

The Nexus between Capitalism and Human Trafficking

U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking (USCSAHT), a faith-based, national network that works to eradicate modern-day slavery, deplors the increase in human trafficking in the United States and around the world. Trafficking is exacerbated by the dominant model of neo-liberal development and unfettered capitalism that creates situations of vulnerability to be exploited by recruiters, traffickers, employers and buyers.

The 19th century philosophy of liberalism, which promotes non-interference in free markets and personal freedom over government power, was revived in the U.S. in the 1970s in response to a stagnated economy and perceived government over-spending on social initiatives. This model maintains that the only goal of businesses should be the maximization of profit, and markets should be free from government interference. The global market has been formed according to this framework, and it remains the dominant model of development.

This economic model has resulted in massive increases in wealth and development for some regions. However, as Catholics we are called to consider the effect of all actions on “the least of these.” On the one hand, rewards for personal enterprise and initiative, and the freedom to pursue one’s own ends are powerful tools for facilitating development and the common good. Without safeguards in place though, unfettered capitalism fosters a mentality of profit over people that leads to the exploitation of millions who are considered only as a means to wealth.

While corporate owners and stockholders amass wealth, the middle class in the United States has shrunk under this system, and the income and wealth gap between the upper-middle class and the lower-middle class has widened. We see employees in the United States working double shifts at minimum wage and still unable to support their families. Globally, we see low-wage workers in sweatshops, unable to find other work but paid well-short of a living wage; coffee farmers in Central America, who are not paid a fair price for their crops but cannot sell them elsewhere; and children in Africa forced to mine mica and farm cocoa so that consumers can have shiny paint on their cars and eat chocolate. Further, we know that economic vulnerability is one of the primary drivers of human trafficking—when a person is desperate, traffickers are prepared to offer a lifeline.

Pope Francis condemns the paradigm at work in global markets, noting the “throwaway culture” that prioritizes individual desires and convenience, and warning that “a misguided anthropocentrism leads to a misguided lifestyle.”¹ He urges a paradigm shift that reorients human beings toward the recognition that we are connected to one another and all of creation, and our activity should further the harmony intended by God. Without this expansive horizon,

¹ [*Laudato Si'*, 122](#)



human activity becomes relative, and we are hard-pressed to limit exploitative practices like human trafficking.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) further recognizes that “at the level of individual national and of international relations, the free market is the most efficient way for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs.”² This includes lifting people out of poverty and providing services to those in need so that they can participate freely in society. Importantly, though, the free market is not the epitome of freedom, but merely a tool for its exercise. Today, “We see how the world of finance can dominate mankind. Possession and appearance dominate and enslave the world. ... Finance is no longer a tool to promote well-being and to support the life of [persons], but a force that oppresses [them], one which almost has to be worshipped.”³ As such, CST maintains that the market must be structured to ensure that it in fact offers freedom and participation to all affected by it—and in a globalized system, that reach is expansive. Indeed, “Charity in truth requires that shape and structure be given to those types of economic initiative which, without rejecting profit, aim at a higher goal than the mere logic of the exchange of equivalents, of profit as an end in itself.”⁴

One of the safeguards CST proposes is that the state must guarantee individual freedom. Because the current economic system engenders human trafficking through unfair trade guidelines, our faith requires us to urge our government to intervene on behalf of oppressed laborers by promoting fair trade policies and supporting those who are vulnerable to exploitation. While it will be difficult to adopt a new paradigm for the global marketplace, “the various grave economic and political challenges facing today’s world require a courageous change of attitude that will restore to the end (the human person) and to the means (economics and politics) their proper place. Money and other political and economic means must serve, not rule.”⁵

We call on all those with power whether economic or political to prioritize the health and wellbeing of all workers, to respect the inherent dignity of all those who labor, to guarantee a living wage and ensure safe working conditions. Finally, we urge capitalists and politicians to protect the rights of workers to organize and to participate fully in shaping decisions which affect their ability to realize their full potential as men and women created in God’s image.

² [*Centesimus Annus, 34*](#)

³ [*Pope Benedict XVI, Visit to the Pontifical Roman Major Seminary on the Feast of Our Lady of the Trust, February 15, 2012, reported by the VIS*](#)

⁴ [*Pope Benedict XVI, 38*](#)

⁵ [*Pope Francis, Letter to H.E. Mr David Cameron, British Prime Minister on the Occasion of the G8 Meeting, June 15, 2013*](#)