

Vatican and Al-Azhar sign joint statement against human trafficking



(©Reuters) Al-Azhar University

The Vatican has announced an agreement among representatives of major faiths inaugurating the Global Freedom Network (GFN). It is being promoted by Andrew Forrest's Walk Free Foundation a major partner of the network. "We are open to Shiites, Jews and other faiths too"

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"Despite the best endeavours of so many in so many countries, modern slavery and human trafficking continue to expand. Victims are hidden away: in places of prostitution, in factories and farms, on fishing boats, and illegal establishments, in private homes behind locked doors and in myriad other places, in cities, villages and slums in the world's richest nations and poorest nations." This was one of the opening reflections contained in an agreement to eradicate modern slavery and human trafficking by 2020, presented at a press conference in the Holy See today. The agreement was signed by the Pontifical Academies of Sciences and Social Sciences on behalf of the Holy See and representatives of the Church of England and Sunni Islam. Significantly, a representative of Cairo's Al-Azhar University was also present. The University had suspended dialogue with the Vatican in the past.

The Global Freedom Network's signatories signed a joint declaration underlining that "the physical, economic and sexual exploitation of men, women and children condemns 30 million people to dehumanization and degradation. Every day we let this tragic situation continue is a grievous assault on our common humanity and a shameful affront to the consciences of all peoples." Global Freedom Network is the name of the initiative launched in collaboration with the Walk Free Foundation. "Any indifference to those suffering exploitation must cease." "Only by activating, all over the world, the ideals of faith and of shared human values can we marshal the spiritual power, the joint effort and the liberating vision to eradicate modern slavery and human trafficking from our world and for all time."

The signatories of the "revolutionary" (as the Walk Free Foundation called it) and "historic (as the Vatican's spokesman Fr. Federico Lombardi termed it) agreement were: the Argentinean monsignor Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, Chancellor of the Pontifical Academies of Sciences and Social Sciences, Dr. Mahmoud Azab representing Al-Azhar, the Anglican David John Moxon, representing the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and the Australian magnate Andrew Forrest (who was listed as one of the world's wealthiest men by Forbes magazine), founder of the Walk Free Foundation. Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace was also present. He explained how Forrest's idea occurred to him after his daughter had discovered a child

trafficking case in Nepal. During the press conference, Forrest was keen to stress that representatives of other denominations and religions are also “welcome” in the future, starting with representatives of the Jewish faith, Shiite Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Mgr. Sanchez Sorondo recalled that the decision to turn their attention to the issue of human trafficking came after the Pope sent him a hand-written greetings card with a note on the back which read: “Marcelo: Creo que sería bueno...” I think it would be good to address the issue of human trafficking and modern slavery. Organ trafficking can be addressed as part of the human trafficking issue. Thanks a lot. Francis”

The agreement that was signed today promises initiatives of a spiritual nature - “prayer, fasting and almsgiving”, a world day of prayer for the victims and for their freedom” and dedicated prayer networks [that] will be formed in all parts of the world” - as well as other more practical ones. For example: “Action plans for the first year will be developed to engage: “All global faiths to modern slavery-proof their supply chains and investments and to take remedial action if necessary; All global faiths to mobilize their youth sections to support programmes to eradicate modern slavery and human trafficking; Families, schools, universities, congregations and institutions to educate on the nature of modern slavery and human trafficking, how to report it and the destructiveness of harmful social attitudes and prejudices and social systems in relation to modern slavery and human trafficking; Government leaders to modern slavery-proof public sector supply chains; 50 major multi-national businesses whose CEOs are people of faith or of goodwill to commit to modern slavery-proof their supply chains; 162 governments to publicly endorse the establishment of the Global Fund to End Slavery, with 30 heads of state publicly endorsing it by the end of 2014; The G20 to condemn modern slavery and human trafficking and adopt an anti-slavery and human trafficking initiative and support the abovementioned Global Fund.”

The fact that a representative from Al-Azhar University was present is significant. Cairo’s Sunni university suspended dialogue with the Holy See after Benedict XVI gave a speech at the start of the Arab Spring revolts in defence of Egypt’s Copts. This was following a deadly attack on a Coptic church in Alexandria on New Year’s Eve 2011. Cairo saw this act of defence as offensive. The Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb mentioned a speech Ratzinger had previously given in Regensburg (Germany) as a further reason to suspend dialogue with the Vatican. Today, Mahmoud Azab said that when Francis was elected Pope, Cairo sent a number of conciliatory messages, some more publicised than others. Then there was the time when the Pope and the Grand Imam exchanged wishes after the Conclave, the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar, Shawki Allam, attended a collective audience with the Pope in October. The audience was part of an interreligious meeting organised by the Community of Sant’Egidio in Rome. Last December, the Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Fr. Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot, accompanied by the Apostolic Nuncio to Egypt, Mgr. Gobel, was received at Al-Azhar. Finally, today a representative from Al-Azhar took part in a Vatican initiative. But have yesterday’s problems been overcome? “I’m here and I’m happy to be in the Vatican,” Dr. Mahmoud Azab replied. “There aren’t any big misunderstandings between us” and the Grand Imam does not want dialogue to stop at words. He wants it to be a collaboration on concrete issues such as combating human trafficking. “We just suspended [dialogue] for a while” but once we saw some positive signs, relations resumed. “Islam forbids human trafficking and slavery one hundred per cent. I myself and all those working at Al-Azhar are busy trying to combat these phenomena. Modern slavery especially, is strictly prohibited in all parts of the world.”