

Buddhists and Christians, together to counter modern slavery



Buddhist monks in Thailand celebrate Vesakha in 2014. - AFP:

(Vatican Radio/VIS, 21 April 2015) **“Buddhists and Christians, together to counter modern slavery”** is the title of the message from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to Buddhists, to celebrate the month of Vesakh, the commemoration of the three most significant events in the life of Gautama Buddha – his birth, enlightenment and death. This occasion, according to the president of the Council, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, also provides an opportunity “to think of the unfortunate and all who suffer, and to rededicate ourselves to bringing them comfort and happiness through acts of love and compassion”.

This year's text is inspired by Pope Francis's “Message for the 2015 World Day of Peace”, entitled No Longer Slaves, but Brothers and Sisters, in which the Holy Father observes that, historically, the institution of slavery was once generally accepted and resulted in the “rejection of others, their mistreatment, violations of their dignity and fundamental rights, and institutionalized inequality”. Accordingly, “a slave could be bought and sold, given away or acquired, as if he or she were a commercial product” and although slavery has been formally abolished throughout the world, there are still “millions of people today – children, women and men of all ages – deprived of freedom and forced to live in conditions akin to slavery”.

Pope Francis gives examples of modern day slavery: men, women and child labourers; migrants who undergo physical, emotional and sexual abuse while working in shameful working conditions; persons forced into prostitution, many of whom are minors, as well as male and female sex slaves; those kidnapped by terrorists and forced to be combatants, and those who are tortured, mutilated or killed. Human hearts deformed by corruption and ignorance are, according to the Holy Father, the cause of these terrible evils against humanity. When hearts are corrupted, human beings no longer see others as “beings of equal dignity, as brothers or sisters sharing a common humanity, but rather as objects”.

“Dear friends, we share the conviction that modern slavery and human trafficking are grave crimes, open wounds on the body of contemporary society”, states the message for Vesakh. In one section of the “Eightfold Path” – namely “Right Livelihood” – the Buddha declares that trading in live beings, including slaves and prostitutes, is one of five occupations that are

not to be engaged in. He instructs that possessions are to be acquired peacefully, honestly and by legal means, without coercion, violence or deceit, and by means that do not cause harm or suffering. In this way, Buddhism promotes respect for the life and freedom of each person”.

“As Buddhists and Christians committed to respect for human life, we must cooperate together to end this social plague. Pope Francis invites us to overcome indifference and ignorance by offering assistance to victims, in working for their psychological and educational rehabilitation, and in efforts to reintegrate them into society where they live or from which they come”.

The text concludes, “We pray that your celebration of Vesakh, which includes making special efforts to bring happiness to those less fortunate in our midst, may be a time of deepened consideration of the various ways in which we can work together so that there will no longer be slaves, but brothers and sisters living in fraternity, loving kindness and compassion for all”.