

Diocese of Venice

Human trafficking: Awareness may save a life

Posted: 11.08.2010



FORT MYERS |

It may seem impossible that slavery could still exist today, but that is exactly what the second-largest illegal commercial activity involves — trafficking of human beings for profit to the tune of \$32 billion a year. And when it comes to human trafficking, the state of Florida ranks third in the nation, according to Terry Coonan, Executive Director of the Center for the Advancement of Human Rights at Florida State University.

Coonan was one of the speakers at the Diocese of Venice Human Trafficking Awareness Training held Oct. 16 at St. Columbkille Parish in Fort Myers that included more than 60 parish representatives from around the Diocese.

Thomas Gillan, a certified law enforcement trainer for human trafficking and Orlando Diocese Prison and Jail Ministry manager, was also a speaker, and Bishop Frank J. Dewane, a committee member of the Florida Catholic Conference Ad Hoc Committee on Human Trafficking Awareness, gave the opening and closing prayers.

“The training day was part of a plan developed by the Florida Catholic Conference Ad Hoc Committee on Human Trafficking Awareness,” explained Jeanne Berdeaux, the director of the Diocese Respect Life Office. “It is in response to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishop’s (USCCB) request that Florida and California develop a pilot awareness program, since our states have so much trafficking going on.” In fact, Florida is the leading state for forced labor — also known as debt bondage — and the Fort Myers area is considered the focal point of much of the regional activity, Coonan said.

Human trafficking victims are found in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors, hotel and janitorial services, landscaping and construction businesses, health and elder care, hair and nail salons, and strip-dancing clubs. They are also found in the pornography and prostitution industries. Victims come from a diverse background, but vulnerability and poverty are usually the common denominator and include immigrants and U.S. citizens, Coonan noted.

According to the U.S. State Department’s 2010 report on this subject, there are an estimated 12.3 million adults and children in modern-day slavery. More than 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States yearly. Of those trafficked, 80 percent are female and half are children.

“It is unlikely we will rescue a large number of those being trafficked until the public is aware and can assist law enforcement,” Coonan said. “We need to train parishioners because there is a real possibility that they will come into contact with a trafficked victim — traffickers do let their victims attend church as a way to control and manipulate them.”

It is with that goal in mind that the training day aimed at giving the parish representatives the knowledge and tools they need to implement an awareness program in their parishes by the end of February 2011. “The Catholic Church is a credible organization to be helping human trafficking victims,” Gillan said.

In fact, the USCCB has been at the forefront in the fight against human trafficking, and has worked closely with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Justice to raise awareness and to assist victims. The USCCB convened the Coalition of Catholic Organizations Against Human Trafficking that consists of more than 30 national and international Catholic organizations for that specific purpose. Since 2003 it has helped more than a thousand victims of human trafficking in the United States.

Gillan notes that it can be easy to get lost in the numbers, but he suggests focusing on helping one person at a time.

“I see one victim. I can’t help 17,500 victims, but I can help one,” he told the attendees.

“Awareness is the first step to stopping human trafficking,” Berdeaux said. “We’ve already had a case of one attendee who was reading an acquaintance’s blog and heard a debt-bondage story about someone working in a hotel that was similar to what he had learned at the training. He was able to send the person the national hotline number and hopefully help this victim find help.”

If you think you know someone is being trafficked, call 1-888-3737-888 or visit www.rescueandrestore.org. Or if you have questions, e-mail EndSlavery@dioceseofvenice.org or call 941-441-1101.