



The Prophetic Role of Women Religious

in Counter-Trafficking:

The Strength of Networking

Rome: November, 2016

Introduction:

Dear Members of Renate, we have gathered in Rome to celebrate the Second General Assembly at a time when the Church is concluding the special Year of the Jubilee of Mercy. During the past year all of us have been in a special way living this time by breaking the chains of many people in captivity, mainly young women and children to free them from slavery and exploitation. The works of Mercy as well as the Parable of the Good Samaritan have become our icons guiding us to live fully and practically the spirit of the Jubilee of Mercy: “Who is my neighbor?”..... “Go and do the same”.

Being the “old Mama” - as the girls use to call me - and have been dealing with this ministry since 1993 when in Italy, as well as in other parts of Europe, religious congregations were facing a new challenge in living their specific charism, I fill the need to recall the history of the many events that made it possible for all of us to be here today in such a great number. Congratulations. To all of you a warm welcome and a sincere “Thank you” for your presence, interest and commitment.

Many times Pope Francis has repeated that without the memory of the past there will be no future. And we are here to share our experiences in dealing with this special healing ministry by building a solid network in response to the signs of the times.

What I wish to share with you now will be recalling and high-lightening some events that in a special way started in the year 2000, the year of another Jubilee. It is therefore meaningful to link the past with the present situation to rediscover the value and richness of working together in synergy and in unity, not in competition.

In my sharing I will recall some important events, that starting from Rome, as a small seed it has spread all over the world forming a strong network between countries of origin, transit and destination. In a special way my attention will be given to:

1. The awareness among different congregations and collaboration with local and international organizations
2. opening shelters to rescue victims from the streets and helping them to regain their freedom, dignity and legality

3. The need of professional formation courses for personnel engaged in this ministry as well as the need to cooperate with other organizations
4. Cooperation in dealing with prevention, reintegration and repatriation projects
5. Contacts between countries of origin, transit and destination
6. Awareness programs in schools, parishes, media, locally and internationally
7. Contacts and cooperation with Embassies to provide identification documents.

I wish to recall now some specific events and dates we lived in the past years to combat human trafficking; they were the mile stones in building up a strong network:

- **2000:** In Italy the first network was started by USMI by opening a specific office dealing with counter trafficking and coordinating the ministry of over 200 sisters belonging to 70 congregations. A first map of shelters and personnel was started.

In the same year 2000 USMI invited 3 Nigerian Sisters to visit Italy to see what has been happening to their young people on the Italian streets; since then a strong collaboration and information was implemented, mainly among religious sisters.

- **2002:** The first international conference on human trafficking was organized by the US Ambassador to the Holy See in Rome. A big group of religious took part in it and their presence and commitment was noticed and appreciated by the organizers. Later on a stronger link of cooperation had been established.
- **2003:** A group of sisters from different countries and congregations started a weekly visit to immigrant women held in a Temporary Detention Center in Ponte Galeria, Rome, awaiting deportation because they had no legal documents. At that time their number was around 150 young women from different countries mainly brought to Italy for prostitution. From 2003 - 2013 this ministry was carried out with great joy and dedication by 60 sisters from 27 different countries and belonging to 26 congregations. This ministry is still carried out every week.
- **2004:** In collaboration with OIM the first four formation courses for sisters started in: Rome, Albania, Rumania and Nigeria. After this first pilot program many other countries benefited by such courses. Similar courses have now been organized by Talitha Kum in many other Countries and Continents where the phenomenon of human trafficking is felt.
- **2007:** A shelter was built in Nigeria to receive and help victims returning home because they had no proper documents. The building was financed by the Italian Episcopal Conference with the mediation of USMI Counter trafficking office.
- **2007:** Another important event took place in Rome: The first international conference of 33 women religious from 26 different countries. This programme was organized and supported by the US Embassy to the Holy See in collaboration with USMI Counter Trafficking Office; its main aim was to create a stronger network of religious sisters working in different continents to link with countries of origin, transit and destination. The participants launched an international

network: INRATIP (*International Network of Religious Against Trafficking in People*) and drafted a Public Statement addressed to institutions and other bodies concerned and involved in trafficking in human beings. Some of you present in this Assembly today have also taken part in such a great event. Soon after UISG took over this ministry as part of an international body by creating a new structure that absorbed also INRATIP that took the name of TALITHA-Kum.

- **UISG/IOM Congress:** three important seminars were organised in Rome, in 2008, in 2009 and in 2011, for representatives of different networks of women religious with the aim to create a stronger international network involving and connecting National Religious Conferences and Congregations dealing with this ministry. **Talitha Kum** is the name of the new international network of Sisters. The network was launched officially in 2010
- **2009: RENATE** - *Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation* was started as a new European network established in March 2009. It is an inclusive network of Religious from East and Western Europe. **RENAME** organized its first conference in September 2011 in Krakow, Poland, where 80 Religious from East and West Europe took part.
- **2013:** The election of Pope Francis gave a great support to our ministry. We met him personally in September, 20th and submitted to him a special request: An annual world day of prayer and reflection to be celebrated in the whole Church with the aim of creating a stronger awareness among Episcopal Conferences, parishes, congregations, different associations as well as media....
- **2014 – 2015:** This special day took place with many initiatives on the February 8th feast day of St. Bahkita, a little slave that became a Saint.
- **2013:** A new Association called “Slaves no more” was started in Italy to deal with a voluntary repatriation project of Nigerian women that after failing to be legally settled in Italy accepted the opportunity to return home and start a new life. The project covers a safe travelling expenses and a financed support for a personalized project to start a new life in a dignified manner. The project is implemented in Nigeria with the cooperation of Nigerian Sisters both in Lagos and Benin City. So far 24 women and 10 children have been benefitted by such project. Such project has been supported by Caritas Italiana with a financial help of the Italian Bishops Conference.

Building a Global Networking

Throughout the past few years, much has been achieved in giving voice, protection and hope to many voiceless women; however, much more still needs to be done to break this new and invisible chain, to rescue our young girls and give them back their stolen dignity. This can be achieved only if we can work together keeping in mind three C:

- ❖ Communion
- ❖ Cooperation
- ❖ Communication

Against the great temptation of competition that destroys our organizations and our ministry we are all called to work in communion and not in competition.

Conclusion: Who is my Neighbour?

In a global world, each of us is called to build a better future by joining together in the fight against all forms of poverty, discrimination, exploitation and inequality to build a society where everybody is accepted, valued, respected, appreciated and loved. No woman is born to be a “prostitute,” but simply reduced to slavery by our consumer society. Women and men must be rescued, rehabilitated and reintegrated to form a new global family where everybody has an important role to play to ensure that we live in harmony, peace and love. Christ the Redeemer has the power to break all the chains that bind so that people and let them to be freed.

In accordance with the new demands of a world that is constantly changing and in search of justice, solidarity, dignity and respect for the rights of every person, especially the weak and the vulnerable, we are also called to offer our contribution.

Only by networking and collaborating we can find success in our ministry to break the invisible chain of human trafficking, and give new hope to women, children and men who have been broken and exploited.

In rediscovering our own prophetic role in the Church of Christ, as women religious together with all members of the global Christian community, we will respond in a concrete and clear way to the question: "**Who is my neighbour?**" The answer cannot but be, "**Go and do the same!**"

May God help us to make His and our dream for a world free from slavery and exploitation become a reality, by “working in communion and not in competition”.

Thank you for your attention.

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