relation with God. What does that faith consist of? She had the courage to enter the house of the Pharisee, knowing that he condemned her. She went in because she believed in Jesus and that he would welcome her. With the love she received from *him*, she awakened to a power that helped her to be reborn.

This power can still regenerate exploited and dehumanized women and many others. What attitude do I have towards these women when I meet them in Italy or in France, in the Philippines or in Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and in other countries?

Learning from the Book of Judges (ch. 4 – 5)

To continue our reflection, let's be guided by the Book of Judges (ch. 4 – 5). It takes us back to the twelfth century before Christ. It tells of the tribes of Israel living in the central mountains of Palestine. Sisera was the general of the army of Jabin, king of the Canaanites, who harshly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. But a slow and hidden conscientization/awareness was at work. The tribes organized themselves for the liberation struggle.

Sisera had gone to battle against the Israelites, but his mother and the other ladies of the court did not know that he had been defeated. They thought it strange that he had not yet returned in triumph. In the Song of Deborah (see Judg 5:28-30) the conversation between the ladies of the court is described with subtle irony. The mother of Sisera gazes out of the barred window and complains:

*“Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why are the hoof beats of his chariots delayed?”* (5:28).

Among the princesses the wisest one answers, and she replies it to herself:

*“They must be dividing the spoil they took:
a slave women or two for each man,
spoil of dyed cloth for Sisera, spoil of ornate dyed cloth,
a pair of ornate dyed cloths for my neck in the spoil.”* (5:30).

But Sisera was already dead.

The people woke up. They organized themselves and rebelled. The abduction and sale of their women had been prevented. Human trafficking is possible only where there are no organized networks. That was true already at the time of the Judges.

The trade in human beings, especially the trade in women for sexual exploitation, was even one of the objectives of warfare, as is clear from many texts in the Bible. This way of thinking had to do with the religion in Palestine at that time. People worshipped Baal, the godhead of fertility who, they thought, controlled the production of food and the reproduction of human life. They dedicated to him sanctuaries high in the mountains under leafy trees where temple prostitutes worked. People thought that a sexual relation with temple prostitutes fostered a deeper unity with the godhead.

The kings of Israel and Judah manipulated religion for their own interests. Young women were forced to prostitute themselves in high places, and their children belonged to the king. The boys served as soldiers and laborers and the girls, as slaves and concubines of the king as well as prostitutes in the sanctuaries. So thought also King Jabin, his general Sisera, the mother of Sisera and the ladies of the court. It had been said that this was a divine right of the kings: *“The governance of the king who will rule you will be as follows: He will take your sons and assign them to his chariots and horses [...] He will use your daughters as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. [...] He will take your male and female slaves, as well as your best oxen and donkeys, and use them to do his work. [...] As for you, you will become his slaves.”* (1 Sam 8:11-17).

By this way of thinking, the abduction and sale of women was justified. King Solomon did not think differently. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines (see 1 Kgs 11:3). In the Book Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) he is presented as saying: *“I amassed for myself silver and gold, and the treasures of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and delights of men, many women.”* (Eccles 2:8).

People are trafficked. We should not be shocked that there are so much evil in the Bible. Joseph of Egypt was sold by his own brothers for 20 pieces of silver. Even Jesus Christ was sold for 30 pieces of silver. Sacred Scripture does not hide the mistakes of people so that we will not make the same mistakes; this is said in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (see 1 Cor 10,6-11).

People's common sense turned against this mentality which was encouraged and practiced by grand people but was opposed by ordinary men and women. In the book of Judges we read that many volunteers joined the battle. The promoters of this conscientization process were the men and women of small trade, travelling salesmen and women who enjoyed more freedom than farmers. Riding on their mules, they went to drinking places where people gathered, and tried to teach the farmers a different way of thinking.

And so, there started in the time of the Judges a slow but steady process of conscientization which eventually ended the abduction of and trade in women, and which exposed the lies supporting and justifying the power of Sisera and Jabin, and of the court ladies.

Deborah sings in her beautiful poem:

*“My heart is with the leaders of Israel,
with the dedicated ones of the people – bless the Lord;
Those who ride on white donkeys, seated on saddle rugs,
and those who travel the road, sing of them
to the sounds of musicians at the wells.
There they recount the just deeds of the Lord,
his just deeds bringing freedom to Israel.
Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, strike up a song!
Arise, Barak!
Take captive your captors, son of Abinoam!
Then down went Israel against the mighty,
the army of the Lord went down for him against the warriors.”* (Judg 5:9-13)

Deborah ends with:

“So perish all your enemies, Lord.

*But may those who love you be
like the sun rising in his might!*" (Judg 5:31)

This is our hope

Such a result is what all who fight human trafficking hope to achieve. Based on the biblical-theological reflections that we have expounded on, we can definitely say that our Christian faith is very much relevant to human trafficking and human exploitation. Our Judeo-Christian tradition offers hope that a new world is possible. As we become involved in the people's struggle for life, we experience God's empowering Spirit – inspiring, comforting, sustaining with inner strength – the same Spirit as manifested in the people's commitment to persevere for justice and peace.⁹

In the first place, the Hebrew people experienced similar situation of injustice and humiliation. But they believed in a God who hears their cry and listens to their anguish and cries. The relevance of faith is clearly expressed in this modern paraphrase of Exodus ch. 3: "*The Eternal One said: 'I have seen the tribulations of the women and heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their suffering. I have truly noted their oppression by the pimps and their cries have reached me. Now then, go and work for the liberation of these women'.*"¹⁰

As Sr. Helen Graham, MM has pointed out, our biblical heritage provides examples of how women coped with, maneuvered within or resisted oppression during their time. There is for example the attractive widow Judith, who made use of the tendency of patriarchal culture to see women only in terms of male sexual gratification. She was able to beguile the enemy general, Holofernes, and cut off his head. Judith brought liberation to her people (see Jdt ch. 7 – 16).¹¹

At present, there are many people motivated to join forces with other groups and individuals to stop human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Many Churches and church-based agencies work in partnership with women's organizations and networks at the frontline of the fight against this global problem. As part of their diaconal and pastoral ministry, they have set up shelters and safe houses for the victims, and have conducted education and awareness-raising campaigns among potential victims. They have also advocated at international and national levels for the passage and implementation of laws curbing this horrific form of international organized crime and protecting the human rights of its victims.¹²

As a concrete response, the Migrants and Refugee Section of the Dicastery of Promoting Integral Human Development has just released the *Pastoral Orientations on Human Trafficking* – approved by Pope Francis – with the purpose of providing a *reading* of the phenomenon and an adequate *understanding* of it in order to motivate and sustain the much-needed long-term struggle¹³. The above document is the result of many efforts and can orient future work: "*In recent years, the Holy See [...] has increased its appeals to the international community for cooperation and collaboration*

⁹ Arche Ligo and Virginia Fabella et al, eds., *Dugo ng Buhay: A Philippine Experience in Spirituality* (Tagaytay City: Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians and Forum for Interdisciplinary Endeavors and Studies, 1995), 8.

¹⁰ Carlos Mesters, *Reflection and Prayer Guide on Human Trafficking* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2012), IV.

¹¹ Helen Graham, MM, "...And She Said 'No'" in *And She Said No!: Human Rights, Women Identities and Struggles*, eds. Liberato C. Bautista and Elizabeth B. Rifareal (Quezon City: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1990), 34.

¹² Athena K. Peralta, "Trafficking and trade in women and neoliberal globalization", in *Reformed World* Volume 56, No 1, March 2006, 14.

¹³ <https://migrants-refugees.va/documents/en/read/a4/pastoral-orientations-on-human-trafficking.pdf> (accessed March 25, 2019).

*between different agencies in putting an end to this scourge. Meetings have also been organized to draw attention to the phenomenon of human trafficking [...]. It is my hope that these efforts will continue to expand in years to come”.*¹⁴

While the Catholic Church has already taken some important steps towards effective coordination among its own institutions, there is room for improvement: *The Church is committed to raise awareness of the growing need to support victims of these crimes by accompanying them on a path of reintegration into society and the recovery of their human dignity. The Church is grateful for every effort made to bring the balm of God’s mercy to the suffering, for this also represents an essential step in the healing and renewal of society as a whole.*¹⁵

In the footsteps of John Baptist Scalabrini

Human trafficking is a vile crime against humanity and against God. There is possibly no greater scriptural condemnation of human trafficking than what the Bible says about the human creation. Men and women have been created in God’s image (see Gen 1:26-27). That conveys ultimate value. A person is not to be bought and sold, used and discarded as if he or she is merely a thing and not an image bearer of God.

As a community of faith and mission committed to the following of Christ in the service of migrants, we dedicate ourselves to making every effort to help those who have been victimized to regain their sense of dignity.

On this way we can learn from Blessed John Baptist Scalabrini and from the centrality of Jesus Christ in his life: *“The secret of John Baptist Scalabrini’s life and work is his passionate love for Jesus Christ. Enamoured of the Eucharist, Scalabrini is in constant contemplation of the Son of God who became man to reveal the Father’s love and to hand back to Him a renewed human family”*¹⁶.

This was the secret of John Baptist Scalabrini’s life and work, this can be the secret of our life and mission. Through constant contemplation of the Son of God, the Word who became flesh (see John 1,14), we can learn to look up to every woman and man and to serve them especially when their dignity is violated.

*We are sent to announce the Father’s universal love and to serve.
Our pilgrimage calls for an ongoing migration from ourselves to the
other [...] to look with love at our fellow pilgrims wounded or
hurt in their dignity, caring for them with the tenderness and
commitment of Jesus, the good Samaritan.
(Basic Text of the Scalabrinian Traditio, 5)*

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2015*.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Address to the ‘Santa Marta Group*, 9 February 2018.

¹⁶ Basic Text of the Scalabrinian *Traditio*, 3.