

Remarks to Shine The Light Conference 3/9/2021

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We heard from many powerful speakers yesterday about many of the root causes of human trafficking, and the power of legislation and policy to make a critical impact in preventing human trafficking. We were challenged to see the ways that systems of injustice intersect to create a demand for sex and labor trafficking and keep certain populations desperate and vulnerable to traffickers, especially those living in poverty and those forced to migrate in search of safety or work.

We learned a lot yesterday, and today is our day of action! I have been asked to begin by reflecting with you all on why we do advocacy, particularly as it relates to preventing and ending human trafficking. As people of faith who recognize, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, that we are in fact One Body with many diverse parts, we have a moral obligation to ensure the health and well-being of our collective body, the mystical Body of Christ. Pope Francis has spoken about human trafficking as a deep wound, a scourge, in this collective body. We are all hurting, whether we realize it or not, because we are one, and when one member of the body suffers all suffer with it.

And so we are called to take action – to address what is causing this wound, this harm to the body. As we heard yesterday, there are many root causes of this wound of human trafficking: poverty, forced migration, sexism, racism, exploitative economic systems, climate change, among others – and so it will take all of us, working from different angles to address these intersecting injustices that cause the problem to ultimately solve it.

We do advocacy at a national level like this because it has the power to address the underlying systems and create large scale impact.

As residents of the United States we have certain rights and responsibilities, and as people of faith we have certain responsibilities rooted in the values of our faith. The US Council of Catholic Bishops has said, “Responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.”

Living in a democracy means not only that we have a voice and vote, but that we have a responsibility to use that voice and vote to promote the common good, and in our context of this conference, to protect all those most vulnerable to trafficking and hold those responsible accountable for their crimes. It is not enough to just participate in elections, but we must form relationships with our elected representatives and let them know our values and priorities to guide their decisions.

Pope Francis has reminded us that “The future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of the people

and in their ability to organize.” We hold conferences like this and form organizations like US Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking and the Coalition of Catholic Organizations Against Human Trafficking in order to organize people of faith across the country to become informed advocates and use our collective power and voice to protect the most vulnerable, promote the common good, and end human trafficking.

When we stay silent, when we choose inaction, when we fail to engage our elected officials and involve ourselves in the policies being created whether nationally or locally, we are giving away our power, and in our failure to act or speak up we become complicit in injustice and allow policies that actually cause further harm to be put into law. When we stay silent and fail to act, we are contributing to this deep wound in the body of Christ.

But when we honor and embrace our power, when we honor and embrace our interconnectedness, when we raise our voices together and allow the vision of God’s beloved community to inspire us to action, we begin to heal. I know that sometimes it might not feel like it, but you are powerful and important, together - we are powerful and important, and we really can make a difference. Human trafficking is a horrific and violent crime created by human beings, and it can be ended by human beings if we have faith, join together, and take action to create the world we want to see.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew: “Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” Faith-based advocacy speaks love and compassion to what can seem like immovable mountains: be it a political system or a global criminal enterprise, and trusts that our faithful action, rooted in Gospel values, promoting human dignity and freedom, can in fact make those mountains move.

So join us today in taking action, raising your voice, connecting with your legislators, and let’s move some mountains together!