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“Slavery proofing the supply chains of the Catholic Church”

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and

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The election of Pope Francis to the Chair of St Peter in March 2013 has proved to be momentous for the anti-slavery movement in the contemporary world. From Rome during the past five years the Church and the world have heard a constant flow of statements and exhortations by the Holy Father in respect of the eradication of modern slavery and human trafficking.

Pope Francis is perhaps the greatest anti-slavery advocate in our world today. This is a cause dear to his heart and always high in his priorities. He has declared human trafficking to be “an open wound on ... contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ” and “a crime against humanity.” He has pledged with other global religious leaders to collectively work to bring each faith community together to rid the world of this affront to human dignity and defilement of human freedom.

The Holy Father was more than an inspiration in the adoption of Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals which seeks “[t]ake immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers [by 2030], and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.”

Pope Francis is firm and consistent in his belief that we will be victorious over modern slavery and human trafficking. He exhorts the contemporary world and the contemporary Church to provide the collective will and organization to defeat modern slavery in all its manifestations in this generation. Without a doubt, this is one of the most inspiring visions of freedom in our world. Pope Francis’ words sound out like a trumpet that shall never call retreat.

And from across the seas and continents comes a thunderous salute to Francis comes from the peripheries; from far away Australia. The Archdiocese of Sydney and its Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP, signals that Pope Francis has been heard loud and clear by offering a framework for a comprehensive anti-slavery strategy. The Sydney framework encompasses

- an anti-slavery supply chain strategy,
- anti-slavery education and external engagement, and
- anti-slavery welfare services.

This far-reaching framework, which is now being implemented, seeks to bring about change in the areas where the Church has the most capacity to influence change; in our supply chains. As Pope Francis has declared that businesses “must also be vigilant that forms of subjugation or human trafficking do not find their way into the distribution chain. Together with the social responsibility of businesses, there is also the social responsibility of consumers. The vigilance and social responsibility of business and consumers described by Pope Francis applies, in all respects, to Catholic dioceses and Catholic institutions.

When we consider the estimated 40 million people who are enslaved in our world today we note that the majority of these men, women and children are held in forced labour conditions. Modern slavery touches every country and every industry sector. However, notable examples of high risk sectors include construction, manufacturing and agriculture. Moreover, when we appreciate that 80% of trade flows through global supply chains and consider the sheer extent of the supply chains of Catholic institutions (such as schools, hospitals and universities) we can see that our possible exposure to modern slavery is enormous. So, too, is our capacity to effect change.

When taken together, the Catholic Church in Australia is both the largest employer and likely the largest procurer of goods and services in the country outside of the public sector. By way of example, 1 in 5 Australian children are educated in Catholic schools and 1 in 10 hospital patients and aged care residents receive care in Catholic health facilities. Indeed, the major exposure to modern slavery by the Church in Australia relates to our procurement decisions – to the buying of goods and services and to investment decisions. This includes not only Church institutions which have a procurement function but parishes, communities, families and individuals who also make daily purchasing decisions, as well as the investment decisions of Catholic entities and development funds.

In March 2017, Archbishop Fisher publicly committed the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney to a programme directed towards the eradication of modern slavery in the supply chains and life of the Archdiocese. In this statement to a New South Wales State Parliamentary Committee, Archbishop Fisher demonstrated he well understood that the Holy Father wanted action.

In proposing action in his own Archdiocese, the Archbishop said that, “it is not enough for groups such as churches to lecture or exhort the rest of the community in such matters [as modern slavery and human trafficking]. We must demonstrate our own willingness to act where we can. The Vatican has already committed itself to slavery-proofing all its procurement practices and supply lines. It is no small task to ensure everything we use has been obtained ethically, that everything we obtain has itself been produced and supplied ethically and sustainably, and that those upon whom we rely or with whom we are affiliated are like-minded. It is no small task but we must try. As Pope Francis has pointed out, buying goods is not just a commercial matter; it has moral dimensions.”

Archbishop Fisher subsequently appointed an Anti-Slavery Taskforce and issued a strong Mandate to them. He honoured me by naming me as the Taskforce Chair and with Katherine Moloney, a supply chains expert, we constitute the Taskforce Executive working to fulfil Archbishop Fisher’s Mandate.

Our anti-slavery supply chain strategy is multifaceted and is set out in the January 2018 Taskforce Report to Archbishop Fisher. Firstly, it involves the implementation of an effective anti-slavery supply chain strategy for Catholic institutions with procurement functions. Our strategy uses the so-called Australian Model of supply chain regulation which is an international best practice model incorporating human rights due diligence throughout supply chains.

This Model is based on the premise that in order to combat modern slavery and other forms of exploitation, it is imperative to know the locations and conditions of work for all who labour throughout the supply chain at both national and global levels. This transparency is achieved by harnessing contractual arrangements, which already regulate global supply chains. Both national and global supply chains are comprised of a successive ‘chain’ of contractual arrangements for the production of goods or the provision of services. Businesses at the top of supply chains already use contracts to leverage their relative power to effect outcomes throughout the chain. This same mechanism may be harnessed to combat modern slavery and slavery-like practices.

The Australian Model builds into contracting arrangements human rights due diligence provisions for the protection of all workers throughout the supply chain. These provisions are binding on all suppliers throughout the chain. Moreover, a major strength of the Model is the implementation of a robust system of compliance due diligence. The Model differs from and is superior to other models of supply chain regulation which rely primarily on Codes of Conduct, supplier self-report and auditing.

Secondly, the Taskforce Executive is developing an ethical purchasing guide for use by priests and parishes, communities, families and individuals. This resource will be used to educate the faithful about the link between what they buy and modern slavery, and so equip them to make ethical purchasing decisions.

And thirdly, on behalf of the Archdiocese, we are actively engaged in advocating for effective anti-slavery supply chain strategies in the public and private sectors. We are working particularly closely with government legislators with the view to ensuring that legislation and public procurement policy requires human rights due diligence throughout supply chains.

Our proposal for the global Church is based on the sure fact that Catholic institutions and communities the world over interface with modern slavery each and every day through their supply chains. We therefore propose that Catholic organizations with procurement functions (such as Catholic educational facilities and health systems) adopt effective anti-slavery supply chain strategies which implement human rights due diligence throughout all tiers of their supply chains.

We also propose that priests, parishes and the wider Catholic community, including Catholic commercial entities, are equipped and empowered about how they can contribute to ending modern slavery through ethical purchasing and ethical investment decisions. And we propose that, in its engagement with governments, the Church worldwide adopt a policy position that prioritizes anti-slavery supply chain legislation and ethical public procurement.

While all of us in the Antislavery movement recognise and acclaim the leading and direction setting role of Pope Francis in worldwide Catholic anti-slavery action, we must carry his vision into our present world and generation. We must also acknowledge with gratitude the difficult but vital work being carried out by Catholic groups, particularly Religious sisters and other anti-slavery organizations to support and protect victims and to expand justice and freedom in our world.

Like Pope Francis, we truly believe that it is possible to eradicate modern slavery in this generation. Like Pope Francis, we also believe that the Church throughout the world

must demonstrate the will and the determination to effect liberating change in the lives of the many millions enslaved for the goods and services our world consumes. We can hope and plan that soon there is convened, in Rome, an international conference on Catholic supply chains which would educate and empower the global Church to carry out this work. So, we challenge the Church worldwide to embrace an effective anti-slavery supply chain strategy at institutional, diocesan and national levels and to engage with the Archdiocese of Sydney about how to implement such strategies. For Church leaders everywhere, Archbishop Fisher sets a new standard for strategy and effective action.

Going forward the famous words of William Wilberforce take on new relevance for Catholic leadership throughout the world “You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know.”