

FORTIFIED BY FAITH

COMBATING GLOBAL TRAFFICKING

by *Amy Roth Sandrolini*



Victims of trafficking are hard to identify.

Photo: World Vision Australia

On September 25, President Obama issued an executive order to strengthen the United States' zero-tolerance policy against human trafficking, calling it "modern slavery."

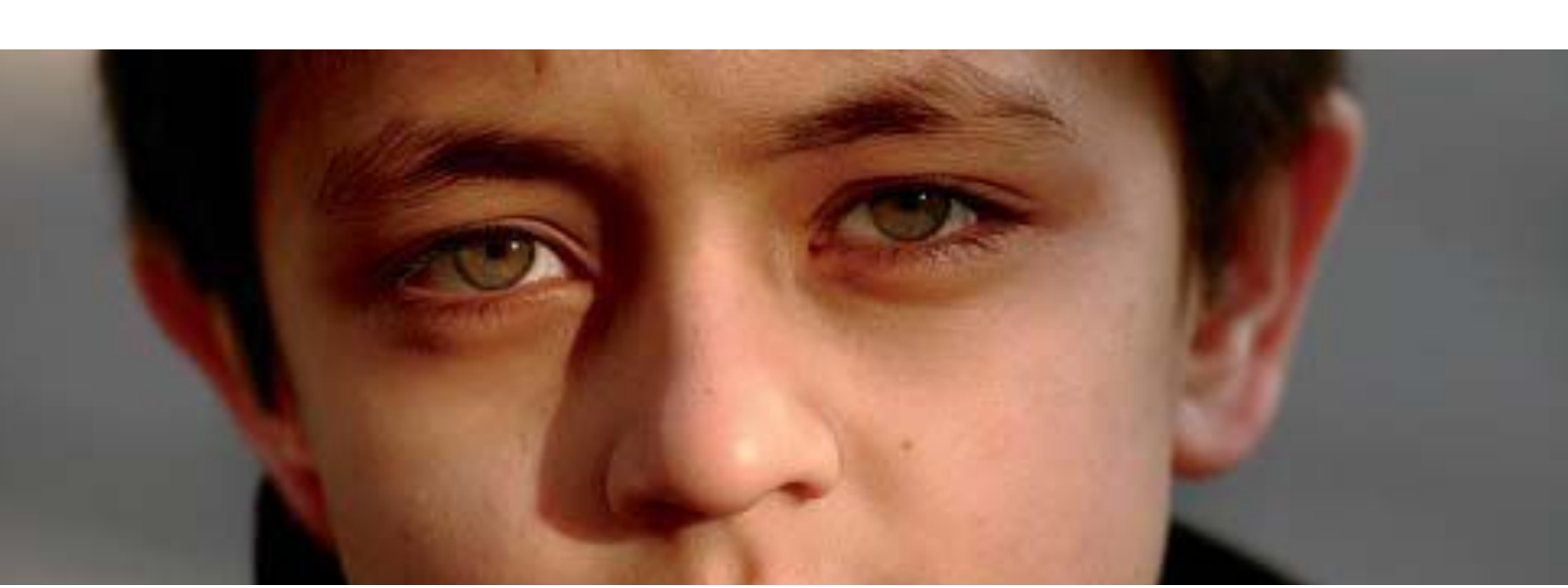
"I do not use that word, 'slavery,' lightly," he said. "It evokes obviously one of the most painful chapters in our nation's history. But around the world, there's no denying the awful reality."

And awful it is.

Human trafficking claims an estimated 27 million victims globally—primarily women and girls, many forced into prostitution. UNICEF reports that each year more than 1.2 million children are entrapped in traffickers' webs. Staggering figures, but equally so is the roughly \$32 billion annually that the trade in human beings generates—making it the fastest-growing criminal enterprise, behind only the sale of drugs and arms.

As a journalist and human rights activist for more than two decades, I've reported on abuses from the front lines. Most recently I worked with International Justice Mission (IJM), a faith-based human rights agency combating violent injustice, including sexual exploitation of minors. From India to Italy, Guatemala to Kosovo, Cambodia to the Philippines, I've seen that human trafficking is a brutal trade that strips its victims of their freedom, dignity, passports and possessions. But I've also seen men and women of goodwill the world over do what they can to stop it, including an international network of Catholic nuns. One of the towering figures is a diminutive nun: Sr. Eugenia Bonetti.

Celebrating 50 years as a Consolata



“The effect of trafficking is soul damage. A forced expulsion from your own body.”

Missionary sister this year, Sr. Eugenia, 73, embodies the soul of this movement. We met in Rome in 2005, when I was working on the issue with the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See and she was directing the Counter-Trafficking Office of the Italian Union of Major Superiors (USMI).

Sr. Eugenia has devoted her life to supporting other nuns in their oath to stand with those who have been, as she describes, “alienated, and trampled upon.” Since 1995, those have been victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

She is admittedly an “accidental” human trafficking veteran, having been rudely awakened to the reality when a victim turned to the crisis center she was staffing in northern Italy one cold, dark night. Over several months, that young woman—and thousands of others like her over the years to come—educated Sr. Eugenia on the brutal reality of pimps and mamasans, clients (aka “johns”), sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions, violence and even death. She was to learn that they, like so many other young women and girls, were first victims of poverty, illegal

status or some other vulnerability. This made them prey to organized crime or trafficking networks, which then forced them into the underground sex industry.

Given the unique physical, emotional and spiritual toll that human trafficking extracts from its victims, Sr. Eugenia understood a holistic response was needed. She created a network of nuns and their convents, which she transformed into 100-plus safe houses for victims across Italy. The nuns provide safe harbor, clothes and food, as well as pastoral support and vocational training for victims who have left the life. They also face great risk to minister to girls still working the streets, visit those who have been arrested and detained in a temporary detention center, lead public awareness trainings, and enter court rooms with victims testifying against their traffickers. Sr. Eugenia, along with the sisters and lay individuals who collaborate with her, has seen more than 14,000 victims in Italy alone pass through the “holy” doors of this network.

When individuals motivated and fortified by faith take thoughtful action, they can revolutionize the

world. And in addressing the issue of human trafficking, President Obama acknowledged men and women of faith—those like Sr. Eugenia—who, like the great abolitionists before them, are truly doing the Lord’s work ...”

Since the 1960s and 70s, the Episcopal Church has been a leading voice on some of the most pressing issues of our time: opposing the death penalty, supporting the civil rights movement and affirmative action. Yet today, as human trafficking threatens individuals, societies and the moral fabric of humanity the world over, the Episcopal Church has remained relatively silent. Let it not remain so. Let us do more to raise awareness about this great human rights abuse and promote stronger legislation targeting sex traffickers and their networks. And let us do more to support its victims.

Sandrolini is the daughter of an Episcopal priest and served on the Bishop’s Council of Advice with the Convocation of American Churches in Europe. She has reported on modern-day slavery as a journalist and human rights activist. She can be reached at arothsandrolini@gmail.com.