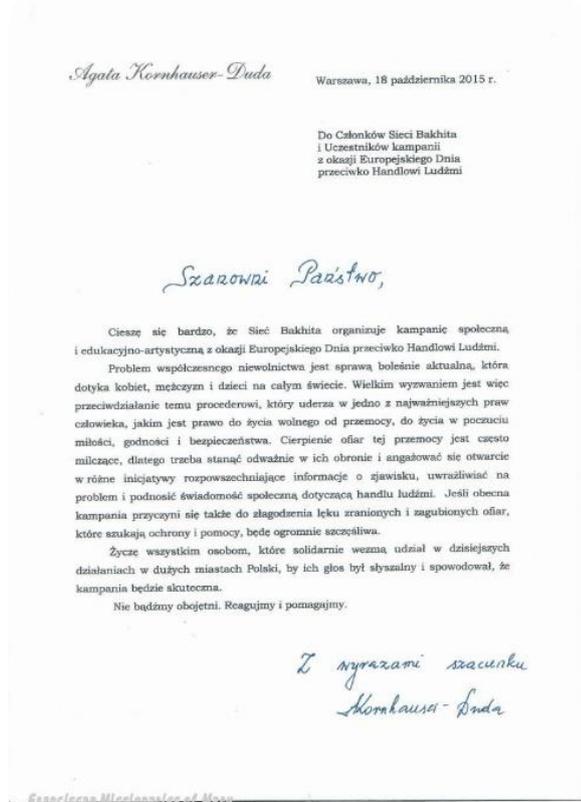


## EUROPEAN DAY AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING: WARSAW, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2015

### A Reflection by Sr. Agnieszka Chwalińska FMM

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> October was the day of a *Campaign against Human Trafficking\**, initiated and organised mainly by the *Bakhita Network\*\** in conjunction with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, the Alliance of Mercy Community and people from various other communities.

Several weeks before the event, Sr. Joanna Lipowska FMM together with Paulina Spratek and Justyna Chłodny (the Alliance of Mercy Community) decided to put into words what had been stirring in their hearts for so long: a desire to express their solidarity with the victims of human trafficking, too often voiceless and forgotten. Their goal was to make others aware of the problem and encourage people to go out into the streets and become a voice crying out for dignity and respect of those who are enslaved. All those who decided to join in the campaign – individuals as well as communities - in different towns and cities of Poland, received a booklet containing a set of suggestions, ideas, rules and information to give guidance when organising a similar event.



In Warsaw, the FMM sisters found support and great understanding amongst the Alliance of Mercy Community members. The suggestion to join in with the European Day against Human Trafficking was welcomed with enthusiasm and seen as a mission of sharing mercy with the most needy. Some of those who volunteered felt confident to be part of the street mime, others distributed materials and shared information. There were workshops organised to familiarise the volunteers with the problem of human trafficking and to instruct them on offering possible help to the victims. The whole process required a lot of preparation. Often people attended after a tiring day of work or studies: some for rehearsals, others to learn the art of communicating effectively about prevention; how to handle possible reactions to the problem and source information on where to get help for the victims.

The long awaited Sunday came eventually. Despite the weather forecast, the day was not bright and sunny. The Old City of Warsaw looked sad and dull as rain drizzled down. Yet nobody seemed discouraged: instead, we saw it as a sign from the Lord – sadness, fear, cold and tears are often the reality of those suffering as contemporary slaves. So even the weather helped us to feel solidarity with the victims, to sense their world through feeling cold and longing for a ray of sunshine.



At 3 p.m., praying the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, we entrusted our campaign to the Merciful God. Strengthened with His power, we took to the streets of Warsaw.

Our first “station” was by St Anne’s church. On the previous week, as people gathered in the church after mass, they were informed about the forthcoming campaign and its goal. Now

one of us reminded the faithful about the main issues related to human trafficking and how to help the victims. Most of those leaving the church afterwards stopped to watch the street mime. Also, the passers-by stopped to watch. Some took photos while others filmed the mime. The serious expressions and many emotions on their faces spoke volumes. They seemed deeply touched and willingly accepted small cards with prayers and information.

Next, we moved on towards the Sigismund's Column square, where another "station" had been planned. Our mime performers were truly amazing: no one could be unaffected. The brave volunteers did everything to invite strolling pedestrians to join in. Many people were surprised that a person approaching them did not expect money or any donations, but instead simply wanted to raise awareness of the suffering of others, so often living around us. Somebody shared with one of our volunteers, "The victims are no different to any man and woman who, even once in their lives, felt powerless, betrayed, cheated, humiliated and lonely in his or her suffering".



The campaign continued through the streets. Our "actors", though soaked with rain, created a very realistic scene of a "transaction" between a dealer and a buyer. At some point, when they held one of the victims, an elderly lady from the surrounding crowd started beating up the 'dealer' with her umbrella! She cried in desperation, "Let her go, what are you doing to this poor girl!" After others explained the pageant to her, she was relieved and took some of the information pamphlets. What a moving experience! We could ask ourselves, how often have we passed by, indifferent to those in need...?

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The volunteers talked with many people, and not only in Polish, but also in English, French, German, Italian, Ukrainian... They had various encounters, but the majority of people listened to them and were willing to discuss the topic, often also sharing the sense of pain and helplessness. Some people refused to stop and talk or accept the pamphlets distributed. A few people admitted that their own situation was very complicated, revealing they were victims of slavery and gratefully accepting cards containing helpline phone numbers. At one point, we learned from the city guards that somebody had called their hotline, complaining about us and demanding they stop the campaign.

So it seems not everyone was pleased with what we were doing! Despite that our event continued, as we had secured all the necessary permits required for our public campaign.



At 5.30 p.m. we arrived at the welcoming monastery of the Franciscan Conventual Friars, where we warmed up and reflected on the afternoon's work so far. After an hour and a half there, the whole group went back to St. Ann's church where once more, our tireless actors performed the mime. The volunteers invited people to come and join us for Adoration and Mass for the intention of the victims, which were undoubtedly at the heart of our campaign. We were so happy to see crowds of people – many of them young – filling

the church. We also recognised some whom we had met earlier on the streets.

Adoring our Lord, we entrusted to Him the torment and longing of our enslaved sisters and brothers; we asked God to open our hearts and to make us expressions of His mercy. Our prayer was beautifully

accompanied by music and singing of the “Brighter Day” students’ musical group. It was a precious time of prayer for the victims, the perpetrators and also for people who selflessly help those in need.



During the Eucharist, there were many moments of prayer for the victims of human trafficking. The Word of God for this Sunday spoke of service and not domination, which echoed the intention we were praying for. Sr. Joanna Lipowska, FMM, gave a touching and moving account of her work with “Solwodi” in Germany, helping women forced in to prostitution. Her words challenged our attitudes, called us to pray and encouraged us to look for concrete ways to be involved in working against human trafficking.

At the end of the Mass, Fr. Zbigniew Kras, chaplain to Polish President Andrzej Duda, read a letter from our First Lady, Agata Kornhauser-Duda, praising the campaign and underlining the need to fight against contemporary forms of slavery.

To conclude, I would like once again to remind you of Pope Francis’ message. May it be dedicated to you and I who are reading this article about the European Day against Human Trafficking in Warsaw.



*Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help!*

Let us be moved to act... Let us give even a little of our time and our lives to those, whose lives have been deprived of so many things. LET US BE THERE FOR THEM.

Written by Sr. Agnieszka Chwalińska FMM, the Campaign’s volunteer

*\*„Put an End to Modern Slavery” was the title of the Campaign which will take place on 18th October 2015 in the big cities of Poland: Warsaw, Katowice, Lublin, Zamość, Wrocław, Przemyśl, Cracow and Piaseczno. This initiative of Bakhita Network will commemorate the ninth European Day Against Human Trafficking.*

*\*\*Bakhita Network functions under the umbrella of the Conference of Major Superiors of Female Religious Orders in Poland.*

Revised and amended by Anne Kelleher, RENATE Communications Person