

By [Elise Harris](#)

Vatican City, Feb 3, 2015 / 02:49 pm ([CNA/EWTN News](#)).- The Vatican has organized the first-ever international day of prayer and reflection against human trafficking, in hopes that the world will join forces in putting this “plague” to an end.

“Our awareness must expand and extend to the very depths of this evil and its farthest reaches – from awareness to prayer, from prayer to solidarity, and from solidarity to concerted action – until slavery and trafficking are no more,” Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, told journalists at a Feb. 3 news conference.

Set to take place this Sunday, Feb. 8, the event, titled “Turn on a light against human trafficking”, also coincides with the feast day of former Sudanese slave St. Josephine Bakhita. Faithful who participate are invited to pray a special prayer given by the Vatican, and to light candles in remembrance of all who are affected by modern forms of slavery.

Organized by “Talitha Kum” – a network of women religious dedicated to fighting against human trafficking – the prayer initiative is also being sponsored by the International Unions of Men and Women Superiors General, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

In comments made to CNA, Cardinal Turkson said the international day of prayer and reflection is a “welcome initiative.”

The purpose of the event, he said, “is to draw attention on the feast of St. Bakhita to the message that it’s not over. The experience of Bakhita does not mean that this phenomenon doesn’t exist anymore.”

With the problem of human trafficking still a global phenomenon, Cardinal Turkson stressed the need to be aware of just how grave the problem currently is.

Those who work daily to rescue trafficking victims and help them recover “need for us to be aware of the problem, of the commitment we need to exercise and they need to do this all together in solidarity to try to get the world to overcome what the Holy Father calls a ‘plague’ in human

society," he said.

Sister Imelda Poole of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Loreto, was also present at the conference announcing the prayer initiative.

In her address, St. Poole stressed the importance not just of praying and lighting a candle for the victims, but also to "do something" to counteract the phenomenon of human trafficking, which she believes is on the rise due to the current economic crisis.

In comments made to CNA, Sr. Imelda voiced concern that some countries are "slipping back" on their policies to fight trafficking due to "the issue of their own poverty."

"Some countries are sinking financially, and as they sink financially they look at the most vulnerable frequently, to see how many they can bring back into their own money-boxes," she said.

"There needs to be a stronger commitment" in putting more effective legislation into place to prevent human trafficking the sister noted, explaining that the current laws in many countries are "(not) strict enough at all."

St. Josephine Bakhita was a Canossian Sister born in 1869 in the Darfur region of Sudan. While still a young child, she was kidnapped and subsequently sold into slavery.

After being sold a total of five times, Bakhita was purchased by Callisto Legnani, the Italian consul in Khartoum. After two years he took Bakhita to Italy to work as a nanny for his colleague, Augusto Michieli. Michieli, in turn, sent Bakhita to accompany his daughter to a school in Venice run by the Canossian Sisters.

While at the school, Bakhita felt called to learn more about the Church, and was eventually baptized with the name "Josephine Margaret." In the meantime, Michieli wanted to take Josephine and his daughter back to Sudan, but Josephine refused to return.

The disagreement escalated and was taken to the Italian courts where it was ruled that Josephine could stay in Italy because she was a free woman. Slavery was not recognized in Italy, and it had also been illegal in

Sudan since before Josephine had been born.

Josephine remained in Italy and decided to enter Canossians in 1893. She made her profession in 1896 and was sent to Northern Italy, where she dedicated her life to assisting her community and teaching others to love God.

She was known for her smile, gentleness and holiness. She even went on record saying, "If I were to meet the slave-traders who kidnapped me and even those who tortured me, I would kneel and kiss their hands, for if that did not happen, I would not be a Christian and Religious today."

St. Josephine was beatified in 1992 and canonized shortly after in October 2000 by Pope John Paul II. She is the first person to be canonized from Sudan and is the patron saint of the country.

Please find below the prayer to be recited on Feb. 8, the International Day of Prayer and Reflection against Human Trafficking:

"O God, when we hear of children and adults deceived and taken to unknown places for purposes of sexual exploitation, forced labor, and organ 'harvesting', our hearts are saddened and our spirits angry that their dignity and rights are ignored through threats, lies, and force. We cry out against the evil practice of this modern slavery, and pray with St. Bakhita for it to end. Give us wisdom and courage to reach out and stand with those whose bodies, hearts and spirits have been so wounded, so that together we may make real your promises to fill these sisters and brothers with a love that is tender and good. Send the exploiters away empty-handed to be converted from this wickedness, and help us all to claim the freedom that is your gift to your children. Amen."