

‘He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor’ (Luke 4:18)

The International Symposium on Pastoral Care of Migrants and Street People Vatican, 14 – 17 September, 2015



This symposium was held at The Vatican and led by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People. The message from Pope Francis and the teachings of the Church has always been strong and clear in relation to those in need. We need to stand by the refugees and migrants, protect their rights, protest against evil, give shelter, love and compassion and a chance for them to live a life of dignity. The planet and all that is in it is the common heritage of all. The bounty of the earth is not just for the powerful few to the exclusion of the rest of humanity, but for all.

The document on *The Church in the World*, from Vatican II Council says:

“There is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since the person stands above all things and the rights and duties of each one stands above all things and their rights and duties are universal and inviolable. Therefore, there must be made available for every human being everything necessary for leading a truly human life, such as food, clothing and shelter The right to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect...”
(*Gaudium et Spes*, NO 26)

This theme was maintained throughout the symposium, leading to a plan of action as guidelines for The Church. The first day was spent examining the Biblical foundations and the social teachings of the church to underpin our thinking and to give us direction as we moved towards writing a corporate plan of action for future guidelines in the Church. Many texts from the scriptures and from the Catholic Social Teaching of the church emphasise the subject of human rights and dignity to be given to each person.

The reflection of these truths in terms of the present-day reality was expressed in a moving presentation from the leader of the Council of Europe, representing the Inter-Government Anti-Gypsism and Roma Equality Unit. She herself was of Roma origin and spoke with great credibility. We also had a presentation given by the Director of GRETA (the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings), an independent body which monitors the European country efforts made against the trafficking in human persons.

The programme was participant-led and consisted of panels of speakers from every continent of the world. All who spoke were working at 'grass roots' with migrants, street women and street children and their families. Short video clips were shown during intervals to highlight the words spoken by the panel speakers.

The European panel, with two members from RENATE Network - Ivonne Van de Kar from The Netherlands and Imelda Poole, IBVM from Albania – also represented their home countries.

Sr Inocencia CJ from Romania presented her work at the Symposium. Inevitably the crisis in Europe and The Mediterranean became a major focus for the European panel. Some of those fleeing from war have been left to die in the sea or have faced a wall of barbed wire. Our question, '*How can the church agree with a fortress Europe?*' was uppermost in our discussion. It was a moving experience to take a virtual journey across the major countries of the world as we heard of the desperate plight of thousands of people redeemed homeless by poverty, war or natural disasters, through stories of rescue, survival, rehabilitation. We witnessed the work of peer group support. The fact that 7,600 children alone entered Europe in 2015 after experiencing terrible treatment was shocking. Behind every fragmented child there is a fragmented family. Ignorance becomes complicity. We are called to say 'NO' to complicity and 'NO' to the traffickers who ply their trade in such vulnerable situations.



Since 2006 half of the world's population live in cities which have become super cities. 120 million people in Brazil live on less than \$2 a day. In many countries, poverty or conflict has forced people on to the streets. Thousands are used as 'Drug mules'. The war in Syria was discussed by a delegate from United Arab Emirates. Today, 85% of Syrians are migrants.

Our virtual journey took us through many African countries as we heard of the sex slaves on the borders of Sudan, used as weapons of war; the female body being a territory to conquer; children being brought to the Lebanon and sold for 2,500 EUR and then recruited for jobs and sold on to Lebanese families.

In Australia the issue of domestic violence and the fact that there are 105,000 homeless people resulting in increased violence on the streets was a major point for discussion.

In Bombay there are 17,000 street children in the one city alone.

Protest is called for to highlight these terrible situations. Some of the ideas presented to the group included street theatre, women and child parliaments and national and international networks to safeguard Women's rights. The treatment of women across the world in patriarchal societies was discussed at length, along with the question: '*Where is the Church Today?*' is it on the streets? The outskirts of these cities are

the challenge for the Church of the future. Programmes of prevention were seen as the key to protect the most vulnerable. There was a call for the Church to be stronger and to heed the story of the Good Samaritan.

A significant part of the two days was spent deliberating and formulating the plan of action. The plan included many important subjects such as education processes at every level of the church, policy and statement making by the church on sensitive issues to do with the protection of migrants, victims of trafficking and issues relating to labour on the street affecting women and children. We feel that the plan will impact on everybody and particularly the future protection of all people living on the street. Once completed and approved by the group this will be presented to Pope Francis. We can but live in hope!

The final day was memorable when we met Pope Francis in the Vatican audience hall. He is a Pope like no other in his simplicity of life. He spoke movingly to us about our need for continued dedication to this work. We are called to speak and not to be silent.



In his address to us, he said:

“No child chooses to live on the streets. Sadly, even in our modern, globalised world, any number of children continues to be robbed of their childhood, their rights and their future. Lack of legal protection and adequate structures only aggravates their state of deprivation: they have no real family or access to education or health care. Every child abandoned or forced to live on the streets, at the mercy of criminal organizations, is a cry rising up to God, who created man and woman in his own image. It is an indictment of a social system which we have criticized for decades, but which we find hard to change in conformity with criteria of justice...

I ask you, please: do not be disheartened by the difficulties and the challenges which you encounter in your dedicated work, nourished as it is by your faith in Christ, who showed, even to death on the cross, the preferential love of God our Father for the weak and the outcast. The Church cannot remain silent, nor can her institutions turn a blind eye to the painful reality of street children and street women.” (Pope Francis Address, Thursday, 18 September, 2015)

Written by Imelda Poole IBVM – Albania