



Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking, and Access to Justice for the Poor and Vulnerable

Ethics in Action for Sustainable and Integral Development



It is fair to say that our contemporary world is beset by the following injustices: broken promises on behalf of governments; unequal distribution of income and wealth; unjust redistributions from poor to rich; bullying of states and individuals on behalf of multinational corporations that are solely concerned with profit; states that do not welcome migrants, while contributing to the causes of mass-migration; and global warming caused by human activity, mostly due to fossil fuel consumption. Concerned with this “globalization of indifference” which tends to exclude whole masses of people from society, Pope Francis, soon after his election, asked the Academy to study human trafficking and modern slavery, in the forms of forced labour, prostitution, and organ trafficking. On several occasions he has defined these practices as “crimes against humanity”. In order to describe this kind of exclusion, contempt and, ultimately, non-participation in what makes us human, it is necessary to understand the double nature of the violence of this crime. It is an attack on corporal integrity and a combination of all forms of abuse – torture, repetitive rape, organ harvesting, forced labour, including that of children – which destroy a person’s primary trust in him/herself and in others. But it is also an attack inflicted on the survivor’s soul, which creates wounds that are deeper and more complex than those already caused by the physical violence.

What kind of psychological and moral violence are we talking about? Friends, or individuals who love each other, approve each other’s existence. Trafficking victims cannot have true friends, so they lack the affirmation that makes friendship the “unique good”, as defined by Simone Weil, inspired by Aristotle¹. The humiliation of the victim, perceived as the withdrawal or rejection of that

affirmation to exist, harms, first and foremost, at a pre-judicial level. The humiliated person feels looked down on or, worse, completely unvalued. Deprived of this essential approval, the person almost becomes non-existent. Therefore, the humiliation caused by forced labour, prostitution, involuntary organ harvesting and rape makes the victim feel he or she does not exist as an end-in-itself, but merely an individual's property, or a means for the benefit of others.²

In the case of prostitution there is an additional component of non-approval of the victim as a human being: the betrayal of affection at its most intimate. When parents force their daughter into prostitution – as is usual in contexts of extreme poverty and in promiscuous environments – they betray her in the affection that they owe her, and that she has the right to expect from them. Likewise, when a life partner or a boyfriend woos a young woman with the intention of leading her to a life of prostitution, he is betraying her in the most intimate way possible, as he is violating their relationship of love, understood as mutual approval and as a bond of perfection (τὴν ἀγάπην, ὃ ἐστὶν σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος – St Paul, Col 3,14). Unfortunately, this is the most common and effective method that traffickers use nowadays: handsome young men seduce girls through romantic promises (“You will be my wife: we will raise a family together”).

This destroys the very core of the trust that one can lay in a person. Somehow, the betrayed victim feels worse than someone whose existence has not been recognised. It is for this reason that the protocol of victim rehabilitation is often based on the reconstruction of self-trust, and of trust in one's fellow human beings, as well as on a sort of public admission of the iniquity of having been betrayed and sold. Betrayal by the person on whom we have laid all of our trust is worse than death itself.

It is not possible to cross the threshold of the first model of participation in affection without considering the restrictions and rules that, despite not being formally judicial, must be upheld – in every sense of the word – as institutions, and which have actually encouraged countless developments in the judicial arena. Such is the case of parent-child and husband-wife relationships, and it is also true of family ties, since families, in their educational role, mark the beginning of cultural and value-based life. In contrast with the city and the state, the family is a way of living together that is represented by a home and a shared roof, which unite a limited number of people. Naturally, it is very difficult for people that have fallen prey to these new forms of slavery to raise a family and nurture a conjugal relationship. This appalling form of exclusion also rules out every opportunity for full-fledged filiation, and even denies victims the chance of becoming fulfilled parents. It is for this reason that desire – whether desire for conjugality or desire for filiation – often works as the stimulus for fleeing slavery in its modern manifestations.

Naturally, victims of modern slavery are also deprived of the civil rights proclaimed after the last World War. In fact, they are the targets of the most ruthless discrimination.

When faced with so much injustice and human misery, a feeling of indignation arises on the part of

the onlooker. The most sensitive kind of indignation lies in the unbearable contrast between the equal attribution of rights (and pre-rights) and the unequal distribution of human dignity and goods in societies such as ours, which seem doomed to pay for progress in terms of productivity across all domains with a dramatic increase in inequalities, exclusion and new forms of slavery (*Laudato Si*).

Nevertheless, negative feelings in the face of such injustices can act as significant triggers in the struggle to obtain individual and social human dignity. Indignation for modern slavery can disarm us but can also spur us into action. Indignation can paralyse us and force us to look the other way, but it can also spark renewal and social revolution. In-dignation, the etymology of which indicates a lack of dignity, can and must lead to the recognition for everyone of the dignity that every human being deserves.

These new moral imperatives are enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals promulgated unanimously by the United Nations after Pope Francis' address at the UN General Assembly. Goal 8.7 affirms that we must "Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms". In addition, SDG 5.2 asks "to eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation" and SDG 16.2, "to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children".

It is with these intentions that Ethics in Action brings us together. We hope to offer a decisive contribution to a world where dignity, justice, freedom and peace are a reality for all.

First of all, it is necessary to achieve an accurate estimate of the extension of the phenomenon and of the locations where it is rife. Secondly, we must suggest models and good practices to eradicate it.

1 Simone Weil, *Amitié*, in *Ouvres*, Gallimard, coll. "Quarto", 1999, p 755.

2 "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end" (Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals/On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*).

