

July 2015

Bishop John Noonan

Brothers and sisters:

*I, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received,
with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love,
striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace:
one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all in all.*

Ephesians 4:1-6

My Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

I chose this particular Scripture, the second reading for the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 26, as our opportunity for reflection. St. Paul makes a general plea for unity in the church. During St. Paul's life, Christians were being formed through the Spirit into a single harmonious religious community, belonging to a single Lord in contrast to the many gods of the pagan world, and by one way of salvation through faith, brought out especially by the significance of baptism. This beginning of Christianity was a very radical movement compared to the understanding of many gods and/or worshipping the god of whomever was the leader of the land or tribe.

But Christian unity is more than adherence to a common belief. It is manifested in God's gifts to each of us who are called to serve so as to make the community more Christlike. Today, we still cry for Christian unity; to make our community more Christlike.

Our cry resonates as we witness the horror of human trafficking which Pope Francis discusses in his recent encyclical, [Laudato Si](#). "A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings. It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking, unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted. This compromises the very meaning of our struggle for the sake of the environment. It is no coincidence that, in the canticle in which Saint Francis praises God for his creatures, he goes on to say: "Praised be you my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love". Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society."

I pray with the people of our diocese whose ministry makes our community more Christlike by providing advocacy and services to victims of human trafficking, refugees and other vulnerable persons.

Led by Deacon Fred Molina under the direction of Deacon David Gray of the Office of the Permanent Diaconate, a Human Trafficking Task Force has become very active. The Task Force teams with local human trafficking task forces, from Orange, Brevard, Polk, Marion/Sumter, Lake, Volusia/Flagler, Seminole and Osceola Counties.

Having this kind of representation allows us to better understand the issues and initiatives, which lead to better care for these victims. In addition, the diocesan task force has joined the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Human Trafficking Task Force. As our representatives, its members participated in a series of training sessions with the Department of Justice to bring forth awareness to the prevalence of human trafficking in the United States and internationally. The committee members develop training resources and conduct numerous training sessions, some of which are coordinated training with participants of JMJ Centers and our parish communities.

Efforts have begun to bear fruit as a keen awareness of the issues creates an urgency to become advocates for change. Numerous rescue and restoration organizations have been supported through fundraisers and the delivery of more than 250 backpacks throughout central Florida to as far as McAllen, Texas. The backpacks were a Lenten service project of St. James Cathedral and were filled with hygiene items such as shampoo, tooth brush, a brush, a shirt or pair of pants, flip flops, etc. They were distributed to different organizations whose representatives work with individuals who are trafficked. These representatives gave them to each victim as a gift, something that is personal for which he/she did not have to do anything to receive.

The Immigration and Refugee Services Program at Catholic Charities of Central Florida (CCCF) serves refugees from across the world, some of whom are also victims of human trafficking. Through the CCCF Refugee Resettlement program, vulnerable individuals from Congo, Rwanda, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Burma, Syria, and Cuba, who have fled their own country due to persecution and war, can begin a new life of hope and safety in Central Florida.

I am grateful to Deacon David Gray, the CCCF staff and our strong team of deacons and laity who are 'prisoners for the Lord' that they may set these victims of modern day slavery free.

May we, too, become prisoners for the Lord that we may live in a manner worthy of the call we have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love.