



DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

**On the Occasion of the 87th Catholic Women's League (CWL)
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KEYNOTE SPEECH

by

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Honored guests, sisters in the Lord, ladies and gentlemen:
Marhay na aga sa indo gabos! (Good morning to all of you!)

As I stand before you here today, I am overwhelmed with the joy of coming home, both in body and in spirit. As a proud Bicolana from Iriga City, I am delighted to be able to celebrate with you the Feast of Our Lady of Penafrancia, through whose intercession I have received blessings beyond measure.

As we all know, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines has declared 2015 as the **Year of the Poor**. They enjoin all sectors and institutions to actively support the fight against poverty by protecting the environment; building vibrant communities where resources are used wisely and the wealth generated is distributed equitably; and building a national economy that responds to the "unconscionable poverty of the fishermen, the farmers, and the urban workers." They also push for education that promotes respect for all people as human beings, as God's children, and is relevant to the fight against dehumanizing poverty.

This call burns in our hearts, for it is rooted in the new commandment of our Lord to love one another as He loved us¹. And it especially burns in our hearts as Catholic lay women, who are called by the Good Book to open our hands to the needy and stretch them out to the poor.² As noted by Saint John Paul the Great, our prophetic mission as women is to manifest the order of God's love.³

This meditation brings me to an important issue that concerns us all: **human trafficking**, a modern-day form of slavery that is directly rooted in poverty.

In his 2014 address at the Conference on Combating Human Trafficking, Pope Francis described human trafficking as “an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ.” Human trafficking is becoming more and more prevalent. Globally, it is the second largest type of criminal activity, exceeded only by the illegal drug trade. Thus the Holy Father observed that law enforcement authorities “are primarily responsible for combating this tragic reality by a vigorous application of the law.”

In order to fight this evil, the Philippines passed a series of complementary laws: R.A. No. 7610 or the “Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act”, and its amendment, R.A. No. 9231, which mandated the elimination of the worst forms of child labor. In 2003, we also adopted R.A. No. 9208 or the “Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003”, which was recently strengthened R.A. No. 10364 or the “Expanded Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2012”. These laws demonstrate our government’s commitment to eradicating human trafficking; and, I am proud to say, this makes us one of the few Asian countries to have such a comprehensive response to the issue.

In obedience to the mandate of these laws, the Department of Justice has worked to bring human traffickers to justice, in partnership with the agencies and organizations of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking. And our efforts have borne fruit: Whereas before the present administration, only 30 persons were convicted of human trafficking even though the rate of commission of the crime was high, under President Aquino we were able to secure 182 convictions.

This is obviously a significant improvement and can be credited to the fact that the government doubled both its resources and manpower

1 John 13:34-25, 15:12.

2 Cf. Proverbs 31:20.

3 *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 29.

in combating this global menace.

Just to share with you, some of the child cyber pornography cases that we have had to deal with are truly shocking and disheartening, as the perpetrators of the exploitative acts are the parents or relatives of the victims themselves.

There was that case of a 44-year old Filipina mother who forced her 5-year old daughter to undress for her New Zealander boyfriend in front of a webcam for a fee.

There was that case of a 53-year old grandmother who her two elementary-age granddaughters to engage in lewd acts for the benefit of Belgian man watching online.

And there was also that case of an aunt who was asked by her sister to take care of her young daughter. While the mother was out, the aunt sexually abused the girl by making her touch herself in front of a vid cam. After the act was done, the aunt paid her niece with a burger and told her not to tell anyone.

These acts are all the more depraved because they breached the trust of their own flesh and blood, driving home the reality that predators can exist even in the sanctity of our homes. The parents and relatives involved in the cases I just mentioned are so clearly morally bankrupt that they dared to invite evil where there was once just innocence.

Foreigners are also getting in on the act. Among the most high profile traffickers that we have caught is a foreigner national named Peter Scully. Prior to his arrest, he ran a cyber sex business, filming girls aged 12 to 18 from impoverished families and selling the videos to customers in Germany, the US and Brazil. He was recently charged with 5 counts of rape and 1 count of human trafficking in Cagayan de Oro. Scully is also under investigation over the rape of an 18-month-old baby girl and the rape and murder of a 12-year-old girl.

For these horrible and inhuman acts, we are making Scully as well as exploitative parents and relatives answerable through our efficient justice system, and we are serving notice to all criminal elements that the days of human trafficking and child cybersex operations are numbered.

Ladies and gentlemen, the tide is turning. Slowly but surely, we are eradicating human trafficking.

Thus, in the 2015 Trafficking in Persons Report of the US State

Department, where the Philippines retained a Tier 2 rating, something given to countries who are making significant efforts to combat trafficking in persons. The Philippines was also singled out in the Global Slavery Index among countries “making comparatively strong efforts with limited resources” based on their national economic capacity. The same Index ranked our efforts at number 3 among Asia-Pacific countries and number 29 out of 167 countries globally, and specifically commended our strong criminal justice system as being at the core of our achievements. This, I believe, aptly recognizes our efforts against modern day slavery.

I acknowledge, however, that the results vary from region to region.

Bicol was once considered a human trafficking hotspot. However, since 2013, the numbers have been going down, thanks in large part to the combined efforts of the PNP, the DOLE, the DOJ, and non-governmental partner organizations. Measures are also being actively taken in order to prevent the resurgence of trafficking activities. However, human trafficking, particularly as it relates to child pornography, still remains a problem. Fortunately, the situation in Bicol is still manageable, especially when compared to other regions.

Dito sa Cam Sur, hindi pa ganun kalala ang problema. Pero huwag na tayo mag-hintay na lumala pa ang situasyon.

Looking at these numbers now, I want to emphasize that law enforcement cannot solve the problem of human trafficking alone, but must be accompanied by a personalist approach. First of all, victims need help getting back on their feet, which is why Pope Francis noted that humanitarian and social workers are also tasked to provide victims with welcome, human warmth and the possibility of building a new life.

Second, to eliminate human trafficking we need to address its root causes, which is primarily the lack of resources and job opportunities. Poverty is often hard to escape, and many people trying to have better lives become desperate enough to fall prey to fraudulent employment schemes or are forced into prostitution. Traffickers therefore prey on vulnerable individuals, particularly women and children, who are willing to pursue their dreams of a better life at whatever cost, often paying in the currency of their bodies and souls.

This is why our effort against trafficking needs partnership and cooperation among law enforcement, social welfare, and other bodies. For example, in June this year, I had the privilege to be part of the signing of the Manila Declaration to Enhance International Cooperation in Combating Human Trafficking. Over 100 delegates from 19 different

embassies, 11 non-government organizations and 15 government agencies came together to identify the decisive next steps to address trafficking in persons. This Declaration highlights the fact that now, more than ever, our greatest weapon is our expanding partnerships and strong commitment to a greater cause.

Above all, we need a mobilized community that will help in catching traffickers, helping victims, and fighting the poverty that makes people, especially women and children, vulnerable to trafficking. And as Catholic lay women, it is our responsibility to lead society in making this effort, through our word and our example, faithful to our mission to be "the light of the world". We can do this simply by mobilizing community resources in support of our advocacy, and also by increasing awareness at the grassroots level.

At the end of the day, we must be aware. We must be committed. We must be united. And we must be compassionate.

In this way or ways, we can truly radiate the life of faith in ourselves and in others.

Let us keep this in mind as we offer our prayers to *Ina*, Our Lady of Penafrancia, and let us ask her to intercede for all the exploited and enslaved women and children of our country.

Dios mabalos!