

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 12, 2013 at 8:43am

Pope: Human trafficking is crime against humanity, must be stopped

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

The Francis Chronicles

Vatican City — The trafficking of human beings is a crime against humanity and must be stopped, Pope Francis told diplomats.

"It's a disgrace" that people are treated "as objects, deceived, raped, often sold many times for different purposes and, in the end, killed or, in any case, physically and mentally damaged, ending up thrown away and abandoned," he said.

The pope's comments came Thursday in a speech to 17 new ambassadors to the Vatican who were presenting their letters of credential to the pope. Among the 17 were ambassadors representing the state of Palestine, Kuwait, Sierra Leone and Iceland.

Speaking to the group of diplomats, the pope dedicated his entire talk to human trafficking because, he said, it is "an issue that worries me very much and today is threatening people's dignity."

Every country in the world is touched in some way by this new form of slavery, which often targets the most vulnerable members of society: women, children, the disabled, the poor and people from broken homes or other difficult situations, he said.

Even those who have no religious beliefs should be concerned about victims of human trafficking out of pure "compassion for their suffering" and should help work to free them and soothe their wounds, he said.

"This cannot go on," he said, adding that human trafficking "constitutes a serious violation of human rights and is an affront to (victims') dignity as well as a loss for the world community."

"Together we can and we must commit ourselves so they may be freed and this horrible trade can be put to an end," Pope Francis said.

"Human trafficking is a crime against humanity. We must unite our efforts to free victims and stop this crime that's become ever more aggressive, that threatens not just individuals, but the foundational values of society," international security and laws, the economy, families and communities, he said.

Pope Francis recognized the many efforts underway around the world to prevent trafficking and protect victims.

Even though countries have been addressing the problem, he said, "we can't deny that sometimes even public officials and members of peacekeeping forces have been contaminated" by the corrupting forces of trafficking. (The account by a former peacekeeper denouncing her colleagues' complicity in trafficking in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the late 1990s was the basis for the 2011 film "The Whistleblower.")

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Together with laws, something must be done to address cultural considerations and communication, he said. "There is a need for a deep examination of conscience: How many times, in fact, do we tolerate human beings being considered an object, exposed to sell something or to satisfy immoral desires?"

People must never be bought or sold like a piece of merchandise and anyone "who uses or exploits (a person), even indirectly, becomes an accomplice to this oppression," he said.

The pope said he firmly believed something can be done "because I believe in the value and strength of a concerted effort at combating (trafficking)."

He called for more cooperation and effective strategies, a common sense of responsibility and "a more decisive political will" to stop trafficking.

Often human trafficking is connected with "the drug and arms trades, the illegal transport of immigrants and the mafia," he said, and more needs to be done to help victims, to protect their rights and safety, and to stop "the corrupt and the criminal" from evading justice.

"Adequate legislative measures in countries of origin, transit and destination, including facilitating legal immigration, can reduce the problem," he said.

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