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Trafficking

Four young people, two wearing red, hold sheets of paper

Young people from around the world participate in an ecumenical prayer vigil against human trafficking at Santa Lucia Parish in Rome Feb. 6, 2023. (CNS photo/Margherita Simionati, courtesy Talitha Kum)



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Young people must be "missionaries of human dignity" to fight human trafficking and all forms of exploitation, Pope Francis said.

The pope's message for International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking, observed Feb. 8, was directed to young people. He encouraged them to build their own sense of dignity and care for the dignity of every person they meet.

"Human trafficking disfigures dignity. Exploitation and subjugation limit freedom and turn people into objects to use and discard," he said in his message. "Unfortunately, trafficking is growing to a worrying extent, affecting primarily migrants, women and children, young people like you, people full of dreams and the desire to live in dignity."

For the first time since the day of prayer was established by Francis in 2015, young representatives of anti-trafficking organizations around the world gathered in Rome to participate in training sessions on how to better prevent human trafficking. Talitha Kum, an umbrella network of religious sister-led anti-trafficking organizations, coordinated the training.

The 15 representatives of young people aged from 18 to 35 years old were scheduled to participate in an ecumenical prayer vigil in Rome Feb. 6 as well as an online pilgrimage of prayer and awareness Feb. 8 with participants from 50 countries and all continents.

One of the representatives, Genc Gjoci, 29, said that trafficking has become a serious problem for those leaving his native Albania to immigrate primarily to the United Kingdom.

"Many people are leaving Albania, and that leads to the question: How many of those that are leaving are free? How many are safe and won't fall into the hands of someone who lies to them?" he told Catholic News Service Feb. 8. "They leave without any profession, without knowing another language, and so it is much easier that people fall victim to different situations."

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Gjoci said that the organization he represents in Albania, the Mary Ward Loreto Foundation, primarily works with young people in schools to educate them on how to spot risks. They teach young people to recognize the signs of a trafficked person and identify tactics a trafficker may use to lure people into exploitative situations.

"People who are more informed are stronger and can better resist being trafficked," he said. "We can't tell them not to go away, but we can inform them on how to leave (Albania) safely."

Samuele Paolucci, 19, spent much of his childhood in a home operated by the Pope John XXIII Foundation in Lourdes, France, which seeks to integrate marginalized persons into society. He said it wasn't until he was much older that he realized many of the long-term guests his family hosted were victims of human trafficking.

"Spending time with these people allows you to reflect on their situations, and once you learn the truth, you can't sit back and do nothing," he told CNS. "You also learn that you must work on developing your own dignity each day to help them, because you may think you are not up to it or not worth it, but no. Each person can help and make a difference."

Maryknoll Sr. Abby Avelino, international coordinator for Talitha Kum, said educating young people is a priority in combating trafficking since young people themselves are often targets of traffickers. While the organization has brought young people to Rome for precisely that reason, Avelino told CNS that being conscious about the often-hidden plight of human trafficking is essential no matter where one is located.

"Just thinking about what you're buying, does this come from labor exploitation? When I drink coffee, do I know where this coffee came from?" she asked.

To combat trafficking, she said, "simple awareness is so important, you don't have to go anywhere.