

Woman's Dignity and Talitha Kum

Sr. Gabriella Bottani, cms

Coordinator of Talitha Kum

The International Network of Religious Life Against Trafficking in Persons.

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"I encourage those who work helping the men, women and children who are enslaved, exploited, abused as instruments of work or pleasure, who are often tortured and mutilated. ... May each one of us feel committed to being a voice for our brothers and sisters, who have been humiliated in their dignity."

This is the appeal of Pope Francis during the first international day of prayer and awareness against human trafficking, February 8th, memorial of Saint Bakhita.

Talitha Kum is a well-known expression, taken from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 5, verse 41. The Aramaic translates: "little girl, I say to you, arise". Jesus spoke these words to Jairo's daughter, a 12 year-old, who lay apparently lifeless. Jesus took her hand and she immediately arose and began to walk.

The global network of consecrated life committed to ending trafficking in persons took the words "Talitha Kum" to define its identity.

Talitha Kum is a powerful phrase. It calls to mind the transformative power of compassion and mercy. It awakens us from the slumber of passivity, resignation and indifference. For our Network Talitha Kum is call of hope, giving us the courage to carry on weaving together networks of freedom and dignity, witnessing to our commitment as consecrated women and men to announce the Kingdom, drawing spiritual sustenance from being with those who are set deep in darkness of social vulnerability and exploitation.

Born officially in 2009, the global network "Talitha Kum" grew from a shared desire to coordinate and improve the activities of religious women against trafficking. Currently Talitha Kum connects different networks of more than one thousand consecrated and good will people in about 80 countries on five continents. Talitha Kum is a network of networks, each one has a different organization and carried out anti-trafficking activities in compliance with the different contexts and cultures.

The central activities are: prevention of trafficking in persons, the promotion of anti-trafficking campaigns, projects and social policies to reduce the main causes of trafficking and slavery, and the accompaniment of trafficked people or in the process of social reintegration, as well as promoting collaboration and networking.

The majority of Talitha Kum's members are women. We aim to be neighbours to those who suffer the serious consequences of trafficking in persons, women, children, men. Anyone who is injured in his/her own dignity and deprived of liberty, regardless of their lifestyle, race, religion, economic condition or sexual orientation.

The Talitha Kum team in Rome has specific tasks. It was founded to empower the local networks, improving worldwide communication and sharing of information, making known the courageous and competent work of the local networks and to enlarge the network's geographical scope and outreach capacity. It is a project of the International Union of Female and Male Superior Generals.

"Women's dignity and Talitha Kum". I admit it is not easy for me to speak on this topic, as this requires me to consider the concept of dignity in the abstract. I am marked by ten years spent in Brazil sharing my life with those who are sociologically defined as "underclass", that is, those who are marginalised in our contemporary globalized world.

In Brazil, I experienced that women's dignity cannot properly be understood as an abstract principle. Dignity is something which is slowly realized in a person who has been loved and whose fundamental rights are recognized.

The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights remind us that:

"The recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

Love is expressed through concrete gestures. It can only be understood amidst the concrete realities of daily life - when it is enlivened. In the context of Talitha Kum, this means identifying closely with the needs and sorrows of the people with whom we seek to share our lives, who themselves are all unique children of God.

The Evangelist Mark told a story of daily life. The Talitha Kum Gospel (Mk. 5:21-24.35-43) communicates about how dignity was realised in Jairo's daughter. The encounter is more than a sociological category; it is the immense space of God's presence among us.

For us, these encounters in everyday life are moments of shared hope and pain with systematically exploited people and deprived of their dignity. They are moments to contemplate the presence of God. They teach us that dignity is a gift that we can give each other through sororal and fraternal relationships marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit. We dignify each other together, through daily simple gestures, sharing the joys and the pain and going on to row upstream stubbornly and with confidence, against the tide of the dominant message of a society increasingly led towards fear, indifference and individualism.

I am going to try to follow in Mark's footsteps and explain how I have seen the love of God and dignity which flows from it realised in three encounters between survivors of trafficking and Talitha Kum sisters.

“In a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people’s lives, shamelessly given over to morbid curiosity. The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this “art of accompaniment” which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other. (cf. Ex 3:5)”ⁱⁱ

Welcoming the invitation of Pope Francis, let us take off our sandals. We stand on the geographical and existential outskirts, defined by people living in poverty, insecurity and violence but also by the deep desire for dignity and fullness of life.

First Encounter: “Are you interested in my life?”

Mariana was 12. She was sexually exploited and forced to transport drugs. Sometimes she would visit a socio-educational centre, seeking support.

One day at the centre she was particularly furious and violent. “People like me have no value” were her sharp words. The sister in charge of the centre asked her what was wrong. She shouted loudly in response: “Mind your business. Are you interested in my life?” The answer was simple and clear: “I’m interested in you!” Mariana looked at the sister near to her and asked unbelieving: “Are you interested in me?!” That day Mariana told her whole story and her great pain of being abandoned by her mother when she was a little baby. Her childhood had been spent between her grandmother’s house, a neighbour and, more recently, with a number of different men. One year before she moved in with her boyfriend, a drug dealer, who had exploited her. At 12 Mariana’s dignity, innocence and life had been destroyed. That day, for the first time in her life, she had the opportunity to share some of her wounds, beginning with the heavy words that her mother repeated every time she met her: “When the doctor told me that I was pregnant with you, I would have preferred he had told me that I had cancer.”

Today Mariana asks us a question: “Am I, are you, are we really interested in exploited or trafficked people? Who will take care of the millions of women and men, girls and boys and children living in absolute poverty, in unsafe places, in situations of social vulnerability? They are real people, individuals, each one with her/his own history. They are not anonymous numbers and statistics.

The encounter of Mariana with this Talitha Kum sister invites us all to renew sincerely our interest in the lives of our brothers and sisters through our solidarity with them. This requires us to take a genuine interest in the lives of those who are suffering, recognizing that each person is unique and that loving them in solidarity means building relationships based upon deep respect. This is the most often manifested in small gestures. Our attempt to give to others the dignity they deserve begins with simple signs of love. The dignity of everyone in this room has been realised this way. Pope Francis remind us:

“This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their

culture, and in their ways of living the faith. True love is always contemplative, and permits us to serve the other.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Second Encounter – “Which is the alternative you offer to me?”

Talia's story tells of one of the greatest challenges to women's dignity. She was a teenager, sexually exploited on the most important beach in Brazilian city: Fortaleza. She encountered Talitha Kum when she attended a workshop organized by the religious against trafficking. Her story is sadly common in Brazil. Talia was born in a “favela”, she wanted a better life: a house, good clothes and shoes, perfumes. She wants to be like the girls she watched on the TV and she saw in advertisements. Invited to escape from poverty to find a better future, she accepted a job as a waitress in the city centre. When she began working, she realised immediately that her work was very different to the job she thought she was going to do. The very day she arrived she was exploited in a massage centre, enslaved to pay off a very high debt. However, Talia was not able to recognize she was exploited, or that the daily violence perpetrated against her was wrong because she had the opportunity to consume and to have what she had dreamed of back in the favela. Her only concern was to have branded perfumes, clothes and a cell phone, regardless of the cost. During the meeting, Talia said: "You are speaking about dignity; you affirm that all we are sons and daughters of God. But which kind of dignity do you offer to me?"

And she continued in a tone of voice between resignation and anger:

"Which alternative do you offer to girls like me? Your professional training courses, when we are lucky, allow us to get into your world through the back door, to clean, wash dishes, as waiters or we have to work 16 hours a day sitting at the sewing machine. This is not life. Now I enter your world through the front door. The clients bring me to restaurant, pizzeria or to the hotel. I can afford everything I want to buy, including a cell phone. This is dignity!"

Talia bluntly confronts us with the ambiguity and hypocrisy of our society, and consequently the necessity to work out a strategy to tackle the root causes of trafficking in persons. With the advent of modernity, the society of producers is transformed into a society of consumers. In this new society, individuals become simultaneously the promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote^{iv}. I consume, therefore I am. In the consuming life many freely exchange their liberty and dignity for commodities. From this warped perspective, people and their dignity and freedom are commodities to sell and buy. The dominant development model where the rich get richer and the poor poorer, makes it difficult to find a suitable and interesting alternative to promote the access to the basic human rights. Our commitment to human dignity against trafficking in persons struggles to compete with the consumer-driven media.

The words of Talia are as indelible and awkward, as the bodies and the faces of many trafficked people marked by violence, social exclusion and exploitation. The first time I heard Talia speak, I felt uncomfortable. My first instinct was to defend

the good work done by so many social, educational and reserializations projects led worldwide by religious women and many other organizations. But I understood that it was not the time to justify our activities which are, I believe, excellent. What Talia needed was for us to listen and to allow the stress and mournfulness of her cry deep within me.

Talia teaches us compassion and mercy. She invites us to enter in her world to stay with her, living with her the distress caused by the deep desire of a better life and simultaneous helplessness. To promote and enhance women's dignity Talitha Kum's members are convinced about the imperative to eradicate the causes underlying the phenomenon of human trafficking. Many of them are structural. In Talitha Kum, we work towards greater solidarity, sharing and sustainability to contrast the dominant socio-economic model with its exploitation mentality and concentration of economic and financial power and decision-making in the hands of few people.

Talia presents us the paradox experienced by billions of people living below the poverty line, in the context of globalised consumerism. It is difficult to be and live without collecting commodities. Items such as mobile phones, brand perfumes, belts or shoes enable people to feel part of society and a worthy, dignified person. However, in order to access consumer goods, many people like Talia, give up their human dignity, liberty and physical integrity, and suffer any kind of violence: physical, sexual, psychological and symbolic. In order to have commodities, Talia has to become as a commodity. The price she has to pay is too high. The trafficker lures people into a vicious circle of consuming and debt. Rarely can trafficked people pay their debt, leading to dependence and eventual exploitation. On tropical beaches in Brazil, girls like Talia earn about a thousand of dollars per week. None of this money remains in their hands.

Talia challenges us to take action to offer a credible alternative. To denounce all the causes of trafficking including the systems based on all forms of exploitation of resources for economic purposes, which promote the culture of relativism, consumerism, and wastage. The main risk group are those who live below the poverty line, and 70% are women!^v

The same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labour on them or enslaving them to pay their debts. The same kind of thinking leads to the sexual exploitation of children It is also the mindset of those who say: Let us allow the invisible forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their impact on society and nature as collateral damage. In the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs, what limits can be placed on human trafficking? ...This same "use and throw away" logic generates so much waste, because of the disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary.^{vi}

Promoting human dignity requires individual, cultural and socio-economic conversion. Talitha Kum aims to go beyond superficial attempts to prevent

trafficking, proposing new alternatives, testifying with our life style that other models of development are possible.

Third encounter - "I can be a Saint!"

The third encounter is with Julien one of the many people who are treated by our society as if they have any value. She is counted among the many illiterate women, living on less than \$ 2 a day. She is head family of 9 people (a son, six daughters and two nieces). She had no home, and was living in a slum without sewers. Julien as child and teenager was been sexually abused several times. She is a survivor of trafficking for exploitation in domestic work. Julien became a dear friend to me.

One day we met at the market. I had bought hygienic material commonly used by women. Julien stunned asked me, why I bought such things. I said, "Because my community needs it, what's the matter?" Astonished she replied: "Are not all sisters saints, like Mary the mother of Jesus, Saint Lucy, and Saint Theresa? You are not women like me!" I was speechless. I tried to explain her that religious women and the saints are persons, women and men with flesh and blood, like her and everybody. She looked at me mistrustfully and she did not say anything else. Julien became serious and thoughtful. I was not able to decipher her silence, so I asked her if she felt better or worse to know that sisters and saints were women like her. She smiled softly with her eyes and her wide-open toothless mouth and she said, "This is wonderful!" I was completely confused, unable to understand. Promptly I asked her why. Without thinking, she answered: "It means that I can be a saint too". We carried on walking in silence, contemplating together the presence of Christ among us.

Julien is giving us a message of hope; her life is memorial of Christ, Eucharist.

The encounter with Julien shows the centrality of evangelization and pastoral care to the promotion of human dignity. It is also an invitation to be careful with the language we use when we speak about God and his kingdom. There are messages that can divide and separate, even leading to discrimination and judgement - even words like saints, sinners; poor, rich; women, men; adults, children; black and white; graduates, illiterates; worthy and unworthy; employed, unemployed.

"We are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives" so pope Francis. "Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness."^{vii}

Our desire to respect human dignity requires us to be creative, daring and compassionate in our mission, so that we can rediscover perpetually the flavour

and beauty of life in Jesus, announcing the Kingdom. Dignity is not a commodity to be consumed, but a precious gift by virtue of our being created, male and female in the image and likeness of God (Gn. 1:26). We all belong to one humanity, one body. It is this that enables us to dare to say “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ”^{viii}.

There are tens of millions of people like Mariana, Talia and Julien. For us in Talitha Kum they are the Burning Bush of the presence of God among us (Ex. 3:1-10), who calls and sends.

The psychosocial consequences for trafficked people are devastating. The experience of Talitha Kum is that the dignity of women who have been exploited can be restored through the mysterious encounter of God in our humanity.

Talitha Kum is a common endeavour of consecrated life to discover the geographical and existential outskirts of humanity and to go there to be with those who have been exploited or who are in vulnerable situations. We are part of this same humanity, each disfigured in their own dignity to some degree. Together, we must “keep calling to God day and night, even though [it seems] he still delays to help us” (Lk. 18:7)

We are all pilgrims on the road to God - journey which is too long for us (see 1King 19:7). Therefore let us eat and draw strength from the bread of compassion, solidarity and mercy, and arise together every day again and to fulfill our common mission to announce and to be witness of the Kingdom of God.

My Talitha Kum experience has taught me the importance of weaving together networks, if we want to prevent and transform the culture supporting a multinational phenomenon as complex and multifactorial as trafficking in persons.

Faith strengthens us to collaboration, “to set off” despite our fragility, and to walk out to encounter us together, sisters and brothers on the road, repeating patiently and humbly “Talitha Kum, arise” stretching out our hands, in the hope that together we can realise the inherent dignity of every person.

e-mail: uisg_talithakum@yahoo.it

ⁱ Pope Francis, Angelus , 8th February 2015

ⁱⁱ Pope Francis; Evangelii Gaudium 169

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., 199

^{iv} Bauman Zygmund; Consuming Life; UK - April 2007; Polity Press.

^v Source UN www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/Media_and_public_information/Press_releases/lang-en/WCMS_008066/index.htm

^{vi} Pope Francis, Laudato Sii, 123

^{vii} Pope Francis; Misericordiae Voltus – Bull of Indiction of the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy

^{viii} Gaudium et Spes