Pope John Paul II - Letter to Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran

On the Occasion of the International Conference "21st Century Slavery - the Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings" 15 May 2002

To Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, Secretary for Relations with States

On the occasion of the International Conference "Twenty-First Century Slavery - The Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings", I ask you kindly to convey to all present my warm greetings and the assurance of my close personal interest.

The trade in human persons constitutes a shocking offence against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights. Already the Second Vatican Council had pointed to "slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, and disgraceful working conditions where people are treated as instruments of gain rather than free and responsible persons" as "infamies" which "poison human society, debase their perpetrators" and constitute "a supreme dishonour to the Creator" (Gaudium et Spes, 27). Such situations are an affront to fundamental values which are shared by all cultures and peoples, values rooted in the very nature of the human person.

The alarming increase in the trade in human beings is one of the pressing political, social and economic problems associated with the process of globalization; it presents a serious threat to the security of individual nations and a question of international justice which cannot be deferred.

The present Conference reflects the growing international consensus that the issue of human trafficking must be addressed by promoting effective juridical instruments to halt this iniquitous trade, to punish those who profit from it, and to assist the reintegration of its victims. At the same time, the Conference offers a significant opportunity for sustained reflection on the complex human rights issues raised by trafficking. Who can deny that the victims of this crime are often the poorest and most defenceless members of the human family, the "least" of our brothers and sisters?

In particular, the sexual exploitation of women and children is a particularly repugnant aspect of this trade, and must be recognized as an intrinsic violation of human dignity and rights. The disturbing tendency to treat prostitution as a business or industry not only contributes to the trade in human beings, but is itself evidence of a growing tendency to detach freedom from the moral law and to reduce the rich mystery of human sexuality to a mere commodity.

For this reason, I am confident that the Conference, while treating the significant political and juridical issues involved in responding to this modern plague, will also explore the profound ethical questions raised by trafficking in human beings. Attention needs to be paid to the deeper causes of the increased "demand" which fuels the market for human slavery and tolerates the human cost which results. A sound approach to the issues involved will lead also to an examination of the lifestyles and models behaviour, particularly with regard to the image of women, which generate what has become a veritable industry of sexual exploitation in the developed countries. Similarly, in the less developed countries from which most of the victims come, there is a need to develop more effective mechanisms for the prevention of trafficking in persons and the reintegration of its victims.

With encouragement and hope I offer cordial good wishes for the work of the Conference. Upon the organizers and all taking part I cordially invoke an abundance of divine blessings.