

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MODERN-DAY SLAVERY—INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: The Meaning of Human Relationships and Justice in View of Trinitarian Theology
- Convener: Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes, Mount Mary University
- Moderator: Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
- Presenter: Katherine Elliot, University of Notre Dame
- Respondents: Nichole Flores, University of Virginia
Meghan McGuire, Chief Executive Officer, Ascent 121: Ministry to Long Term Survivors of Human Trafficking

The Human Trafficking and Modern-Day Slavery Interest Group met for the final time of its three-year session cycle. The group's second year discussion on salvation and hope set the tone for this year's robust input and response on the dire issue of human trafficking and the need for human relationships that cohere with trinitarian theology. Katherine Elliot presented a paper entitled "The Mutuality and Vulnerability of Trinitarian Relationship as Antidote to the Commercial Sex Industry." Beginning with a traditional Aztec legend, as retold by Latin American feminist theologian, Elsa Tamez, called "The Power of the Naked," Elliot used it to highlight the essence of respect, intimacy, mutuality, love, etc. in human relationships. At its heart, she argued that this story is about transcending societal norms and expectations that deny life. Illuminating the importance of egalitarian harmonious human relationships, for Elliot, it is antithetical for those caught in human-trafficked, especially sex-trafficked relationships. That is, as the "Johns" drive this commercialized sex industry, they exacerbate spiritual and theological impoverishments of cultures in which a sizeable portion of men reduce sex and sexuality to what happens in paid transactions. Elliot used Audre Lorde's work to claim that distortions of human relationships result in vulnerable persons experiencing pain and suffering. In the end, offering an "antidote" to these impoverishments, Elliot drew on the notion of right relationship as modeled by the persons of the Trinity. That is, Sacred Scripture reveals that the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity are marked by mutuality and vulnerability. This invitation to right relationship thus challenges the warped understanding of masculinity and sexuality that are, to use the language of *Gaudium et spes*, "signs of the times" and that drive the sex industry and dehumanize all who are caught in it.

Nichole Flores, responding to Elliot's presentation affirmed that the use of "The Power of the Naked" allowed for her to arrive at a critique of societal norms concerning sex and sexuality that foster distorted human relationships, and thus hinder genuine relationships to flourish. Genuine relationships are necessary, indeed, essential, in resonating with the strong trinitarian view in contemporary Catholic theology and ethics. That is, human beings created in the image and likeness of God—*imago-Dei*—are necessarily created in the image and likeness of a trinitarian God—*imago Trinitatis*—and thus ought to pursue relationships that reflect the divine life (in so far as we understand the immanent Trinity as revealed in the economic Trinity). Flores further offered that in Lorde's discussion of the distortion of human relationship via suffering, pain, and vulnerability, that which is authentically *erotic* also builds bridges between persons and thus allows for the expression of our intimate selves in our

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striving toward wholeness. Yet, vulnerability, like the crucified Jesus, is a necessary feature of relationships among individuals, communities, and the divine.

Among others, Flores posed these questions: in a potential womanist critique—does locating the image of vulnerability in the account of Jesus' suffering on the cross undermine womanist soteriological concerns for surrogate suffering? How might more engagement with and privileging of the voices and experiences of trafficked women themselves help to navigate the tension between Elliot's proposal and a womanist critique (from the Johns' axis)? Do we need to have this soteriological account to get to surrogate suffering?

The second respondent was Megan McGuire. The Chief Executive Officer from Ascent 121 represented an Indianapolis faith-based, non-profit agency with a mission of addressing domestic human trafficking through clinical service, aftercare, awareness, outreach, and discipleship. McGuire's presentation crystalized distorted human relationships resulting from human trafficking by Johns (and others) of primarily teenage females. The commercialized human sex industry, she noted, is a 32 billion dollar world-wide and most-profitable crime industry that ranks only second to the drug trafficking industry. Offering soteriological accounts resulting from the agency's mission and ministry, she detailed the positive steps employed to combat this grave social injustice. Her presentation confirmed Elliot's presentation, supported Flores's responses, and gave witness to the necessity of the Human Trafficking and Modern Day Slavery Interest Group.

The presentation ended with a lively engagement of Flores' generated questions noted above in addition to comments and questions about McGuire's picturesque presentation. A main question that was asked was when will the CTSA leadership offer a plenary session on this topic that maybe hidden in plain view from many of us, yet, it adversely impacts our lives as researchers, authors, educators, academics, and social justice/action oriented Catholic theologians?

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