

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MODERN DAY SLAVERY—INTEREST GROUP

Topic: The Meaning of Human Freedom in View of Theological Anthropology  
Convener: Nichole M. Flores, University of Virginia  
Moderator: Christina G. McRorie, Creighton University  
Presenters: Joseph E. Capizzi, The Catholic University of America  
Gemma Tulud Cruz, Australian Catholic University  
Victor Carmona, Oblate School of Theology

In his presentation, “What’s Wrong with ‘Human Trafficking?’,” Joseph E. Capizzi investigates the language used to describe human trafficking in an effort to identify the precise moral issue at stake in current debates. Asserting that evil of slavery is one of the few moral consensuses of our age, he nonetheless argues for the necessity of identifying a specific and compelling ethical argument to undergird this popular agreement. Capizzi traces the language of “old slavery” and “new slavery” (or “modern day slavery”), inquiring whether there is a suitable analogy between them. After a thorough investigation of the relationship between slavery then and now, he concludes that their equivalence rests on shared features of totalizing corporeal domination of one person based on and supported by violence. Capizzi concludes his presentation by raising concerns about the relationship between illegality and invisibility that exacerbate contemporary human trafficking as a particularly pernicious form of exploitation: “Slavery. . . has never really disappeared, it’s been hiding all along where we didn’t think to look—out in the open.” Human trafficking demands a comprehensive moral response, in addition to a legal one.

Gemma Tulud Cruz, in her presentation, “*Homo vulnerabilis*: Vulnerability in the Context of Human Trafficking and Modern-Day Slavery,” discusses the social and theological significance of vulnerability in engaging human trafficking on a global scale, especially in Asian contexts. Cruz asserts that social invisibility exposes vulnerable persons and populations—women, children, migrants—to human trafficking and forced labor. Cruz criticizes the role of criminalizing vulnerable persons, which fosters human trafficking while complicating its detection and eradication. Having established the social problems of vulnerability, Cruz pivots to a discussion of the theological implications of vulnerability in relation to social solidarity, underscoring several positive aspects of vulnerability—openness, mutability, and human fragility—as a theological basis for global solidarity capable of resisting human trafficking.

In his presentation, “Mercy, Justice, and the Duty to Admit Central American and Syrian Refugees,” Victor Carmona asks how an ethic of hope might inform an interpretation of the Central American and Syrian Refugee crises. Carmona engages in comparative social analysis of border policy in the United States and the European Union, arguing that both of these governmental entities have employed “border externalization” in an attempt to stem the flow of refugees through Mexico and Turkey via both political and economic means. Through strategies of “prevention through deterrence,” both the U.S. and EU aim to make migration so difficult that refugees will decide not to come. On the contrary, desperate refugees often turn to smugglers to escape harm in their home countries, a risky move which increases

vulnerability to being trafficked and other forms of exploitation. Carmona's social analysis finds his theo-ethical argument for an ethic of friendship with migrants and refugees. He turns to a pair of Dominican theologians—Gustavo Gutiérrez and Thomas Aquinas—to assert friendship as the heart of the Gospel. Whether expressed as the preferential option for the poor or virtue of charity, friendship offers a theological basis for responding to the Central American and Syrian situations with mercy and justice rather than dangerous indifference.

In the conversation following the presentations, session attendees echoed panelist concerns about the dangers of social, legal, and economic invisibility and criminalizing vulnerable persons, as well as the centrality of theological conceptions of vulnerability and friendship to a theological and ethical approach to global solidarity. Attendees also raised questions about the role of the Church in responding to these issues, including the possibility that the Church should employ civil disobedience in order to resist unjust policies that create the conditions of invisibility and vulnerability that perpetuate trafficking as a form of modern day slavery.

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