News



Pope Francis listens as Margaret Archer, a British sociologist and president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, speaks during a meeting of the academy with the pope at the Vatican April 18, 2015. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

Catherine Pepinster

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Margaret Archer has long been one of the world's leading sociologists, recognized for her analysis of societal structure with awards and professorships.

Thanks to a note scribbled in Spanish from Pope Francis, the British academic is also an activist, sheltering victims of human trafficking in her English home with the help of her parish.

The note that inspired Archer to move beyond the theoretical to take concrete steps to help individual victims of trafficking came from Francis to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences after his election in 2013.

As the academy had done after previous papal elections, it sent Francis a letter of congratulations, asking if he wanted them to investigate a particular issue. To the same query, Pope John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI told the academy to carry on as before.

But with Pope Francis — the third pope Archer has served since joining the Vatican-based think tank in 1994 and becoming its president a year later — it was different. He sent a hand-written note with a specific request, urging the academy to study the problem of human trafficking.

The papal request led to a series of conferences examining trafficking of peoples throughout the world but it also led to Archer's realization that she could no longer do this work only on an intellectual level. She felt herself drawn to involve herself personally in the lives of trafficked people.

"It became clearer and clearer to me that it was wrong to see this issue just as an exercise in social policy. I didn't know any trafficked people. I didn't know what they had to confront," she said.

"I thought about what needed doing, I wasn't broke, so I thought why don't I buy a little house. As I enjoy DIY it would not be a painful experience, but I wanted to get my parish involved as well. And this is something that parishes can do elsewhere

too."

By August 2016, Archer had bought her house in Kenilworth, a small town 90 miles northwest of London. It is a quintessentially English place, not far from the birthplace of William Shakespeare. A year ago, two trafficked women moved in — rent free — and Archer’s Catholic parish church rallied to bolster their finances and help them adjust to their new lives.

The stories of the two women she has housed are harrowing – and typical of the more than 45 million trafficked people around the world. (At their request, pseudonyms are used for the two women to protect their identities.)

Adunni was just nine when she arrived in Britain and doesn’t know why she was taken from her native Nigeria — whether her parents sold her, or whether they were tricked, with promises for a better life. She ended up in punishing, uncompensated domestic servitude. The family members for whom she worked were by all accounts respectable as far as the outside world was concerned; they would take Adunni with them to church. She eventually escaped their house and sought help. Adunni, now 27, developed a relationship with a student she met at the church and now has two young children, who live with her in Archer’s house.

Yagazie, also from Nigeria, came to Britain when she was older than Adunni and was forced into prostitution for 16 years. Now 41, she lives at Archer's house with her 6-year-old son.

The two women were referred to Archer by a Catholic charity, the Medaille Trust, which works with trafficked people. Such charities, in England and elsewhere, take on most of the responsibility for caring for trafficked people. In the United Kingdom, the Modern Slavery Act focuses on preventing, detecting and investigating trafficking but not on resettlement of victims.

Victims of trafficking get 45 days of what the government calls "recovery and reflection," and care is offered via the Salvation Army. But traumatized, destitute people need far more than help for just six weeks, Archer discovered. This is where her parish came in.

A notice put up in her church led to donations of clothes and furniture for the house, and the parish branch of the St. Vincent de Paul Society has donated items such as

children’s shoes. Other collections have helped pay the bills.

More personally, some parishioners became trustees of the charity formed to run the resettlement project; drivers help take the Nigerian women and their children to doctors’ appointments; and other young mothers help them navigate the areas' schools and playgrounds.

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"I was worried about how the two families would be accepted in a small town, especially at the time of Brexit when there is a certain xenophobia about," said Archer. "But when they first moved in, I ended up wandering around a supermarket carrying a Nigerian baby and people came up to chat and say "isn’t she sweet."

She teaches her fellow parishioners that they may in no way replace the people who trafficked the women.

"One of the biggest dangers," said Archer, "is that you must not perpetuate dependency."

"If you’ve been in forced labor, you become very passive, so they leave us to make decisions. But they have to take responsibility for themselves. For example, they kept the heating on all the time, but they needed to learn about costs and realize they must make decisions about them."

The parish is helping Adunni and Yagazie to secure their residency in Britain; until then they cannot work or attend training courses.

As Archer's expertise in human trafficking has helped her parish to better support these victims of modern slavery, she has also used her position as president of the Pontifical Academy to encourage others to do the same. At the Vatican summit on trafficking earlier this month, Archer urged other parishes around the globe to take in trafficked peoples.

"People aren’t ungenerous in giving money but their charity has become routinized," she told Religion News Service.

"We put a donation in the collection and it doesn’t require much effort. Working with trafficked people takes a lot more. And parishes are in an ideal position to help; this

is a bottom-up initiative. The call has been made from the top, from Pope Francis, and we can respond in this very effective way."