

Workshop on Human Trafficking. Toronto, Canada. March 2012.



The **CANADIAN LORETTOS** recently organised a seminar on **HUMAN TRAFFICKING** that attracted much interest from a wide range of people, including male and female high schools students. A federal MP, who has introduced a number of bills on the prosecution and sentencing of human traffickers, opened the proceedings. After a moving testimony by a trafficking survivor, three activists working at the national and international level took the floor: an ex-policeman, a First Nations woman and the Canadian director of International Justice Mission. Evanne Hunter ibvm (Provincial Leader) set the scene for the day in the following manner.

How fitting it is that we should be here on this day, the 2nd United Nations “International Day for the Right to the Truth for Victims of Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims”. In proclaiming this new UN day last year, Ban Ki Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, also instituted “Romero Day” as he paid tribute to the Salvadoran Archbishop, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who was shot dead at the altar during Mass at the behest of pro-government Armed Forces on March 24, 1980, an act clearly intended to silence an ardent opponent of repression.

Today’s conference is the fruit of a gathering of more than a hundred IBVMs and lay colleagues in mission in Toronto last May. One of the aims of that gathering was reflection on our experience in the light of the reality in which we live and work in more than 40 countries on all five continents. This reflection, in the true Ignatian tradition, resulted in discernment about how to be what God wants us to be and the world needs us to be, wherever we live and engage in ministry.

For our founder, Mary Ward, the empowerment of women through education was the particular emphasis of the ministry of the new religious congregation she founded in 1609. A gradual evolution from formal education meant that her followers engaged in “education in all its forms” as required by circumstances of time and place, though still aimed primarily at ensuring that “women in time to come [would] do much” to quote Mary Ward herself.

At last summer’s IBVM gathering, it became quickly evident that the forces conspiring against women in today’s world are appalling. In spite of a plethora of international instruments, including the UN Committee for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the creation of a new agency called UN WOMEN, annual Commissions on the Status of Women and the passing of gender equity legislation in many countries, implementation of these agreements remains weak.

The prevalence of gender based violence is vividly evident in the continuing reporting of such horrific practices as female genital mutilation, honour killing, dowry death, bride burning, child marriages, widow cleansing and acid burning to name just some. The feminization of poverty is well recognized. It is almost unthinkable that rape is seen as an effective weapon of war and that girls are prized as child soldiers. The painful experience of children bearing children has tragic consequences for both the short and long term, while the effect of gender-based violence is a

significant factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS



As if this litany of human rights violations were not enough, we must add the horrendous modern form of slave trade: the trafficking of human persons for profit. Sadly this travesty is not solely the domain of powerful criminal organizations with international reach. It is also promoted by sports organizations, global companies and some government agencies that have no qualms about importing women to service males during gatherings such as the Olympics, the World Cup, political party conventions, R and R for military servicemen and even UN Peacekeepers and NGO respondents to international disasters. This is the dark side of globalization that treats persons as commodities.

Each Province Group at our gathering last May was asked to move beyond reflection to some action as a result of our being together. As Canadians we decided to organize a conference on human trafficking as our response.

Maria Lanthier ibvm, Pat Grant ibvm and Anne Murray ibvm with Associate, Claudette Wingell, offered to take on the task.

So here we are, almost 200 strong, in the company of passionate experts whom we are counting on to advise us on how to do something to help eliminate the scourge of human trafficking. As IBVMs we want to do as Mary Ward did, to empower women in our day to raise themselves out of the poverty and oppression that makes them vulnerable to sexual violence with its damaging physical, psychological and generational consequences.

The IBVM is committed to the implementation of the UN Millennium Declaration which tells us that there will be no peace without security, no security without development and no development without respect for human life. We know that no strategy is more effective for development than the empowerment of women. We believe that each child who is born is precious and that a phrase I read recently in the newspaper is true: "There is a little girl out there who will suffer if we do not do something".

We are aware of the gravity of the problem; we know that it is real, even in our own backyard; we hope today to find out what we can do to help remove this blight on our society and break the chains of bondage for vulnerable women and children.

Anne Kelly IBVM