International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition – 23rd August

In August 1997 a young boy named Sebastião fled from Flor da Mata estate in Pará state, Brazil. It belonged to a man who owned several other estates and who had been investigated by the authorities for practising slave labour. Sebastião guided a special inspection team and federal police agents to the estate, where 220 enslaved workers were rescued, among them 30 minors and 15 women. Later that same year police at Goianésia, Pará, found the remains of dead bodies - believed to be those of slave workers - in eight wells on another estate.

Slave labour is characterised by the exercise of physical control over the worker. Despite being officially banned in Brazil for the past 140 years, it clearly continues, these days exacerbated by growing poverty and the Covid-19 virus.

Columban Fr Colin McLean has lived and worked as a missionary in Brazil with African-Brazilians for over 30 years. During his time, he has traced the almost five centuries history of the Atlantic slave trade. Brazil received about 40% of African slaves that came across the Atlantic up until 1888 when Brazil abolished slavery. There is a vibrant African-Brazilian cultural scene in Salvador. Dance and song come naturally to this exuberant people, providing a counter-weight to the discrimination they face and gangland violence. Fr Colin McLean encourages presentations of Capoeira among the young folk. Capoeira is a frenetic cross between dance and martial arts, reputedly perfected amongst slaves as a form of defence against cruel masters. He has also set up a theatre group which specialises in stories of slavery and liberation. The group has performed widely in Brazil and abroad. Fr Colin has reached out to members of the Candomblè community. Candomblé is a fusion of Christianity and African religions.

Slavery and Africa

And what of Africa, the home continent of Brazil's slaves? It was tragic for Africa that Europeans regarded the continent for many centuries largely as a source of cheap labour. The incorporation of at least 28 million people, without asking their approval, and often through coercion, into Western economic models and business plans warped Africa's development paths and prospects. Around half the victims were transported to the Americas, including Brazil. Tens of thousands of others died or were injured or displaced because of the Slave Trade. According to "Feast to Famine: The Course of Africa's Underdevelopment", written by Bill Rau and produced by the Africa Faith and Justice Network, the demographic gap left Africa with wounds that continue to handicap its development. As other continents were growing through an interplay of agricultural, industrial, technological and population expansion, the Slave Trade denied Africa the physical and mental energies of young, strong people who would have contributed to their continent. Instead, "slavery forced Africans to produce for the wealth and power of others." Imperial domination of Africa underpinned racism which further sanctioned exploitation in the name of mutual improvement.

The Slave Trade intensified differences within African societies which in modern times are regularly marked by conflict, undermining development. It had a long-term impact on traditional farming practices, affecting agricultural production and output. The farming cycle was disrupted by raids as people feared going to their fields for planting and harvesting. Unsettled conditions for centuries undermined food security. European control also led to the introduction of cash crops, dependence on foreign markets and national debts which, today, siphon away the wealth of many African nations. Africa's history was distorted by the Slave Trade and African societies and cultures exposed to a dominant world economy determined to exploit and manipulate for geo-political reasons. Today, some 73 million Africans face hunger daily and the continent is dealing with the pandemic and with climate change disrupting food production.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the fastest growing form of slavery today, and only a small percentage of the 2.5 million people trafficked throughout the world are given help and protection by the authorities. Trafficking is big business. The UN estimates that it is a $36bn global 'industry', as lucrative for those controlling it as the drugs and the arms trade. The pursuit of profit is the key motivation. Women and girls are particularly liable to end up in exploitative forms of work in domestic settings, prostitution and mail-order brides. Major causes of trafficking include poverty and conflict, but also discrimination against women and the poor, and inadequate educational and employment opportunities. The Internet has become its quick and easy vehicle and a means for traffickers to market women and children.

Trafficking is close to home for us in Britain. In June 2019 the Conference of Religious in England and Wales organised a day in London on Trafficking, attended by around 60 members of religious congregations. They were told that on their walk from the station they had passed several houses where victims of trafficking were recently released.

Women religious tackle trafficking

Many non-governmental organisations are addressing trafficking. Religious Orders, particularly women religious, are joining forces with them internationally to set up safe house programmes for victims and to campaign for legislation that will criminalise the traffickers. Sr Patricia Mulhall, a Brigidine sister based in England, works with UNANIMA International, an organisation made up of congregations of women religious and their partners in mission. Trafficking is one of the issues that it has helped bring to the attention of the United Nations. The title 'UNINIMA' is 'UN' because it works at the UN and 'ANIMA' which derives from the Latin word for the feminine spirit. Sr Patricia feels that tackling trafficking can go on at many levels. Education work is important which fosters gender equality based on mutual respect and understanding. Challenging the media when it seems to stereotype and to commodify the bodies of women and girls is important too, and UNANIMA is calling for a code of ethics to tackle the growth of the global sex industry. It lobbys national governments to pass and implement legislation that punishes the traffickers, not the victims.

RENATE, Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation, is another powerful network. It is involved in 31 countries in Europe with 139 anti-trafficking networks. Its head, Sr Imelda Poole, a British Loreto Sister belonging to the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM), received an MBE award at Buckingham Palace in November 2018 for her work to end modern slavery. Based in Albania since 2013, she has established centres to work on prevention, advocacy, awareness, and the rescue, protection and rehabilitation of trafficked and exploited women. The centres have worked with more than 3,000 women and set up 16 economic empowerment businesses.

Women religious have successfully engaged the Catholic hierarchy in their mission. This engagement went up to the level of the Pope and Vatican with meetings in Rome and now an international movement has been set up by Pope Francis, called the Santa Marta Group. The networks of Religious and their coworkers across the world, is knitted together under the umbrella of Talitha Kum, founded in Rome during 2009.

Sr Imelda Poole, speaking at an online gathering last month of Women Religious on the Frontlines organised by the US and British Ambassadors to the Holy See, reported that in her work with RENATE she has seen three changes since the lockdown began in March. One is a massive increase of hunger, another is that counselling of trafficking victims is now largely online, and the third is an explosion of children going online unsupervised, leading to an increase in sexual exploitation. The latest Global Slavery Index estimates that 136,000 people in the UK are experiencing modern-day slavery.

Highlighting the causes

Trafficking affects every continent and most countries. Going to the root causes means addressing poverty and the gross inequality of wealth and opportunity between people living in source and destination countries. The global community must respond with greater urgency to world hunger, which has increased during the pandemic. To end global poverty, there needs to be an increase in social protection systems, which are crucial for vulnerable groups. This is especially true in the wake of the pandemic, given that 55% of the world's population do not benefit from any form of social protection.

LINKS

Renate - [www.renate-europe.net/](https://www.renate-europe.net/)

Talithakum - [www.talithakum.info/en/about-us](https://www.talithakum.info/en/about-us)

Santa Marta Group - <https://santamartagroup.com/>