

In a recent interview with Mr. Lukáš Seidl, Journalist with *TÝDEN cz*, RENATE member, Sister Klara Marie Stráníková, of the Congregation of Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, talks about her experiences in working with women in prostitution in Prague, the Czech Republic.



It is no surprise to meet a Sister on the streets of Prague, but most people would raise an eyebrow at meeting Sisters walking the streets of the city late at night. Sister Klara Marie Stráníková, of the Congregation of Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross knows the harsh realities of the sex trade, stating "a night on the street will change your life."

Prayer is an important part of the Sisters' ministry, "We even have special prayers dedicated to women in prostitution," says Sister Klara Marie. On an average night in Wenceslas Square, she is joined in prayer by a number of women who are prostituted on the streets of Prague. Discreetly dressed, they talk, then join hands and pray together, an unusual sight in the heart of a popular tourist city.

"It is a special atmosphere and many participate in prayer. Often, as Sisters, we stand out and many people approach us and ask to join in prayer," says Sister Klara Marie, who came to Prague four years ago from a monastery in Kroměříž, to assist women in prostitution.

Today, the Sisters live in a smaller community, and together with several other Sisters, spend every Friday night ministering to those who have no choice but to work in the dark corners of the city. In addition to prayers and the distribution of small religious objects, the Sisters provide contact details where the women can access free legal and social assistance, in addition to testing for sexually transmitted diseases.

Accompanied another colleague Sister of a different faith, Sister Klara Marie stops and listens to the women's stories. "We are an international, ecumenical team founded many years ago by an American woman and go out into the streets in groups of three, four or five, depending on who just might be available," said the Sister. She knows the psychological effects on women who have to offer their bodies and how they school their minds to face their clients. "It is just a mask, to hide behind. These women have to put on an appearance and 'switch off' so they can survive the trauma of the street. Sometimes they turn to alcohol and drugs, to numb their senses."

As the women speak about their stresses and traumas, Sister Klára Marie slowly and carefully reflects upon each word. Sometimes she smiles, but soon becomes serious again. Sometimes she looks me in the eye, sometimes she looks away. It is noteworthy that throughout the interview, not once does she use the term 'prostitute'. To Sister Klara Marie, such a term is abhorrent and she always corrects me, replacing it with the phrase "women in prostitution".

On the street, the stark contrast between consecrated life and the world of paid sex is blurred. Reflecting on her eight years ministering to women in prostitution in Prague, Sister Klara Marie recalls "Even the first such meeting for me was a powerful and unforgettable experience. Offering reliable and trustworthy support to them, seems to instil some confidence."

Currently, there are forty-five Sisters in Sister Klara Marie's community, which she joined after a period of discernment with the Sisters of Mercy, at the monastery in Choryně Valasske Mezirici, "I started to feel at home there and decided to enter the order," she says, as she described her life story. The innovative Sister came to Prague eight years ago, as a result of a Congregational decision to focus on helping victims of human trafficking.

Dressed in ordinary clothes and no outer semblance of Religious life except for the cross she wears, Sister Klara Marie recognises the dark side of Prague, based upon her previous work in cities like Milan, Turin and Naples, where she spent three months supporting women in prostitution. Contrary to the assumption that women in prostitution would hide from a Religious, Sister Klara Marie explains that it is all down to trust. It also helps to have a good knowledge of the language, which she learned while studying Theology in Italy.



When meeting with the women in prostitution, no topic is off limits. Sister Klara Marie responds seamlessly to every topic, even the most intimate, including abstinence. Deference for the dignity of the human person is taken as part of religious life: "These women often ask us about the question of virginity. It is very important to them. The issues of religious consecration so often become questions of personal faith," Sister Klara Marie explains. She is not here to judge, sharing that there are some surprising, intrinsic motivating factors which push women towards prostitution. She understands that some women have fallen into this way of life, such as the story of the young Italian seventeen year old girl who moved away from her family and married at a young age but ended up unable to fend for herself.

Debt is usually associated with the women in prostitution and is the most common cause of prostitution, going right back to biblical times, even referred to in the Bible.

With an estimated 15,000 women in prostitution in the Czech Republic, a legal ordinance now restricts prostitution which in turn is displacing women from the streets into clubs (see *Street fast food and Sex*). Behind closed doors, the situation is often far more serious, where in the event of a violent situation, it is often very difficult for women to call for help. Speaking specifically about Italy and women in prostitution there, the incidences of prostitution occur mostly in private,



involving foreigners mainly, who pay a lot of money. "The Italian women I met have never been assaulted," says Sister Klara Marie's companion, who is also a Sister.

Although not exactly typical visitors to night clubs, visiting them poses no obstacles to the Sisters who apparently venture inside without problems. This is mainly due to their providing assistance to the women, in the form of toiletries and personal items etc. as previously mentioned. "We bring them various gifts," smiles Sister Klara Marie.

Some of the women she meets on the street and in the clubs are unfamiliar with their surroundings. Women from many different nationalities are trafficked to the Czech Republic, for the sex industry. "It happened on International Women's Day that I met a stranger who said she also knows Czech. Unfortunately, her body was sold near the Austrian border," says Sister Klara Marie.

As part of an awareness-raising initiative, the Sisters often organise lectures and talks about the experiences of life on the street for women in prostitution. They are often asked about fear for their own lives in the darkened corners of the city. Sister Klara Marie shared a story about a night in Prague when a particular man was making a nuisance of himself. He had been watching her for several hours, hiding and re-appearing. When she was alone, he appeared again and approached her, asking her to pray for his wife and family whom he had left in the Ukraine, while he had come to the Czech Republic to find work and support his family back home. Her initial discomfort was replaced by surprise, so not all situations are a cause for fear, according to Sister Klara Marie.



On the topic of living in sin, Sister Klara Marie shared that most women conceal their nocturnal occupation, even from their immediate family. The raw realities such as physical and psychological violence often overshadow optimism about economics and sex. According to the latest research conducted by the NGO *Bliss without Risk*, 90 percent of women in prostitution surveyed stated the most common forms of violence experienced are the combination of sexual, physical and economic violence. Only one tenth of the women interviewed, had not experienced any of the monitored forms of violent acts.

"A Bishop in Italy told me that just one night on the street changed his life completely. And I agree with that," Klara Marie says, after a moment's thought. "My perception is that the women are not in prostitution by choice. Personal interviews with them confirm this."

Although many of the women in prostitution are familiar with one another, personal contact is rare. As Sister Klara Marie says, "Caution is a must."

Even when setting a trend, Sister Klara Marie is careful not to divulge the specific details of a new project under way. Her congregation are sourcing a safe house in Prague, where women can find help, prayer, advice and shelter from the street. Working with colleagues who have previous experience with providing such shelters, Sister Klara Marie says "The main project we have for now, is looking for a suitable shelter."

We wish her well in her search.

Lukáš Seidl, Journalist with *TÝDEN* cz.

For original text, please see:

http://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/s-bibli-mezi-prostitutky-radova-sestra-resi-i-jejich-dluhy_377913.html

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