

***Sisters of Christian Charity
Special Meeting with
Justice and Peace Coordinators
Rome, 26 April 2008***

**The Strength of Networking:
The Prophetic Role of Religious Congregations
Against Trafficking in Human Beings**

By Eugenia Bonetti MC

USMI

Italian Union of Major Superiors

Via Zanardelli, 32 - 00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. (+39) 06-68-400-555 Fax (+39) 06-68-801-935

Mobile (+39) 339-193-4538

migrantes.usmi-n@pcn.net

ebonettimc@pcn.net

Foreword

I am grateful for the invitation to share my personal experience in response to the plight of trafficked women and children, imported and exported all over the world like commodities mainly for the "sex market." We need to acknowledge that "slavery" still exists in the year 2008, and that the majority of the victims are women and children who do not choose to become prostitutes, but are forced into it by a variety of different circumstances.

I am aware that "trafficking in persons" does not refer just to women involved in the sex trade. Modern slavery takes many other forms today, such as trafficking for cheap labour, child adoption, organ smuggling and begging; however, for several reasons, I will focus mainly on the phenomenon of forced prostitution and the prophetic role of religious in counter-trafficking in persons.

The Social Teaching of the Church

The voice of the Church, Mater et Magistra, echoes through the magisterium of Benedict XVI who reminded us in November 2006 – in his message for the 93rd World Day for Migrants and Refugees - that immigration and exploitation are acquiring an ever more "feminine" face and that it is urgent for us to know "how to read the signs of the times, by interpreting them in the light of the Gospel".¹

He reminded us that, "Among the signs of the times today we surely recognise migration". The feminisation of the phenomenon leads, in some cases, to exploitation and slavery in which, "there are women and girls destined to be exploited in the field of work, almost like slaves, and --not rarely-- also in the sexual industry".

The urgency of this reality and of the new "signs of the times" reminds church leaders—women and men – of the actuality and the power of our specific charism to be put at the service of the Church and the society. Our society, never more than today, has experienced such a great social uneasiness that, in a special way, religious life is questioned.

It challenges our congregations to put into action "the fantasy of charity", since we are all called "to be the Epiphany of God's love" and to be "prophetic and silent witnesses, but also eloquent denouncers of an inhuman world".²

A New Missionary Call: A Personal Experience

I am a Consolata Missionary Sister. I spent 24 years in Kenya, working with teachers, children and youth in schools and with women's groups in parishes. In 1993, I was asked to return to Italy for a new missionary challenge: to work with immigrant women in the city of Turin.

There in a Caritas Drop-in Centre, for the first time, I met a Nigerian woman enslaved by the "sex industry" and my missionary life changed drastically.

Maria was 30 years old and the mother of three children, left behind in Nigeria. She came to Italy, hoping to get a job to help her family, instead she was thrown on the street, a victim of the new slave trade that was starting to emerge. Maria was sick, but being in Italy illegally, she had no right to medical treatment; therefore, she came seeking assistance from a charitable organization. She turned to our Centre.

At that time I had no knowledge that thousands of young women were being exported, like commodities, from poor countries to meet the demands of affluent western societies, where everything can be bought and sold, even the body of a young girl who could not

¹ Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for the World day of Migrants and Refugees (November 2006).

² "Starting Afresh from Christ", for a Renewed Commitment of Consecrated Life on the Third Millennium (N. 33)

give fight against it. Maria helped me enter into the complexity of the “world of the night and of the streets.” Gradually I came to understand the mechanisms of trafficking and traffickers, taking advantage of the poverty and lack of education in many countries of origin, entrapping and exploiting so many victims for lucrative gain. Moreover, I heard the cry for help of these victims and came to understand their deep suffering and humiliation in being forced to become “prostitutes”. As a woman and as a missionary, I felt offended and indignant to see the life of so many young people, dreaming for a better future, be destroyed for futile interests. I felt the need to join other voluntary organisations in the fight against sex exploitation that stripped women of their identity, leaving them completely empty and so often broken. In a special way, I joined with other women religious who have been moved by such circumstances to open the “holy doors” of their convents to hide and protect women running from their tortures.

Many Stories, Many Encounters, Many Names

The pages of my journals are filled with details of so many meetings with victims with different names and stories; but at the same time, so many aspects of their experiences are common, and unveil a widespread social illness. A few notes from my journal include:

- **Mercy**, Nigerian, was brought to Italy at 14 and sold by an uncle to a human trafficker; thrown on the street, she was saved by police and welcomed in an institute for minors; she lost contact with her family, but after six years, thanks to our contact and collaboration with religious women in her own country, she found her mother and in 2005, visited her family to celebrate Christmas, after a seven-year absence;
- **Gladies** left Nigeria with several other girls to follow her dream to Europe, where she thought she was going to work in a family; she travelled across the Sahara Desert, her documents were seized; the voyage was unbearable, she suffered thirst, hunger, heat, exhaustion and illness; along the route she saw the skeletons of those who didn't survive the journey; terrorized, she was convinced this would also be her end;
- **Joy**, 19 years old, the first of eight children, left home hoping to earn money to send her brothers to school; during the journey she was raped and became pregnant; for six months she worked on the street to pay the debt bond – contracted without her knowledge with criminal organizations -- of 40.000 euros; no one knew of her pregnancy, it was only due to the aid of some members of an “Outreach Unit,” who met with her every week, that she was convinced to leave the street and was welcomed in one of the many shelters run by women religious; she was attended to with love, and despite her initial fear and despair, she welcomed the gift of a new life, the life of her baby;
- **Sonia**, just 18 years old, was pulled from the street during a police patrol and taken to the Temporary Detention Centre in Rome because she had no documents; on the street in just 15 months she had earned 55,000 Euros, which she was forced to turn over to her three step-sisters who had brought her to Italy; on the street she was much sought after by “clients” due to her young age; at the Detention Centre she met religious sisters who visit the Centre every Saturday; knowing her story and her young age, the sisters worked to have her dismissed from the Detention Centre; she was welcomed in a home that runs a program of social reintegration;
- **Gloria**, just 22, worked on the street to pay a large debt bond with traffickers; before leaving Nigeria she was sanctioned before a witch doctor to undergo “voodoo” rituals; on the street one of her “clients”—a 38-year-old divorced man—fell in love with her

and wanted to bring her to his home; she refused, and as vindication he threw her from a bridge and her lifeless body was found the next day.

These stories continue, like the links of an endless chain that form the bond of this 21st-century slavery, and which imprisons so many people, among them exploited women or minors, trafficked without conscience and with an ever-growing number of consumers who, with their constant requests, sustain this horrendous business.

The Situation of Woman in the World Today

The face of poverty, marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation in the world today is assumed by women. Women represent 80% of the people who live in conditions of absolute poverty and almost two-thirds of the 850 million illiterate adults in the world. More than half of those between 15 and 24 years of age are infected by the HIV/AIDS virus, mainly in developing countries.

Yet, it is the woman who bears the weight of providing for large families in many countries. It is the woman who suffers because of famine and water scarcity, of armed conflicts and in tribal fights. It is the woman who suffers for lack of medicines and from the infection of AIDS. It is the woman who cannot always attend school and is eliminated from paid labour and responsible positions. It is still the woman who most frequently suffers violence at home. It is again the woman who is too often coerced or forced to leave her land in order to seek security and well-being, for herself and her family.

Above all, it is the woman who suffers many kinds of violence--mainly sexual--and is often forced to use her body (the only property she has at times). She is forced to use her body as an object of pleasure and a source of gain for others. But the most humiliating poverty for a woman is that of being trafficked, of being sold and bought like a commodity. The trade in human beings, particularly of women and minors, has become a powerful global business. According to the latest reports, it produces an annual income of eight to twelve billions dollars, and falls only behind the trade of arms and drugs. No country is a stranger to this phenomenon. This market is mainly supported and nourished by the constant demand of the consumers seeking out and willing to pay for sex.

Prostitution is not a new phenomenon, yet what is new is that a global and complex trade exploits the extreme poverty and vulnerability of many women and minors who have emigrated. They have become the 21st century slaves. Tricked, enslaved and thrown onto the street pavement, the "prostitute" is the living example of the unjust discrimination of women imposed by our consumer society.

The Slave Trade: Women and Minors for Sale

It is difficult to collect statistics on trafficked women. A recent UN report states that four million women have been trafficked from one country to another, or shifted within the same country. The June 2006 U.S. Department of State TIP Report estimates that from 600.000 to 800.000 people are trafficked across international borders each year; approximately 80% of them are women and girls, and roughly 50% are minors. Other surveys indicate that annually 500,000 women are "imported" into, or made to cross, Europe by criminal organizations to be put on the market as merchandise.

Italy, too, has its fair share of victims. Throughout the last 15 years, Italy has had significant involvement in the sex industry. Organisations directly involved with assisting victims report that as many as 50,000 - 70,000 immigrants from West Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe live and toil on the streets of our cities and country-

sides. Recently, this illegal sexual activity has also moved into nightclubs. Of those involved, 30%-40% are minors (between the age of 14 and 18), mainly coming from Eastern European countries. Since these women are in Italy with no documents (having been seized by their traffickers), it is difficult to assess the situation and provide accurate statistics. What we do know is that the majority of them are *slaves*—true victims of human trafficking.

Many of these slaves—90% of them Christians—used by millions of consumers, come from countries previously evangelized by missionaries, where they shared toil and suffering to communicate the Christian faith, to announce hope and freedom, dignity and justice, solidarity and emancipation. Now this phenomenon creates a major challenge for missionary and international religious congregations.

Chains and Slavery

To be a slave is to be chained. That chain robs people of freedom, forcing them to live under the will of another. Modern-day slavery is made up of many links. These links have names: the victims with their poverty, the exploiters with their huge earnings, the consumers with their need to escape frustration and responsibility in instant pleasure, the society with its empty values and permissiveness, the government with its corrupt system and complicity, the Church and every Christian, with our silence and indifference.

There is a highly-organized network of unscrupulous traffickers, men and women, who lure these victims in their home countries, where poverty is extreme, families large, and where young people have no hope for a better life. Exploiting this socio-economic situation, today's slave traders mislead these women and their families with promises of a remunerative and dignified job. These women are brought to Europe/Italy through illegal means which are aided by complicity of corrupt employees and officers in embassies, airports, customs and immigration offices, travel agents, landlords of apartments, hotel owners and taxi drivers. With huge earnings and relatively low risk, many people benefit in the process of destroying these women's lives. On reaching their destination women are immediately deprived of their travel documents (which have often been forged), thus, losing their name, identity and freedom. They gradually lose a sense of who they are.

The women can cross several countries before reaching their "*promised land*". They can pass through Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Holland, Germany, Spain and France, travelling for weeks or months over land, by air, or sea. In the case of Nigerians, today, they are forced to cross the Sahara Desert to avoid applying for legal documents.

The mechanism of the trafficking of young women from different countries is in many aspects similar, especially in regards to the physical and psychological violence they are subjected to. The dynamics of their trafficking is however quite different. For girls from the East, the network often tricks them into bogus engagements and promises of marriage. They are controlled by men who work on their emotions. They are also kept in sight and are easily sold from one gang to another - mainly Russians, Romanians and/or Albanians. Recently this network of traffickers pushed their victims to a kind of consensus, giving them a percentage of their daily earnings, thus clearing them from being accused of coercing prostitution. On the other hand, Nigerians are entrusted to "*mamans*"³. These are Nigerian women, who turn from being exploited to exploiting

³ These are, in most cases, young girls and/or women who were once themselves enslaved as victims of trafficking and who, when they succeed in paying their debt bond, work to earn enough to "buy" a girl who then becomes their slave, obliged to pay them a fixed amount of money as a "debt"—exactly as they were once made to do.

others. They teach the new recruits how to work on the streets, control them, parcel out the stretch of pavement where they are to work, collect the earnings, punish them in case of resistance, and above all subject them to "*voodoo rituals*"⁴ (black magic), a true form of psychological torture. The Nigerian traffickers are usually men delivering girls "on commission" for the madams, or bring in girls they contacted directly with the underlying intent to sell them to the highest bidder.

By the rules of the competitive sex market, African women are considered second-class because they are black, do not speak Italian, are generally uneducated and tend to be less youthful and slim. For these reasons, they are paid a lower price for their services. For a routine affair in a car, an African woman on average will be paid €10 – 15; Eastern Europeans will earn €25. For Nigerian girls to be able to pay back their debt bond - which can run as high as €50,000 to 70,000 (contracted with the slave traders who recruited them and brought them to Italy), they must undergo at least 4,000 acts of sexual intercourse. In addition to this initial debt, they have to pay for monthly living expenses: on average €100 for food, €250 for lodging, €250 for their 'work site' (a stretch of pavement), as well as clothing, transport and various other personal needs. To repay these debts, they are forced to "work" every day, or every night, seven days a week for two to three years.

The Risks of the Streets

The "prostitutes" must live in absolute secrecy and in strict obedience to their traffickers and *mamans*. In addition, they are liable to the dangers of the street: maltreatment, abuse, road accidents and even death. Annually, hundreds of girls are killed on our streets--by their clients, by maniacs or by their traffickers. Many other victims die in the course of their exhausting journeys, while others simply disappear. Still others become pregnant during their journey of being trafficked, often forced to give birth in the desert or street.

There is also the risk of contracting HIV and AIDS. Ten - 15% of women 'working' the street test HIV+. They face unwanted pregnancies, often terminated with forced abortions. Women from Eastern Europe have an average of three to four abortions. For African women--who hold maternity as the highest value--abortion represents not only the killing of a new life, but also of a culture. African women are also frequent victims of mental illness as a result of the *voodoo rituals* performed against them, and from which they greatly fear reprisals against their families back home.

On the street, the "prostitute" completely loses her psycho-physical identity, her human dignity and her freedom of choice. She comes to view herself as an object, a thing, a piece of merchandise. She is forced to live as an illegal alien, a social and cultural outcast, with only one option open to her – to demand payment for sexual encounters, for which she keeps *none* of her earnings.

Demand Drives Supply: The Consumers

In the chain of slavery of the Third Millennium, the consumer—or client—is one of the strongest links. In reality, he supports and fuels the sex industry.

⁴ These are black magic rites in which parts of the girls (e.g. pubic hair, nails, menstrual blood, hair, pieces of intimate clothing) are collected, locked in a bag, placed before traditional shrines and handed over to the traffickers. The girls are made to swear an oath not to disclose the origin of their trip abroad, to pay their "debt" (the amount is usually not stated clearly at the moment of stipulating their "blood contract") and never to report to the police. Under the ritual, failure to respect this oath means suffering from some grave illness, death or misfortune.

Often in the area of relationships and affection, men have opted for a shortcut using “masculine” methods that do not allow for—or require—discussion nor make him feel uneasy. In many cases, men consciously prefer to pay for sex because in that setting the woman does not concern him and is not considered a person, but only an object upon which he can vent his personal frustration, insecurity, and need for possession and dominion over another individual.

In this manner, sex becomes banal; it is no longer considered to be a reciprocal gift, interpersonal communication or a loving relationship, but is turned into an economic transaction or game of power. The fact that there are so many “prostitutes” - the poor, defenceless women, with no identification papers, no legal status, no rights and no family - on our streets, forced to sell their bodies, is proof that there is a high demand, and that these women are seen as the answer to these needs. For women, instead, their involvement in prostitution is not a personal choice.

The customers—whose average age falls between 18 and 80—come from all walks of life and regularly use and abuse these “street slaves.” Seventy per cent of the clients are either married or cohabitating with a partner.

Unfortunately, little is known and said about the clients who at night look for “prostitutes” to be “used” and then discarded like rubbish, thus enacting the slogan and practice of our consumer society: “Use and dispose of”. We so often speak of prostitution as a woman’s issue, while really we must begin to address it as a man’s problem.

Often governments, faith-based organisations, charities and NGOs raise awareness about the victims of human trafficking – which is positive - in response to their needs, while, unfortunately, the issue of the consumers is very seldom taken into account. There is still a lot to be done not only to address the supply side of this phenomenon, but moreover to highlight the demand aspects.

Second Session

Our Response to the Challenge of a New Form of Slavery

From the document entitled, “**Starting Afresh from Christ,**” which addresses the renewed commitment to consecrated life in the Third Millennium, we read:

*“A life transformed by the evangelical counsels becomes a prophetic and silent witness, and at the same time an eloquent protest against an inhuman world. It calls for the promotion of the individual and for a new **creativity of charity.**”*
(No. 33)

The Prophetic Role of Religious Life

Why do religious care for those who are considered the waste of our society? Why do they reach out to immigrant women “imported” from different countries for sexual exploitation? The answer can only be found in the prophetic role of “*the sequela Christi*” in light of the Gospel.

Since Vatican II, the major development in religious life has been the rediscovery of its prophetic identity and mission. Such a prophetic task is linked with “... *the ideal of the prophetic communities in the Old Testament ... rooted in the Covenant between Yahweh and His people*”.⁵ Israel’s role as a community of chosen people was to be a sign of God’s

⁵ P. Lynch, “Religious as Prophets” 86.

love and compassion, a sign of an alternative way of living according to moral ethics and principles given by God to His chosen people. This is exactly what our Founders and Foundresses experienced and lived in their time.

In the history of God's people, this vision of a prophetic community was overshadowed by power and prosperity; a land where corruption, injustice and oppression of the poor were widespread. At this stage, prophets emerged to reawaken in people their commitment to the Covenant. They always appeared at times of crisis to point out to people their unfaithfulness and propose new visions and hope for the future.⁶

Christ was presented in the New Testament as the fulfilment of the prophetic traditions, and He introduced a new dimension to His prophetic message and ministry. His new vision was firmly rooted in love, justice and peace, not in the Law. His vision of God's kingdom was expressed in solidarity with all of the excluded,⁷ and in a very special way with "*the least, the last, the lower and the lost.*"

Religious life is, therefore, an expression of the prophetic mandate given by Christ to the Church. Like prophets, religious too have been called and sent on a mission '*to set the downtrodden free*'. Founders and Foundresses of religious congregations were prophetic people and were not afraid to respond creatively to the needs of their time.⁸

Religious should always be aware of their prophetic role, since they are called to rediscover their founding vision. They are urged to leave behind the prestige they enjoy, their well-established life and organisations, their peaceful security and their self-centred life to live side-by-side with those on the margins of our society.⁹ Signing a true '*covenant with the poor*' is the new vision and the challenge of an authentic and prophetic religious dimension, which many congregations have already chosen to assume with determination and courage, as part of their renewal to be faithful to their original charism.

A New Challenge: To Be Faithful to Our Charism

One of the major concerns of almost all our Congregations has always been the attention paid to women who are so often vulnerable, discriminated against, marginalized and submitted to a male patriarchal culture. Religious families, throughout the centuries, have been able to adapt themselves to the changing condition of women. They have also rediscovered the validity and actuality of their own charism in facing today's challenges.

The answer to how to address the "trade in human beings" is found in this context. In recent years, Religious women have been able to offer concrete and effective responses to this emergency. During the past 10 - 15 years, many Religious Congregations have contributed--with personnel, finances, accommodation-- to the creation of a new *Diakonia* of charity that offers today's immigrants and victims of human trafficking the concrete expression of God's compassion and love.

From Victims to Citizens: Women helping Women

At present, 250 sisters - belonging to 70 congregations - work in 110 projects in Italy, often in collaboration with Caritas, other public or private bodies, volunteers and associations, while maintaining their identity motivated by the Gospel imperative.

⁶ Cf. Ibid., 86-87.

⁷ Cf. Ibid., 87.

⁸ Cf. P. Lynch, "Religious as Prophets" 87.

⁹ Cf. P. Lynch, "Religious as Prophets", 84-85.

Several hundred victims, from various different countries, are at the moment present in our shelters where they are assisted in rebuilding their broken lives.

Some of the various ways in which the religious sisters are present and bear prophetic witness in dealing with human rights and dignity include:

- **Outreach Units** as a first contact with the victims on the streets;
- **Drop-in Centres** to process the questions and identify the problems of women in search of assistance;
- **Safe Communities or Shelters** for programmes of social reintegration¹⁰;
- **Restoring legal status** through assisting victims in the acquisition of documents;
- **Collaboration** with embassies to obtain necessary identification documents;¹¹
- **Professional preparation** through language, skills and job training;
- **Psychological and spiritual aid** to help survivors to rediscover their cultural roots and faith, to regain their self-respect and heal the deep wounds of their experience;¹²

The following initiatives carried out by inter-congregations are also worth mentioning:

- ❖ **Anti-Trafficking Educational Kit** for religious communities, seminaries, schools, parishes and youth groups, available in six languages - English, Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Polish, and Romanian - has been prepared by a working group on Counter-Trafficking in Women and Children of the JPIC Commission of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG/USG).
- ❖ **Weekly Visits** by a group of 14 nuns - from 11 congregations and of 8 different nationalities - to one of the 14 Temporary Detention Centres in Rome, for the pastoral care of 180 women awaiting forced expatriation, after being detained for 60 days under the Bossi-Fini Law, because they were found with no documents¹³;
- ❖ **A Training Programme for Women Religious** was carried out in 2004 - 2007 in various countries touched by the phenomenon of trafficking in persons: Italy, Nigeria, Albania, Romania, Thailand, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, the Philippines, Portugal and South Africa.¹⁴ The trainings were proposed by the U.S.

¹⁰ There are roughly 100 family houses managed by nuns for programmes of human, social and legal reintegration, many of them welcome mothers with children or pregnant women to protect them and safeguard the gift of new life; the number of "girls" staying in any one community never exceeds seven, and the length of stay varies from 12-24 months, the time necessary for an adequate social reintegration to complete autonomy.

¹¹ Since the beginning of our collaboration with the sector Trade in Human Beings, more than 2,500 passports have been issued by the Nigerian Embassy to comply with the procedure of residence permits according to Article 18.

¹² Several religious are involved in the delicate ministry of interior healing to help young women overcome the traumas and deep wounds they carry within, in order to restore their own self-esteem. This is done through prayer and contact with the Word of God that helps a woman to rediscover her femininity and Christian faith. Almost all of the women come from Christian families and have a strong sense of God and of the transcendent. Many experience strong feelings of guilt and therefore feel the need to be reconciled with God, with themselves and with their families.

¹³ For the past five years Sisters have been offering this ministry of mercy and comfort for religious and pastoral assistance, moral and psychological support to the many women in despair who do not want to go back home empty-handed and labelled as "prostitutes."

¹⁴ Another formation course for 24 women religious took place in 2004 in Poland; it was proposed and supported by USMI, sponsored and run by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC). In January 2007 another

Embassy to the Holy See, financed by the U.S. Department of State and carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in collaboration with UISG and USMI.¹⁵

- ❖ **An International Seminar** has been organised in October 2007 in Rome by USMI, in collaboration with the US Embassy to the Holy See and financed by the US Department of State for 33 Sisters coming from 26 different countries. The aim of such an important gathering was to strengthen our network, make local Conferences of Religious aware of the phenomenon and help Congregations to live our Prophetic role. The participants launched an international network (INRATIP) and addressed a message to institutions and people connected with trafficking in human beings.

Cooperation with Religious Women in the Countries of Origin

Our role and interventions for women in countries of destination cannot be effective if they are not in strict collaboration with the local government, NGO's, churches and religious communities in countries of origin. In the past few years we have established channels of cooperation with the Conference of Religious in Nigeria, and we have already obtained noteworthy results in awareness prevention, family tracing and assistance of returnees repatriated either on voluntary bases or deported.

A New Shelter in Benin City: on Wednesday, July 11, 2007, as a result of such cooperation between Italy and Nigeria, a "*Resource Centre for Women*" was officially opened - the first such shelter to be built in Nigeria and run by women religious. It has been fully funded by the Italian Bishops Conference (CEI) and will be run by the Nigerian Conference of Women Religious. The shelter can accommodate 18 women at a time and will help Nigerian victims of human trafficking who have been forcibly repatriated, or have simply chosen to return home for several reasons, including physical and/or mental illness. For the occasion an Italian delegation of 14 people (8 Sisters and 6 lay people) visited Nigeria attended the celebration.

Our aim to network with countries of origin, transit and destination is to:

- ❖ have constant exchange of information with NGOs to monitor and understand the phenomenon on both frontiers and to discover new strategies of intervention;
- ❖ offer an information campaign to prevent the "exodus" of many young women from their families, schools and parishes towards the so-called "*promised land*";
- ❖ seek and protect the families of the victims against eventual extortions and retaliation on behalf of the exploiters;
- ❖ welcome and help socially re-integrate young women who choose to go back to their families, through ad hoc projects;
- ❖ assist the mass repatriation of young girls without documents expelled by European countries: 10-15% of these women go back home with HIV/AIDS.

USMI/UISG feels the urgent need to:

- create an effective network with all religious groups: JPIC/UISG/USG/USMI/ Caritas to contrast the plight of trafficking;

formation seminar was organised in Nairobi, Kenya by a Dutch organization SRTV for a group of 25 sisters from 8 different African Countries.

¹⁵ The main aim of the courses was to offer women religious adequate professional preparation which would enable them to promote prevention in the countries of origin and the reintegration of victims through specific interventions. A book for such training has been produced in Italian and English.

- organise meetings with religious groups working in different parts of the world. This will allow us to meet, to share our projects, to study new strategies of intervention and stimulate strong legislative positions against trafficking and traffickers;
- urge the Episcopal Conferences of the countries involved in "Trafficking" to speak up and assume their responsibility by denouncing this social scourge;
- involve also male religious congregations; their service would be very important mainly with information and formation of youth, family counselling and for the contact and rehabilitation of "*consumers*"; It has to be noticed with regret that few male congregations have so far responded positively to the challenge of this new ministry;
- offer full collaboration to all public and private forces, lay and religious, who work in this sector towards a common effort of crushing the "trade" forever;
- collaborate with the mass media to promote a full and healthy image of women, transmitting timely and accurate information about trafficking in persons;
- keep contacts with the Monasteries asking Nuns for the support of their prayers, knowing that, "*If Yahweh does not build the house, in vain do its builders toil*" (Psalm 127, 1).

Conclusion

Women religious have made a remarkable effort and achieved courageous goals in this service, but a lot remains to be done to restore the dignity and freedom of exploited woman. Still more has to be done to address the person whose constant demand maintains and increases the paid sex market. The "*customer*" himself is a victim of a deep social malaise, of a commercial society in which everything can be bought, from the "poverty" of countless immigrant women to the defenceless body of a minor.

There is an urgent need to address our attention to the consumers, because they too are in need of being formed and informed to recover the values of reciprocal respect, and love, interpersonal and family relationships, to regain balance and harmony, especially in gender interaction.

A policy of repression or punishment is of no use unless people can change their mentality and their life. Information and formation projects especially for young people have to be set in place at schools, in the parishes, in seminaries and in religious houses in order to tackle the problem in a competent and responsible way.

Only by networking with all the forces operating together for the Kingdom of God can we find success in our different ministry to break this invisible chain of frustrated men and give new hope to broken and exploited women. This is our prayer, our vision and our hope. Thank you.

I wish to conclude this section with a prayer: "*Tina, forgive us*"¹⁶

Sr. Eugenia Bonetti MC
"Counter-Trafficking" Office
USMI National – Rome
April, 2008

¹⁶ This Prayer/reflection has been prepared for the funeral of Tina Motoc, a 21 years old Romanian girl, murdered on a road near Turin in February 2001.

TINA, FORGIVE US

Prayer/reflection for the funeral of Tina Motoc,

Jesus the Redeemer Parish, Turin, 23rd March 2002

Dearest Tina,

Your young life that was suddenly interrupted thirteen months ago weighs terribly on our conscience and we need your forgiveness to find the strength to continue the fight against all forms of slavery and exploitation.

❖ We ask forgiveness from your little daughter Elisa, whom you left in Romania few months after her birth; we also ask forgiveness from your mother and all the mothers who weep daily for their daughters who came to Italy with the dream of a life of hope but were struck by a cruel and humiliating death like yours.

❖ Tina, forgive the hypocrisy of our society of well-being and consumption, concerned only for development and technological progress but has forgotten the respect for the dignity and sacredness of each person.

❖ Forgive the responsibility of our civil authorities that permit or tolerate this new form of slavery and do defeat the trans-national organisations of the trafficking in human beings for mire interest and shameful earnings.

❖ Forgive the law enforcement agents that did not protect and defend you because you were an illegal alien, without identity and consequently stripped you also of your dignity and liberty.

❖ Specially forgive those, who, every night looked for you, raped you and used you as an object of pleasure, only to throw you back on the streets like wastes, collaborating with your oppressors, increasing their earnings and paying a fee destined to sustain organised crime.

❖ Forgive the religious authorities that were not able to shout your sorrow loud enough and denounce the injustice of your exploitation and your reduction to slavery. During the Holy Year of the Great Jubilee you waited in vain for the chains to be broken for you and your street companions, so that "The Lord's year of grace and mercy" (LK 4,19) may be realised.

❖ Forgive the attitudes of many Christians who judged and condemned you as the adulterer of the Gospel, because you were a nuisance to them, who soiled our streets and humiliated our false sense of shame.

❖ I ask your pardon in the name of all of us women, because we left you alone on the streets to live your drama of solitude, anguish and fear through our indifference and silence.

❖ I ask you pardon, Tina in the name of your killer who in a barbarous way mutilated your young body. But he is not the only one responsible for your death; in fact, before you were struck, you were already dead. How many people killed the dreams and expectations of your twenty years of life? We are all guilty and responsible for your death and for this we invoke the mercy of God.

Now, we want you to rest in the peace and love of that God who is Father of all the marginalized, desperate, humiliated and despised by history because he is the one who "cast the mighty from their thrown and exalted the humble", he is the one who "filled the hungry and sent away the rich empty handed" (LK 2, 52-53). May He now wipe away all your tears and give you the joy and peace of eternal life. May the comfort of our prayers, our solidarity and our participation in this great loss come to little Elisa and your family; to us the consciousness and dedication to defend and liberate all the slaves of the 21st century.

Amen!