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Gathered in Rome to discuss methods for the eradication of human slavery, both law enforcement and Vatican officials exchanged ideas on how to collaborate in combating the issue and caring for victims.

“Human trafficking is an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ. It is a crime against humanity,” Pope Francis exclaimed in his April 10 audience with the conference participants.

Drawing police chiefs from 20 different nations around the world, the April 9 – 10 conference was hosted by the Vatican’s Academy of Sciences, and was organized through the Bishop’s Conference of England and Wales.

This marks the second conference bringing individuals together in the Vatican to discuss the topic of human trafficking, the first being held in the fall of 2012. Following this week’s gathering, participants revealed that a third gathering will convene in London this coming November.

In his message the Pope extended his greetings to attendees, thanking them for their presence and encouraged them all to “combine our efforts” with the desire for “our strategies and areas of expertise to be accompanied and reinforced by the mercy of the Gospel” and “by closeness to the men and

women who are victims of this crime.”

Referring to human trafficking as “an open wound on the body of contemporary society,” the pontiff gave special attention to the presence of law enforcement authorities, “who are primarily responsible for combating this tragic reality by a vigorous application of the law.”

“It also includes humanitarian and social workers, whose task it is to provide victims with welcome, human warmth and the possibility of building a new life” he continued, noting that although these are “two different approaches,” they “can and must go together.”

During an April 10 press conference following the conclusion of the meeting, representatives from Asia, Africa and Europe responded to journalist’s questions regarding the events and topics of discussion over the last two days.

Speaking in reference to the importance of the strong backing the Holy See gives to civil authorities on the issue, London’s Police Commissioner Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe expressed that this collaboration is crucial.

The fact that Pope Francis, who met with the four survivors of trafficking who gave their testimony during the conference, is giving the topic such dedicated attention is extremely helpful, Howe noted, especially since most of the trafficking is of a sexual nature, because the Pope approaches victims with a particular tenderness.

Cardinal John Onaiyekan, Archbishop of the Abuja province in Nigeria, affirmed the importance of the Pope’s interest in the issue, stating that the fact that he drove down to meet the conference participants rather than having them come to him and wait demonstrates that “He's present, he's part of this group.”

When asked whether or not these meetings have made an impact on the number of trafficked individuals who are being rescued, Sir Bernard Howe responded that he has “seen more come forward,” but that still “only one percent of victims being trafficked are coming forward.”

This is because, he explained, many are addicted to drugs and fear that they will be judged or condemned by both government and Church officials, also because many are no longer in their home countries, and do not have visas or legal immigration status.

Regarding initiatives which both Church and legal authorities are seeking to put into place in order to combat the issue more effectively, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, stated that the issue is handled in different ways in different countries, however he lauded the system of support given to victims in Australia, who are able to be sustained by the government for up to four years.

In England, the cardinal explained that they are seeking to expand and extend the resources already available for as long as possible by establishing a sanctuary where first contact with a victim can be made, and where there can be psychological assistance and an assessment of the victim's needs.

Other goals, he continued, are to help initiate the process of a court hearing, bring about a reconciliation between the victim and their families, and attempting to get rescued persons back into the workplace.

“Slavery has never been as widespread in the world as it is today,” he observed, emphasizing that “those being trafficked are not free” and that there is a need to “focus on those taking people and bodies.”

A religious sister who traveled to Rome from Nigeria for the two-day encounter, and whose order has been highly praised for their efforts in helping trafficked women in Africa, was also present at the press conference.

Emphasizing how the work they do “is great, and complicated,” the sister highlighted that all those gathered have “different projects, but the same goal,” and explained that a large part of this goal is “to build a more human society...with answers for all that don't exclude anyone.”

Quoting one of the victims who gave her testimony during the conference, Cardinal Nichols expressed that her voice echoed that of all those who are suffering at the hands of human trafficking, when she stated that “I would like greater presence from police, and I would like the bishops and the Church to

pray for me.”

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