

# **Opening Address: Cardinal Vincent Nichols**

Latin American Meeting on New Slavery and Human Trafficking  
"Together against Trafficking in Persons"

*Saturday, 9 Feb 2019*

1. I welcome you and thank you most sincerely for your presence and participation in this meeting. Many words of welcome and thanks have already been expressed and I do not need to repeat them, although they are strongly present in my heart.

I would like to thank particularly the Episcopal Conference of Argentina, through the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, the Episcopal Commission of Social Pastoral and the National Commission of Justice and Peace and the Argentinian Federal Police.

The challenge that the eyes of faith see before us today is to work to our utmost to rescue, protect, assist and serve the poorest of the Father's children who have been sold into slavery even as Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers 'in the beginning' (Gen 37.32).

Our aim in this conference is to hear of the work currently being done and to help build trust between the Church, the police and different agencies so our work can best serve all those held in slavery.

2. Human trafficking is a scourge on the face of humanity. Over 40 million people are currently trafficked and held in modern slavery, according to the most recent figures from the United Nations.

Here in Argentina there has been internationally recognised improvements in the responses to human trafficking. Victim identification is up with over 1,100 victims identified in 2017. Prosecutions are up, and victims are encouraged to participate in the trials of traffickers through the provision of support throughout the court process.

A Rescue Program provides psychological reports to detail what requirements they might have to assist in the prosecution of traffickers and support of victims and importantly there have been no cases known where victims are wrongfully prosecuted.

All these measures are reflected in the commitment I have witnessed of Commissioner Roncaglia and his respect for fellow human beings since he joined us at the first Santa Marta Group Conference five years ago.

3. i) Our commitment to the struggle against human trafficking, as we see developing here, lies in our commitment to those who need protection from becoming a victim. And it is these victims that are so often forgotten by society. In all that we do, whether it is the pursuit of criminals and criminal activity, or the eradication of slavery from supply chains in industry, or the detection of illegal profits passing through the banking sector, or the political drive to strengthen legal provisions against human trafficking, we have to maintain at the centre of our motivation the person, the vulnerable person who is the target of the exploiter. The focus must be on the human lives and how we put an end to the suffering and marginalisation endured by 40 million people across our world.

ii) This is the key to our work because the key conviction we share is that of the dignity of every human being. This dignity, which we seek to uphold and protect, is inherent in the nature of every person. It is not dependent on their status, their race, their sexuality, their religion. Increasingly states and legislation are defining the rights of every person which have to be upheld. What legislation and legislators do not do, however, is to recognise the source of those rights, which is the inherent dignity of the person. Human rights, then, are not bestowed by states, nor by legislation, nor by family of origin, nor by wealth, status or power. Those rights arise from that dignity and that dignity, in the eyes of faith, comes from God alone.

iii) This truth is constantly affirmed in Catholic teaching. It finds a fine expression in the Final Document of your Continental meeting at Aparaceida, in paragraph 64. I quote:

'We bless God for the dignity of the human person, created in his image and likeness. He has created us free and made us subjects of rights and duties in the midst of creation. We thank him for associating us with the advancement of the world, by giving us intelligence and the ability to love; for the dignity that we also receive and which we must as a task, protect, cultivate, and promote. We bless Him for the gift of faith that enables us to live in covenant with Him until we share eternal life. We bless him for making us his daughters and sons in Christ, for having redeemed us with the price of his blood and for the permanent relationship that he establishes with us, which is the source of our absolute, non-negotiable, and inviolable dignity. If sin has weakened the image of God in human beings and wounded their condition, the Good News, which is Christ, has redeemed and re-established it in grace (cf. Rom 5: 12-21).'

iv) These, and many other fine expressions of the greatness of the human person and of our eternal destiny, can sound rather idealistic. They can come across as a type of wishful thinking, especially if we who proclaim them are ourselves comfortable and secure. For there is a reality running through our world, through our entire human family, which is quite the contrary. Every day we come face to face with what is simply known as the 'mysterium iniquitatis', the presence of evil, which we struggle to understand and even to counter. This, too, is a starting point for our reflection on the important task before us, that of countering the evil of human trafficking.

v) If our words and our work are to find credibility, then we have to have the courage to look this evil in the face and not hide or deny its features and the ways in which it touches us. This is true of human trafficking. It is also true of the gross evil of the abuse of children and vulnerable people, which is also present among us and which has, shamefully, found a dwelling place within our Church. We need to allow our thinking and reflecting to take seriously the corruption and evil that surrounds us. Only then will our proclamation of human dignity begin to have a lasting impact.

vi) Allow me here to quote words from a recent book published by the Abbot of Mount St Bernard, a Cistercian Monastery in England. He writes:

'The Church has permitted me to read my banal, sometimes squalid life into a narrative of redemption that reaches back not only to time's beginning but remembers forward into eternity. To stay within that narrative's crux is to hear, sometimes with terrifying clarity, the desolate cries of mankind; to hear, too, the rasping voice of evil; and that not vaguely round about, but in one's heart. One can only persevere in such hearing by attending, at the same time, to another discreet but ordering voice that speaks, 'It is accomplished!' It manages, by harmonic genius, to fathom the violent cries of 'Crucify!' and the angelic 'Hosanna!' into a single chord that rises out of this dissonance towards unheard beauty.'

This is our task: to hold together, everyday, the brutal reality of evil, in all its forms, with the reality of our God-given human dignity. As the Abbot continues: 'Evil inflicts real wounds that demand to be seen and wept for. They are not, though, beyond healing if irradiated by a glimmer of the fire that obliterates the night, the fire that has come into the world as love and simply needs kindling to burn.' He concludes by saying that the vocation of a monk 'is to offer one's life as dry wood for this purpose'. ('The Shattering of Loneliness' by Erik Varden). This can be our inspiration, too.

vii) The figure of Adam and the narrative of the Book of Genesis brings together these two foundations for our work and cooperation: the dignity of the person and the reality of evil. Adam, unlike the rest of creation, is made not only by the word but also by the hand of God. Adam receives the very breath of God and is made to be a companion of God. We read that God walked in the Garden of Eden, the home God made for Adam and Eve, in the cool of the evening (Gen 3.8). Adam and Eve were companions for God, for God created the human person to share for ever in the intimacy of the life of God. But sin breaks that bond. Adam and Eve are distanced from God. They lost the Garden of that intimacy and, henceforth, 'with the sweat of your brow shall you eat your bread' (Gen 3.19). Disorder, violence, exploitation breaks out until Lamech, the descendent of Cain, declares: 'I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me. Sevenfold vengeance is taken for Cain, but seventy-sevenfold for Lamech' (Gen 4.23).

Yet despite all the clamour of evil, the breath of God still resides in every human being. The reality and presence of that breath gives rise in our bodies and souls to a longing for something more, a long-lost wholeness, which can no longer name. It finds its fulfilment, of course, in the person of Jesus, the one name in which such wholeness can be found. Jesus, too, is the one who announces forgiveness 'seventy times seven' in reversal of that ancient curse.

viii) The work of redemption to which we give ourselves, is the work of restoring the reality of that ancient promise, which is never withdrawn, but from which we distance ourselves. We turn our backs on that promise constantly by believing that the promises we make to ourselves are more immediate, more attainable, more satisfying. We turn away from the horizon of light and choose a closed-in world which is quickly marked by deceits and failures. Yet, in the gift of faith, we remember the name which shows us the Way. We do not forget his promise to be with us. We remember that the deepest yearning, the longing of which we are made, can come to its complete satisfaction. We are not made for futility but for fulfilment. Then we also remember that we are called, in that name, to a mission: that of shining his 'irradiating light' into all the world's darkest places. And one of those is, without doubt, the darkness of human trafficking.

ix) Every victim of human trafficking lives, in a particularly intense way, the drama of Adam and Eve. They have reached out for a promised fruit only to find that it is a fruit that is corrupt and a promise that is false. They fall into the nothingness of dehumanising slavery, losing every shred of autonomy, every prospect or hope, enduring daily cruelty and the most demeaning of work. Yet the breath of God moves in them still and they long for the light. It is our

determination to work for that to be restored to them. And to that end we must work together.

4. Our Santa Marta project of creating and sustaining practical and effective cooperation between the forces of law and order and the resources of the Church and civil society depends, above all, on the trust that can be established between these partners. My hope is that such a shared vision of why we are ready to commit to one another may help to build that trust. This vision, of the true nature of human dignity and of the way in which we are to face the reality of this evil in our midst, has to be translated into practical steps. These are some of those steps:

- i) That the person always remains at the centre of our action and awareness;
- ii) That the focus of police activity, therefore is prevention and of course the pursuit of the perpetrators of this evil. Illegal immigrants are often among these victims. If this cooperation is to develop, then we need to be of one mind that the illegality of the presence or activity of the victim is not made into the aim of anti-trafficking work or legislation. And if a victim is prosecuted, the entire response can be undermined, trust is lost and the very person we have a duty to protect suffers not just at the hands of the trafficker, but also at the hands of the State.
- iii) That the rescuing and rehabilitation of victims is a work that is to be shared so that not only can victims be helped back into the light but so that, gradually, they will gain in strength and confidence to become part of the process of prosecution of their traffickers
- iv) That together we seek to educate the communities so that their eyes are opened to the invisible reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in their midst.
- v) That we work together to find the resources needed for this work, resources from public funding, from police budgets, from charitable foundations and giving.

5. The work of establishing trust as the basis for this continuing cooperation is helped by the exchange of experience which will now follow. Trust includes being able to challenge without fear of exclusion and being able to listen, often to a voice that is silent and may have spent many years being silenced.

During this time and in your contributions may I ask you to remember that we are best served by candid speaking. As was said at a previous meeting of the Santa Marta Group, 'It is better to hear bad news that is true than to listen to good news that is false!' May that advice guide our way forward into a deeper commitment to this work and a stronger partnership in it.

**Cardinal Vincent Nichols**

*President, Santa Marta Group*