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# A Catholic Response to Human Trafficking in Asia

Paper by John Lee, FIAMC President

*Trafficking in Human Beings: Modern Slavery*

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**Prologue**
**A Catholic Response to Human Trafficking in Asia**

1 I would like to begin this paper by narrating a story. This is a true story of a 10 year old Cambodian girl named Tevy, whose name has been changed to protect her identity. We have often heard stories of girls sold to brothels by desperate families. This sadly was the real life experience of Tevy, an innocent and diligent young girl from Don Bosco Chreh School in Cambodia. Take another moment to consider that Tevy never missed school because it was there that she would receive her only meal of her day. When Tevy failed to turn up at school on two consecutive days, this raised the suspicions of principal, Sr Ophriini. Fearing the worst, Sister went quickly to the shack where Tevy's family lived to look for her. Unconvinced by her parents' story that she had gone to live with her uncle in the city, Sister persisted until they told her the shocking truth. Tevy had been sold to a pimp for US$50. Sister immediately rushed to the address given, and redeemed her for US$100, a life of prostitution, and probably early death from AIDS. What's the purpose of telling the story of Tevy?

**Unanswered Questions**

2 In my research into human trafficking in Asia, I found that it was impossible to obtain any reliable data on the magnitude of the problem or that the relevant information even exists, But the world is slowly waking up to the reality of human trafficking, which might be more accurately described as a modern form of slavery, and those who care wish to know the answers to two sets of questions.

3 First they want to know the magnitude of the problem. How many victims are there? Who are the traffickers and what is their modus operandi? What are the trends, for example, whether the problem is getting more severe, and what are the reasons for these trends?

4 The second set of questions (probably more pertinent to our discussion) relate to what can people do as individuals? What are governments, international agencies like the United Nations or the Church doing about it? Most people are genuinely concerned, but are also pessimistic about the change they can effect as individuals.

5 The first set of questions needs to be answered in order to formulate effective policies to address the problem. However, there has been little light shed on the subject since the UNODC first attempted to identify human trafficking patterns in April 2006. The incident involving Tevy and other anecdotal evidence of thousands of young children in Cambodia will probably never be officially recorded as the relevant authorities lack concrete evidence (or possibly the will) to pursue these cases. According to official Cambodian statistics based on conviction rates, there were only 292 cases of human trafficking with 65 convictions in the country in 2006. But the problem is not just one for developing countries to ponder. In developed and developing countries around the world, prostitution remains rife, and the refusal to acknowledge prostitution as the exploitation of the human person is a separate problem in itself. In the absence of reliable official statistics which are unlikely to ever be collated (because no government would want to report figures which present an unfavourable impression of their countries), most of the reports I researched either did not give a numerical figure or extrapolate from the personal experience of the authors. Essentially, the statistics from the research did not correspond to the anecdotal evidence. With these limitations in mind, I will attempt to give a sense of the magnitude of the problem and trends particularly in Asia.

6 The absence of reliable data should not be used as an excuse for inactivity. Human trafficking is undeniably a major problem and there are many things that the individual or the Church can do. But the focus of our efforts as Church and as individuals should be pragmatic. We should aim to rescue and rehabilitate the individual, rather than to try and totally eradicate a systemic problem.

**Definition of Human Trafficking**

7 Let me begin by briefly highlighting the legal definition of human trafficking. Article 3 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations convention against transnational organized crime states that:

- "Trafficking in Persons" means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.
- Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;

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8 Due to the highly clandestine nature of the crime of human trafficking, the great majority of human trafficking case go unreported and culprits remain at large. In many cases of reported trafficking, it is also very difficult to prosecute traffickers because the victims themselves are often reluctant to testify against them. They fear for the lives and safety of their family members, and are afraid of being punished and deported by law enforcement agencies if they happen to be in a country illegally. It is widely reported that many traffickers are associated with international criminal organizations, which makes them highly mobile, well protected within these organizations, and subsequently difficult to prosecute.

9 The 2005 Global Report on Forced Labour by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that of the 12.4 million victims of forced labour, more than 2.4 million were in forced labour as a result of human trafficking. According to ILO 2012 estimates, the Asia-Pacific region (AP) accounts for the largest number of forced labourers – 11.7 million or 56% of the global total. (Note: While trafficked people are often exploited through forced labour, not everyone who experiences forced labour has been trafficked.)

10 Having said that, we also have to consider that with approximately 4.3 billion people, Asia hosts 60% of the world's current human population. In terms of prevalence, Asia does not fare especially badly compared to the rest of the world. While a simple outlook would be that if the problem of human trafficking would be significantly reduced if the Asian human trafficking numbers went down, I would strongly caution against an Orientalist approach that reduces the many and diverse countries in Asia to a monolithic bloc. The trends and statistics collected here do not necessarily give a complete picture of how human trafficking differs from one Asian country to another but we have to start somewhere.

### Caveats to Studying Trends in Asia

11 I wish to draw your attention to several trends and statistics on human trafficking in Asia, with the latest statistics from the UNODC Global Report on trafficking in persons 2012. But let me first reiterate my point that the data coverage for Asia is relatively weak, especially given the region’s large population. Not all countries participated in the report, and countries did not necessarily provide information for all indicators. As a result, while the sample size is relatively large compared with that of other regions, there is a high degree of uncertainty regarding how representative it is of the actual trafficking situation.

12 More than 10,000 cases of trafficking in persons have been recorded in South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific. However, a profile of the victims was available for only a limited number of those cases. Not just because the profile of the victims was not made available to UNODC, but also because these cases were often prosecuted under other offences, including victims of other crimes. Just nine countries in this large region provided information concerning the profile of more than 3,800 victims of trafficking in persons detected between 2007 and 2010. As a consequence, the results of this regional analysis cannot easily be generalized for the whole region but should be interpreted as representative of the patterns and flows in the countries covered.

### Child Trafficking

13 Child trafficking is a very real problem in Asia. Countries in South-East Asia consistently reported the proportion of children to be above 15-20%. In a particularly alarming case, the information reported by the Lao People’s Democratic Republic indicates that most of the victims of human trafficking detected in the country were children. According to the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons of 2009, the majority of the victims detected in the countries of the Mekong river basin were children. The high rates of child trafficking are not limited to South-East Asia. In South Asia, Nepal reported the proportion of victims who were children was about 50%.

### Nationalities of Traffickers

14 The scarcity of information regarding the profile of the offenders in Asia is even more acute with regard to the nationality of the offenders. In East Asia, only Japan and Singapore provided information on this aspect of human trafficking. Japan reported that while just 7% of those convicted for all crimes between 2006 and 2009 were foreign nationals, some 23% of persons convicted of trafficking in persons during the reporting period were foreign nationals. Singapore indicated that the majority of the human trafficking offenders were foreign nationals. It is difficult to draw any useful conclusions from this finding, given the lack of information.

### Forms of Human Trafficking in Asia

15 In general, forced labour accounted for 47% of all cases, sexual exploitation 44%, and other types of trafficking in persons 9%. However, these figures do not represent the trend for each Asian country. For example, trafficking in persons for forced labour, slavery or servitude was the most frequent form of trafficking reported in Indonesia and Taiwan. In particular, women trafficked for domestic servitude accounted for about 60% of the victims assisted by the International Organization for Migration in Indonesia between 2008 and 2010. Similarly, during those years a large share of the victims assisted in Taiwan were women exploited in domestic servitude and who had been trafficked from Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Bangladesh. The United Nations Inter- Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) reported on trafficking victims from the Lao People’s Democratic Republic exploited in domestic services, agriculture, fisheries, garment factories and the entertainment sector in 2009.

16 In contrast, human trafficking in Thailand for forced labour accounted for around 25% of the victims detected in 2011, while 73% of the victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation. UNIAP also reported that sexual exploitation was the major form of exploitation of Cambodian victims trafficked internally or abroad, while a limited number of cases of forced labour were also documented. The Philippines reported that a large number of the victims detected during the period considered were trafficked for sexual exploitation, prostitution and pornography. To a lesser extent, detected victims were also reported to be exploited in forced labour, slavery and child labour. A large part of the Filipinos trafficked within or outside the country were reported to be under debt bondage.

17 In the other parts of the region also considered, Mongolia and Nepal reported trafficking for sexual exploitation as the most frequent form of trafficking, although trafficking for forced labour or other forms of trafficking were also relatively frequent in these two countries. In detail, 30% of the victims assisted by the Mongolian Gender Equality Centre between 2003 and 2009 were trafficked for forced labour, and 45% for sexual exploitation. The other victims assisted were exploited through other forms of exploitation or for illegal adoption. In Nepal, cases of trafficking for organ removal were also reported by the authorities during the period in question.

### Human Trafficking Flows in Asia

18 Human Trafficking in Asia can be analysed in terms of origin and destination of local, intraregional and long-distance trafficking. For a global picture, countries in South and East Asia and the Pacific, as well as in Africa and in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, detect almost exclusively victims from within the region (including domestic trafficking), whereas several countries in the Middle East, North America and Western and Central Europe have a relatively high proportion of victims from other regions or sub-regions.

19 Between 2007 and 2010, countries of South and East Asia and the Pacific predominantly detected Asian victims. More than 99% of the victims detected in South and East Asia were trafficked either domestically or within South Asia and East Asia, respectively. This is also true for the rich destination countries of Asia and the Pacific, where victims from other regions were very rarely detected during the reporting period. Compared with the overall number of victims detected in Asian countries, non-Asian victims were relatively few.

20 Most of the trafficking flows relevant to Asian countries covered in this report are intraregional (i.e. flows within the region). In the period considered by this report, East Asia was confirmed as a significant source region of victims of trafficking in persons at the global level. Trafficking in persons originating in East Asia is the most widely diffused flow globally. Trafficked victims from East Asia are not only widely detected in terms of geographical destination but they are also detected in relatively large numbers worldwide. Between 2007 and 2010, victims from East Asia were detected in 64 countries around the world, including in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America and Eastern Europe. During the reporting period, East Asian victims accounted for about 7% of the victims detected in Western and Central Europe, 22% of victims detected in the Americas, and 35% of victims detected in North Africa and the Middle East.

21 No specific country can be identified as the main origin of the East Asian long-distance trafficking flow. Victims of different nationalities, including Chinese, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese and others, were detected in or repatriated from various countries in other regions outside Asia between 2007 and 2010. Although the diffusion of the trafficking flows originating in South Asia is more limited, it should not be underestimated. The region is also an origin of long- distance trafficking flows. Indications of the wide diffusion of South Asian trafficking were reported from all the sub-regions considered in this report. During the reporting period, victims from South Asia have been detected in or repatriated from Southern Africa, South America and 13 European countries. In the Middle East, South Asians victims account for about 23% of the detected victims. Victims originating in Bangladesh were detected in the United Arab Emirates, and Nepalese and Sri Lankan victims were detected in Israel. Lebanon also detected victims of those nationalities. Indian and Pakistani victims were detected in Western and Central Europe. South Asians were also detected in the United States.

### Female Dimension

22 During the reporting period, most of the victims detected in the East Asian countries covered were female. With the exceptions of Japan, Philippines and Singapore, East Asian countries did not report adult men among the victims detected. Similarly, the proportion of boys among detected victims in this region was limited in number (less than 5% of total victims) and limited to a few countries. The proportion of males, where detected, among the total number of victims was always less than 10%.

23 It is also noteworthy that the proportion of individuals convicted of trafficking in persons in Asia who were women is higher than the proportion of women convicted of other crimes. It is also higher than the proportion of female convictions reported in other regions. The general proportion of women among crime convictions in these countries is higher than in Africa and the Americas and is similar to the levels found in Europe. Women account for about 10-25% of convictions for all crimes, and the presence of female human traffickers is more common than in other regions. Only three countries in South and East Asia and the Pacific provided data regarding the gender of persons prosecuted, and four countries provided data on the persons convicted of trafficking in persons. These data — although limited — further support the observed global pattern of a higher rate of female involvement in trafficking in persons than in other crimes. In addition, with the exception of Japan, the countries report that the participation of women in this crime is equal to or higher than the rate of participation by men.

### Human Organ Trafficking

24 The same issues relating to the difficulty of collecting data for trafficking in human beings also apply to the collation of data for illegal organ transplantation. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that at least 10% of the total organ transplantation done annually are illegal i.e. 11,000 illegal transplantation are performed illegally (which maybe a gross underestimation) of which majority of the organs are procured from Asia.

25 Due to the paucity of data and the international nature of human organ trafficking, it is difficult to discern any trend that is peculiar to the Asian region. But there are enough anecdotal and media stories that give us notice that Asia is a hotbed of human organ trafficking.

### Illegal Organ Transplantation in Asia

26 The world was shaken in horror at the news during late August 2013 of Binbin, a 6-year-old Chinese boy who was found with his face covered with blood by his father in the middle of a field. Someone had drugged him to gouge out his eyes and left him unconscious on the ground. The police later found his eye balls, but without the corneas. They believed that Binbin was a victim of the illicit organ trafficking trade.

27 Binbin's story is just one more example of a global phenomenon that is rampant in Asia. Some estimates calculate that there are around 10,000 black-market operations involving human organs every year in the world generating profits of more than US$ 600 million. Patients, typically from developed countries, would travel to countries like China, India or Pakistan and pay US$ 200,000 for a kidney that was bought from a “donor” for as little as US$ 5000.

28 Asia is notorious for being one of the main destinations of organ trade tourism. Until very recently human organs for in vivo transplant were legally sold in countries like China, India, and Philippines. International pressure has since moved these countries make organ selling illegal. Today, only Iran has a legal and therefore controlled organ trade.

29 Inadvertently the legal prohibition may have created a flourishing underground market. It is estimated that since China banned organ sale, global prices for human organs have increased 40%. The shortage of organ donors both from cadavers and from living patients is alarming and the waiting lists can drag for years. Some countries have resorted to retrieve organs from executed prisoners; but even with these "extreme" measures, the supply is simply not enough.

30 What does all this mean to us as Christians? Perhaps the first duty is to look at it from the perspective of our faith. This might be considered one of the signs of our times. There are some reasons from optimism. Most countries have moved from a liberalisation of the organ trade to a strict prohibition of any form of organ trafficking. It is true that at times, these prohibitions lack legal teeth and illegal trade still remains rampant. Nonetheless it is still a gesture towards a greater appreciation of the human body and its dignity.

31 This positive aspect however should not be an excuse for conformism. There are dangers that a new economic and utilitarian approach might reverse these advances. The acute shortage of human organs for transplant operations manifests itself in the temptation to legalize organ trade to augment the supply. The experiences of the few countries which have legalized organ trade seem to tackle the problem from a pragmatic perspective, and present a tempting proposition for other countries to follow suit. Constant efforts should be made to make sure that this never happens.

32 The problems of organ trafficking whether legal or illegal are well known. Perhaps the one of more obvious one is the exploitation of the poor. Even in countries where organ trafficking is regulated, the poor provide the majority of organs and the rich are the beneficiaries. This goes against social justice that demands that the burdens and benefits within society be fairly distributed.

33 Another obvious problem is the health risks that befall the individual who provides the organ. The cost of post-operation care and the possibility of complications arising from the operation could also force them to incur further expenses. A time of recovery is also needed, which prevents the provider from working (although this may be a moot point if the individual is out of a job, which may very well be the case).

34 We cannot forget that the prospective of quick money is often appealing to people in serious debt. It is easy for these people to think that they will solve their economic crisis with a straight forward approach. The reality is that often these debts are at least partly created by behavioural problems, which still remain after the money has been received. As the behavioural pattern continues, they find themselves indebted very soon again, or even worse than in the original situation.

35 Organ trafficking has also become a deep rooted problem that might be extremely difficult to eradicate. Today, some countries have become a hub for "Transplant tourism" where patients in need of organs will go to for fast access to what they need. Like in other forms of tourism, a whole economic system is developed in these areas which come up with the supply to meet an ever-growing external demand.

36 It is not only the economic pressure that motivates such trafficking, but quite possibly a cultural one too. In Asia it is traditionally (religiously) perceived that the body is a mere instrument of the mind, or only a vehicle for the transmigration of the soul. This traditional dualism is at times reinforced by the increasing influence of Western thought and its dualistic understanding of the body as something purely biological and not integrally personal. It is against this mentality that the proper ethics of organ donation needs to be understood, promoted and legislated.

37 The moralty of organ transplant was not accepted in the church without difficulty. When the moral issue of organ transplant was first considered, it appeared prima facie to be hard to reconcile with traditional moral teachings in the church. The action of depriving a healthy person of a healthy organ appeared to be a "direct harm" against the person, something that no doctor should be permitted to do. Furthermore, justifying this kind of action on the basis that the patient receiving the organ benefits could give the impression that the end justified the means - which is not what the Church teaches.

38 But it was precisely the traditional understanding of the integral unity of the human person, the integral unity of a human body and a human soul that allowed the Church to see that organ donation was not merely the act of giving away a physical possession, such as when one donates money or other goods to the poor; but rather as an act of giving oneself – an act of charity. Framed in this perspective, the doctor is not harming the donor, but helping him to do an act of charity. As Blessed John Paul II stated in his address to the Organ Transplant Society in 1991: "It is not just a matter of giving away something that belongs to us but of giving something of ourselves, for 'by virtue of its substantial union with a spiritual soul, the human body cannot be considered as a mere complex of tissues, organs and functions . . . rather it is a constitutive part of the person who manifests and expresses himself through it."

39 This is the reason why it is crucial to distinguish between true organ donation, justified only as an act of charity, and organ trafficking and organ trade, which remains a commercial transaction of an integral part of the person, reducing human beings to mere commodities. Even the language is used to conceal the real and serious ethical difference between the two. Only in ethical donation is there a true donor. When a person exchanges an organ for money, there is nothing donated, simply sold, and therefore the word donor is inappropriate and deceiving.

40 We are therefore facing a problem that runs the risk of being dominated by the logic of economy, to which, we must oppose with the "logic of the gift" that emeritus Pope Benedict XVI proposed in his latest encyclical Caritas in Veritate. We face the challenge of being faithful not only to our church's teachings, but also indebted to serve the world with a most needed alternative way of thinking. As his Holiness Benedict XVI put it: "There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable." (*Deus Caritas Est* #28)

41 In this sense we should welcome and promote initiatives, and some are already present, that denounce organ trafficking with rigorous investigation of facts and data and at the same time promote strong judical frameworks to ensure that organ donation remains strictly an act of charity and does not degenerate through excessive incentive in a de facto organ selling.

42 There is one more concern we need to address regarding organ donation from cadavers. In an effort to increase the supply for organs to be donated, some countries have adopted a policy of “presumed consent” where citizens are presumed to be donors after death unless they explicitly state something to the contrary. As we have been insisting, it is hard to see how an act of charity can be forced into the citizenship. Efforts should be made to promote a culture of life and the charitable gift of ourselves so that more and more people in total freedom come forward as organ donors. What is at stake is the precious and inviolable dignity of the human person that the Church has the right and duty to unceasingly proclaim.

### The Church’s Response to Human Trafficking

> “Whatsoever you do to the least of these my sisters and brothers, you do it to me.”
> (Matt 25:40, 45).

43 In talking to many people, including Church leaders, during the course of research for this paper, I was faced with either ignorance or a profound sense of haplessness or resignation over what we can do as a Church or individuals to help the victims of this modern day slavery. From my personal experience I feel that there is much we can do as individuals; parish based communities, and as a Church. The universality of the Catholic Church gives us the framework and infrastructure necessary for us to implement these solutions. I believe that the Church should focus on preventing and rehabilitation of individuals rather than to emphasize on enacting global legislation to eradicate human trafficking.

### As a Universal Church

44 It is clear that some form of trafficking exists in every society from the poor developing nations to the more developed countries albeit in different forms. The first step to resolving the problem is to create awareness. Most people are generally well meaning but can be blind or oblivious to what is happening around them. Some have a “don’t ask don’t know” attitude. The Holy Father Pope Francis who is immensely popular with Catholics as well as non-Catholics (at least in Singapore for his pastoral approach, simplicity and humility) could issue a pastoral letter to Catholics not only through the traditional media but also through the popular social media describing the present day situation and urging everyone to reflect and act in whatever way they can to help the victims. The Irish Ambassador to Singapore has suggested that the Vatican could sponsor a proposal to establish a “World Day against Human Trafficking”.

### On a Regional or Diocesan level

45 The Pontifical Academy can then follow up by sending the relevant information to all the National Conference of Bishops to ask them to study the situation in their diocese and maybe even produce some booklets containing short stories describing actual situations together with some scriptural and Church’s teaching on social justice and questions for reflections. In the Singapore diocese such booklets on social issues are disseminated during the Lenten and Advent reflection to great effect. These reflection booklets should also challenge the individual to see what he can do to change the situation. Generally most individuals do not act on their convictions and beliefs because they have little faith that they can change the society around them. Here is where the Church can come in by facilitating and supporting the efforts of those who are passionate to act on their beliefs.

46 Regional or national bishop conferences could support the efforts to fight human trafficking by adopting the following course of action to promote greater networking and enhancing collaboration among congregations, conferences and lay associations. The first step would be to set up a database of organisations and contact persons working on human trafficking and enhance direct co-operation between host and source countries. Each Conference should nominate a passionate human rights advocate to follow-up on recommendations and provide updates in their respective regions. There should be regular meetings and review of progress on an international, regional, sub-regional and archdiocesan level. Collaboration across lay associates of different congregations should be enhanced with sharing of information and resources. This collaboration will strengthen the work within congregations and conferences thus maximising our resources and making our efforts more effective.

47 A vital first step is to raise awareness among bishops, diocesan clergy and religious congregations. To be effective we must develop a network of professionals including lawyers, doctors, media, businesses etc. We should leverage on parishes and institutions run by religious and reach out to schools and youths to build awareness. The formation of priests and religious should include Church social teachings and human rights. The Church should use whatever forum it can to build public awareness.

48 Where possible the Church at both international and national level should engage NGOs, other faiths and government authorities in dealing with this problem. On a practical level the local Churches could explore the creation of shelters as sanctuary for the victims of human trafficking.

49 One of the main causes of human trafficking is poverty and ultimately the best means to eradicate poverty is education. When I first started mission work on behalf of FIAMC, I was focusing on medical support for disaster relief, providing clean water and building clinics and hospitals. Although these are important I soon realized that education was equally if not more important as a long term measure to eradicate and change society. During the Jubilee year, FIAMC received a small donation which was used to create a Pope John Paul II scholarship for some students in Taunggyi, Myanmar who have since graduated and are assisting Archbishop Mathias in his programs.

### On a personal level

50 Having discussed what the Church can do, I would like to describe briefly a program called ACTS (A Call To Share). ACTS is an example of what individuals can achieve if a coordinating body is created to tie them up with Catholic institutions like Don Bosco that are already active in the more impoverished communities. In December 2006, I went to Cambodia with a small group of around 20 people to work with the Salesian nuns. That mission was the birth of a multi-parish mission group called ACTS following the biblical example of the early day Apostles. Mission participants are given pre-mission formation sessions where they are taught Church social teachings and there is also daily mass and reflection sessions during missions. “Share” implies that true giving is a two way process i.e. in sharing our God given talents, the giver receives a lot more in return.(Acts 20:35)

51 ACTS (although strictly Catholic in orientation includes a significant number of non-Catholic participants) is now a year round program which amongst many activities feed thousands of Cambodian kids throughout the year, providing scholarships, building schools etc culminating in annual advent missions throughout Cambodia which have benefitted thousands of Cambodian children like Tevy. A sterling example is a young man named Savouen who received a partial scholarship and has since graduated as a doctor. He is now helping the Church in ministering to the infirm in sick shelters and also in coordinating a mass vaccination program that a Jewish gentleman is sponsoring.

52 ACTS is involved with building the first major Catholic secondary school in Cambodia which will provide education up to university level enabling hundreds of students to avoid a fate of working in slave-like conditions in factories or prostitution. Every year ACTS brings several hundred mission participants to places like Cambodia, Myanmar and Philippines and has had participants from countries as far away as Mauritius and Australia. This December we are bringing 380 participants to Phnom Penh alone. ACTS also encourages the better off Cambodian kids to get involved in our activities and several of them are passionate about helping our work.

53 Indeed, the main beneficiaries are the Singapore children who realize how fortunate they are and believe they can change the world in their own little ways. The most common response when an individual is confronted with the issue of human trafficking is an air of resignation and defeatism as to what they could do to alleviate the situation. It is very important to empower the individual with the belief that no matter how young they are or their station in life, they can contribute to change society. I remember the 4 young children of my friend, aged between 6 and 12, asking me on one mission trip what they could do. I replied asking them whether they could abstain from meat on Fridays and they replied in the affirmative. I then asked them to think of what they could do with the money they saved from not eating meat. They thought about it for a little while and decided to use the money to sponsor a scholarship for a Cambodian child whom they have befriended. The oldest boy, Jerome subsequently tried to raise awareness of the plight of the impoverished Cambodian kids and get his classmates in an elite secular school to contribute scholarships. There are hundreds of similar heart-warming stories of kind deeds initiated by ACTS participants, young and old following the words of Mother Teresa that “In this life you cannot do great things, you can only do little things with great love”.

54 The work of ACTS is appreciated by the bishops throughout Cambodia and recognized by the Cambodian government. ACTS has been invited to replicate its program in other countries like Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam and Indonesia. I am sure that there are thousands of similar programs and organisations working to bring God’s love to the less fortunate throughout the world and the various dioceses could highlight some of their own successful programs to encourage Catholics to respond to situations like human trafficking. A national or regional coordinating body is essential for the development of bottom up programs like ACTS.

55 Let us unite our efforts and prayers so that we can continue to be courageous witnesses of the Kingdom of God.

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