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## Former prostitute to John Paul II: "Father free these young girls"

On 18 December 2013, the United Nations General Assembly designated July 30 as the World Day against Trafficking in Persons. The intent was and remains to reiterate its *"strong condemnation of trafficking in persons, especially women and children, which constitutes an offence and a serious threat to human dignity and physical integrity."* Numerous initiatives have been taken at international and national level to combat this dreadful form of modern slavery but it continues apace. This is because it takes advantage of people's vulnerability. And sadly, a large part of humanity is vulnerable. A few days ago, at the UN Pre-Summit on Food Systems, FAO Deputy Director Mario Lubetkin pointed out that over 800 million people are hungry globally, and three billion people cannot afford healthy diets. The Pope "from the other side of the world", has always had at heart the fate of those who fall into the hands of this vile trade. Many of us recall 12 August 2016, when **Francis** visited a home for the victims of trafficking run by the "Pope John XXIII Community" in Rome, founded by Don Oreste Benzi, to meet 20 women freed from the sex slavery racket. Countering forced prostitution is one of the last battles fought by Father Oreste Benzi. It is certainly the one which made him known to the general public. *As early as 1990 Don Benzi unveiled the exploitation, the pain and the suffering of prostitution. And it was largely thanks to him that the first trial for slavery was held in Rimini in 1996, where several Nigerian girls testified alongside Don Benzi, resulting in the apprehension of 120 persons on charges of human trafficking and exploitation.* He received death threats as a result of his commitment. In 1998, he managed to secure recognition of the status for the protection of victims of trafficking and exploitation, enshrined in Law 286, Article 18. This pioneering law was adopted two years later by the United Nations, in what is known as the *Palermo Protocol*, promoted worldwide as the best practice against trafficking in persons. This approach recognises both the victims to be protected and the clients culpable of exploiting the vulnerable condition of women. A battle that is not yet over. We therefore embrace the words of **Anna**, a former prostitute with AIDS, accompanied by Don Benzi and blessed by John Paul II in Jubilee of the year 2000. The image became a worldwide symbol of the Holy Year.

"Father free these young girls."

Giovanni Paolo Ramonda