

# CRUX

Taking the Catholic Pulse

## Human Trafficking: Sister tells of immersion in life of night and streets

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Consolata Missionary Sister

Eugenia Bonetti,

ROME - Though it's almost grotesque to speak about "celebrity" in the context of something so tragic as human trafficking, if there is a celebrity in the fight against modern-day forms of slavery that involve an estimated 21 million victims and \$32 billion annually in illegal profits, it's an Italian Catholic nun by the name of Sister Eugenia Bonetti.



A Consolata sister, Bonetti has been featured in documentaries and won both the International Women of Courage Prize from the U.S. State Department and the European Citizens' Prize from the E.U. She's met presidents and prime ministers, spoken to high-level conferences all around the world, and become the face of the anti-trafficking push.

For all that, Bonetti has never lost contact with the concrete human beings who are at the core of her campaign. Every Saturday, she and a group of sisters from various religious orders visit the immigrant welcome center of Ponte Galeria on the peripheries of Rome, where many young women await work visas and passports and often become prey to human traffickers.

"Between 2015 and 2016 nearly 15,000 Nigerian women have arrived in Italy," Bonetti said in an interview with *Crux*. "Where are they?" she asked.

Answering her own question, she said, "They are on our streets."

According to government data, between 50 and 70 thousand women in Italy are victims of human trafficking and forced to prostitute themselves for as little as the equivalent of \$12.

Bonetti has been there since the very beginning, when after her 24 years as a missionary in Kenya she was called back to the small northern Italian town of Turin in 1993, which was then experiencing the onset of the migrant crisis.

“When I returned to Italy, I saw the women that I had met in Africa, once filled with life, joy and desire to live and think about the future, living on the streets,” Bonetti said. “I too, in the beginning, thought they were there because they wanted to be there, because they wanted to earn money. That wasn’t true! They were there because someone put them there. Because someone made a profit from putting them there. And someone else had made a profit from exploiting them, using them and then throwing them back on the street.”

“There’s a whole world of people who make a profit on the skin, on the life, on the youth of these women, many of them underage,” Bonetti said.

The nun has made it her life’s work to fight and raise awareness of human trafficking. In Turin, she began what she calls her “immersion in the life of the night and the streets,” and her missionary life was forever changed as she set out to “break the terrible links of these women’s chains.”

Her understanding of the culture and language helped her relate and communicate with the exploited young women and she credits them with being her primary accomplices in trying to fight this exploitation.

“They were the ones who helped me understand the human rights violations that everyday we hear about on the news,” Bonetti said. “We women, and especially religious and missionary sisters, are called into question, because for us fighting against human merchants is a great challenge. The dignity of the person cannot be bought, bargained or sold.”

On Sep. 21 of 2013, Bonetti along with three other sisters had the opportunity to speak to Pope Francis about their work and dedication toward these young women. They asked him to create a World Day against Trafficking in Persons, which would occur on Feb. 8, the feast of St. Josephine Margaret Bakhita, a Sudanese slave who became a Canossian sister in Italy.

“Pope Francis is a great help to us and now we are preparing for the third World Day against Trafficking in Persons,” Bonetti said. “We wanted it to be ecclesiastic, because we wished for it to be a day of prayer, of asking forgiveness, of raising awareness and understanding of the problem. Because truly, only together we can say ‘never again slaves’,” she added echoing the pope’s words.

In a recent address, the Vatican's representative to the United Nations, Filipino Archbishop Bernardito Auza, invited the world's nations to collaborate in order to fight the root causes behind human trafficking.

"To eradicate trafficking in persons, we must confront all its economic, environmental, political, and ethical causes, but it is particularly important to prevent and end the wars and conflicts that make people especially vulnerable to being trafficked," he said.

Auza also especially thanked women religious, "who have long been at the forefront in the fight against trafficking in persons."

When Bonetti had the occasion to meet former U.S. President George W. Bush, she said she told him that leaders have three "wars" they must fight if they wish to put a stop to the exploitation of human beings. The first is against poverty, the second against ignorance, and the third against corruption.

"We religious sisters have contacts all over the world. Our idea of the human person, of the woman especially, is truly an idea of dignity, of respect, of emancipation," she said. "We know that traffickers are very organized, they know how to work in a network, and we must be likewise prepared and determined to work in a network together."

The idea motivated Bonetti when she moved to Rome in the year 2000, to create a network of more than 200 religious sisters addressing the issue of human trafficking from its origins to its tragic conclusions.

The U.S. Embassy to the Holy See was crucial in funding and promoting the initiative, which has resulted in the rehabilitation of more than 6,000 women victims of human trafficking. The program was repeated in other countries, especially where conflict and poverty make women easy targets for traffickers.

The sister told the story of a 19-year-old woman, who confessed to her that she had had more than a dozen clients in one night. "I thought to myself: 'Eugenia, 13 rapes!' We must do everything possible to bring dignity back to women!" Bonetti recounted. "How much violence do they endure every day! Every night. How many of them are killed and no one does anything!" she added.

Two years ago, Bonetti founded 'Slaves no More,' a network aimed at helping women who were forced into prostitution and ostracized by their communities as a consequence, to be reintegrated into society along with their young children.

"Every woman is a great gift to the nation, the family and the Church, because the woman is always the creator of life, protector of life. We cannot destroy life,

because otherwise we foment death,” she said. According to Bonetti it’s essential to ensure that these women have opportunities in their countries of origin, which are mostly in Africa.

From her experience on the continent, she said that the role of women in Africa is fundamental and the fact that so many are being sent to Europe in order to be exploited is not only damaging to them and their human dignity, but also to their countries.

“If you take the woman out of Africa, Africa crumbles,” Bonetti said.

The nun spent the first World Day of the Poor on Nov. 29 at the immigrant welcome center of Ponte Galeria where along with other sisters she organized a potluck dinner, with sweets and presents, in order to bring joy and prayers to the women who often are coaxed into selling their bodies for revenue by the traffickers who loiter outside.

“Who is poorer than them? They, who have lost everything? Including their dignity, their personality. They are rags just thrown in there,” she said. “This is what it means to bring a true ray of light, for these women who don’t know what will happen to them the following day. This is why it’s important for the nuns to go there every Saturday.”

By having sisters who speak many languages, everyone can approach them and talk to them to have a word, a hug, a consolation, so that they truly may not feel alone,” she said.

Bonetti told of a mother superior who was curious as to what all these nuns actually accomplished once a week at the migrant home, to which a sister replied: “At Ponte Galeria we do what Mary did under the Cross. She could not change what was happening, but she was there to die with Him.”

To Bonetti there is no better explanation for what her life’s mission has been about. While the changes at a global scale may seem out of reach or even impossible, she and the other religious sisters have made it their goal to be with them every step of the way.

“To be there and to suffer with and for them, even if nothing changes, gives a witness,” she said, while not forgetting to point the finger at all those who exploit women for profit and all those complicit in this system.

“We are responsible. We are criminals. We should really be sentenced for life! For these are the crimes against humanity, which cry for vengeance before God. We must do all that is possible to give women back their dignity.”