

The theme of this year's 9th International Day of Prayer and Awareness against human trafficking is called "Journeying in Dignity."

This word "journeying" speaks to us of the journey that we are all making through life together. Pope Francis reminds us that the Second Vatican Council emphasizes that this dignity is inalienable because it "was created 'to the image of God.'" In modern culture, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is "the reference closest to the principle of the inalienable dignity of the person." This declaration is a "milestone on the long and difficult journey of the human race" and we seek to treat every human person with the care, compassion and tenderness that they need in order to flourish.

Journeying in dignity in the light of human trafficking calls us three important capacities – firstly to grow in awareness, secondly to encounter those who have been exploited and thirdly to undergo a personal conversion. On this day of prayer and awareness we are challenged first of all to become increasingly aware of the ways in which people trample on the human dignity of others. Through a multiplicity of ways women, men, young people and children are trafficked and exploited. They are objectified and forced into sexual exploitation, early child marriages, oppressive labour situations; they are preyed on for harvesting their organs and they suffer in a myriad of other ways in which people lose all sense of their personal dignity and worst of all they lose hope and trust. By exploiting people's hopes and dreams, by offering false promises, by various manipulative practices, thousands of women, men, young people and children find themselves trapped and enslaved. Can you and I look around our different societies in which we live and identify trafficked people who are hidden in plain sight. They are there in the fishing, agricultural, hospitality and service industries. The Scripture reminds us that "there are none so blind as my servants, they see and they do not see; they hear and they do not hear." Does that describe me? Describe us? Do we ever have the courage to look into the eyes of the other and ask why they reflect sadness and desperation? Do we ever ask them are you well? Is there anything I can do for you? Can I help you? Thousands of people do exactly that and they are the heroes and heroines of today; the saints of today.

Secondly on this journey we need to encounter one another. This is a meeting that has both depth and heart. In an encounter there is a mutuality where we meet the other and we change one another. Whenever we meet a person who has been trafficked, exploited and objectified we come face to face with our own limitations, with the ways in which we have turned away from those who are suffered and closed our hearts in some way. We see our own ways of excluding and objectifying another. We perhaps face ways in which we ourselves have suffered exploitation. On this human journey Pope Francis reminds us that if we do not take care of one another, starting with the least, with those who are most impacted, including

creation.....we cannot heal the world. In the mutuality of an encounter we can heal one another.

Finally our theme of journeying in dignity reminds us of our synodal journey where we are all walking together, encountering one another, conversing with one another, shedding light on the ways in which we are being called to conversion to change. For human dignity is the same for all human beings; when I trample on the dignity of another, I am rambling on my own.

Let us pray for the restoration of the dignity of all of our brothers and sisters:

O Lord, open our hearts to respect and uplift the dignity of every person. Open our eyes to see the scourge of human trafficking. Open our ears to listen and learn from the experiences of people who have been enslaved in one way or another. Open our mouths to speak out against prejudice and injustice. We commit ourselves to work for the elimination of human trafficking, and to pursue a deeper relationship to you, Lord, so that we truly may be the body of Christ on earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

May the day ahead of prayer and reflection; of sharing stories and actions be truly blessed as we join together as sisters and brothers across the world, crying out for healing and wholeness and dignity for all.