

CHASTE

Churches Alert to Sex Trafficking Across Europe

“ACCOMPANYING TRAFFICKED WOMEN”

***A training day for people working with women
who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation***

County Hall, Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7PB

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10am-5pm

Where is Your Sister?

**The Phenomenon of Nigerian Women
Trafficked into Europe for Sexual Exploitation
Challenges our Christian Organisations:
Answers and Proposals**

*Report / Testimony
of
Sr. Eugenia Bonetti, M.C.*

U.S.M.I.

Italian Union of Major Superiors
Via Zanardelli, 32 – 00186 Roma ITALIA
Office phone (+39) 06/684-00555
Cell phone (+39) 339-193-4538
Fax (+39) 06/688-01935
migrantes.usmi-n@pcn.net
ebonettimc@pcn.net

Introduction and Presentation of the Issue

I thank Rev. Dr. Carrie Pemberton for inviting me to take part in this training programme for people working with women who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation. I am pleased to share with this audience the commitment and involvement of many faith-based organisations and NGOs in response to the plight of trafficked women and children, imported and exported all over the world like commodities mainly for the "sex market." We need to acknowledge that "slavery" still exists in the year 2006, and that the majority of its victims are women and children, mainly from Africa and Eastern Europe. They do not choose to become prostitutes, but are forced into it by many different circumstances.

I am a Consolata Missionary Sister who in 1993, after spending 24 years of my missionary life in Kenya, was asked to return to Italy to work as a missionary in my own country. I worked with immigrant women, first in Turin in a Caritas Drop-in Centre, and since 2000, as the National Anti-trafficking Coordinator for the Italian Conference of Women Religious (USMI). My remarks today are based on several years of personal experience in collaboration with many other nuns and women religious, working all over Italy and abroad, assisting victims of trafficking in regaining their freedom, dignity and self-esteem. Aiding them in their search to recover the value of their lives, cultures, traditions, faith and womanhood, which have been violated and too often truly destroyed.

I am aware that human trafficking involves many different types of people and takes many different forms—trafficking of organs, sale of infants, illegal adoption, begging, just to name a few—but my reflections will refer mainly to victims of sexual exploitation. This new form of slavery has come to be defined as a "crime against humanity," because it violates human rights and degrades the persons concerned, relegating them to mere merchandise.

PART ONE

So Many Stories, So Many Encounters, So Many Names

My journal is full of notes from meetings with women, each with a different name and story; however, at the same time each experience has several things in common, which reveals a wide-spread and institutionalized social ill. Some of the names and stories include:

- Regina, Nigerian, who was brought to Italy at 14 and sold by an uncle to a human trafficker; thrown on the street, she was saved by police and welcomed in a shelter for minors; she lost contact with her family, but after 6 years, thanks to the network of religious sisters--from countries of origin and destination--she found her mother, and this year returned to her family to celebrate Christmas, after a 7-year absence;
- Gladys left Nigeria with several other girls to follow her dream to Europe, where she thought she was going to work with a family; she was trafficked and travelled across the Sahara Desert; the voyage was excruciating and she suffered thirst, hunger, heat, exhaustion and illness; along the route she saw the skeletons of those who didn't survive the journey, terrorized, she became convinced she would meet the same fate;
- Patricia, 19 years old, the first of 8 children, left home hoping to earn money to send her brothers to school; during her voyage she was raped and became pregnant; for 6 months she worked on the street to pay the debt bond of 80 million Italian lire--contracted without her knowledge with criminal organizations; no one knew of her pregnancy, only due to the consistent concern of several members of an **"outreach unit"** who followed her did she become convinced to leave the street; she was welcomed in one of many of the shelters run by women religious, tended to with love and care, and despite her struggle with fear and humiliation, she came to accept the gift of her baby;

- Rita, who just turned 18, was pulled off the street during a routine check by police and taken to a Temporary Detention Centre in Rome from where she was to be forcibly repatriated because she had no documents; in 15 months on the street, she had earned 55,000 euros which she was forced to turn over to her three step-sisters who had brought her to Italy; on the street she was much sought after by “clients” due to her young age; at the Detention Centre in Rome she met the religious sisters who visit the Centre every Saturday; the sisters knew her history and age and worked to get her discharged from the Centre because she was a minor; she was welcomed in a religious community that runs a program of social reintegration;
- Gloria, 22, worked on the street to pay a large debt bond with traffickers; before leaving Nigeria she was forced to undergo “voodoo” rituals before a witch doctor; on the street one of her “clients”—a 38-year-old divorced man—fell in love with her and wanted to bring her home; she refused; as vindication, he threw her from a bridge and her lifeless body was found the next day.

These stories continue, like the links of a long chain that forms the binding slavery of the 21st century and which holds imprisoned so many, among them exploited women or minors, trafficked without conscience and with an ever-growing number of consumers who, with their constant requests, sustain and feed this profit-making business.

The Situation of Women in the World Today

Today the face of poverty, marginalization, discrimination and exploitation in the world is feminine. Women constitute 80% of those who live in conditions of absolute poverty, almost two-thirds of the world’s 850 million illiterate adults, and more than half of those—between the ages of 15 and 24—who are infected with HIV/AIDS.

Yet it is the woman who bears the responsibility of providing for the numerous family members in developing countries; it is the woman who suffers first and most because of famine and water shortages and armed battle in tribal conflicts. It is the woman who suffers most from the HIV/AIDS virus and the lack of anti-retroviral medicines. It is the woman—or young girl—who is kept from attending school, and as a result becomes ineligible for well-paying jobs and leadership positions. It is the woman who experiences domestic violence, kept within walls of silence. Again, it is the woman who is forced to leave her homeland in order to seek security and well-being for herself and her family in other countries. More often than not, it is the woman who suffers various forms of violence—mainly sexual—in which she is forced to use her body, the only property she has left, to dispose of it as an object of pleasure and a source of gain *for others*.

The most humiliating poverty of all for a woman is that of being trafficked—being bought and sold like a commodity. The trafficking of human beings—particularly of women and children—is a thriving global business, producing roughly eight to ten billion dollars each year. It ranks only behind the trade of drugs and arms. And no country is immune to this phenomenon that provides immense financial interests and gains for a limited few. Prostitution is not a new phenomenon, yet today it has taken new forms and proportions, becoming a global and complex trade which exploits women and children—the world’s most vulnerable and poor—who have migrated from their home countries, creating the new slaves of the XXI century.

The Slave Trade: Women and Minors for Sale

It is difficult to find or provide accurate statistics on trafficked women. A recent UN report speaks of four million women who are trafficked from one country to another, or shifted within the same country. The U.S. Department of State’s 2005 Trafficking in

Persons Report speaks of 700,000 to 2,000,000 women and minors trafficked every year for the sexual industry or exploitive work.

In Europe, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 500,000 women and minors circulate each year for the same reasons. Italy, too, has its fair share of victims. It is estimated that there are between 50,000 and 70,000 women from East Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe who work in nightclubs and the streets of our urban centres and rural areas. Of these, 50% are from Nigeria; 20-30% of those from Eastern Europe are minors, between the ages of 14 and 18. Since these women are in Italy with no documents, it is difficult to assess the situation and provide clear statistics.

There is a well-orchestrated infrastructure of men and women who contact the victims in their home countries. By exploiting local socio-economic situations, these new *slave traders* intentionally deceive these women, and their families, by promising them well-paid jobs. Then, as happens to all victims of the trade, the women are brought into Italy - or other countries of transit and destination -, via various unauthorized means, which are met with the complicity of corrupt employees and officers at embassies, customs and immigration offices, travel agents, landlords, hotel managers and taxi drivers.

On the competitive sex market today, African women are considered second-class, therefore, they receive a lower price for their "services". For a routine affair in a car they will be paid € 10-15, whereas the Eastern Europeans will earn € 25. To pay back their debt of 50 - 60 - 70,000 euros, contracted with the traders who have recruited them and brought them to Italy, they must undergo sexual intercourse at least, 4,000 times. In addition to the initial debt, they have to meet monthly expenses: € 100 for food, € 250 for lodging, € 250 for the strip of pavement they work, in addition to clothing, transport and personal incidentals. To repay their debt they have to "work" every day, or every night, seven days a week for not less than two or three years.

On arrival at their destination, women's passports or documents are seized with the promise of returning them after completing debt payment to the slave-traders. Unfortunately, documents, which are often forged, are never returned; therefore, women remain as persons with no identity, no name, no status, no nationality. They gradually lose the sense of who they are. This applies in particular to Nigerian girls who are also subjected to "*Voodoo rituals*" (black magic), orchestrated and performed by criminal organizations before their passage to Europe gets underway.

The women can cross several countries before reaching their final destination in Europe. They can pass through Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Holland, Germany, Spain and France, travelling for weeks or months over land, by air, or sea. In the case of Nigerians, today most are trafficked across the Sahara Desert to avoid applying for legal documents.

For girls from the East, the network often tricks them into bogus engagements and promises of marriage. They are controlled by men who play with their emotions, while the Nigerian victims are entrusted to "*mamans*" - Nigerian women who turned from being exploited to exploiting others. The *mamans* teach new recruits how to work on the streets, they control them, take the earnings, parcel out the stretches of pavement where the girls are to work, and punish them in case of resistance. Above all, they manipulate the "*voodoo rites*" that play a terrible psychological violence on the victims. They are women exploiting women!

The Risks of the Streets

Once in Italy, these women are forced to live in absolute secrecy and strict obedience to their traffickers, pimps and *mamans*. In addition, they are vulnerable to the dangers of the street such as road accidents, physical abuse and even death. Every year several girls

experience death—or martyrdom—on our streets, delivered by the hands of clients, maniacs or traffickers. Many die in the course of their exhausting journey crossing the Sahara Desert or the sea. Many women become pregnant during their journey and some children are born in the desert.

There is also the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Ten to 15% of women forced to work on the street test positive for HIV. Several young women have already died in Italy because of AIDS.

They face unwanted pregnancies and oftentimes forced abortions. Women from Eastern Europe have an average of three abortions. For African women, who hold maternity as the highest human value, abortion represents not only the killing of a new life, but also of a culture. Among African women, cases of mental illness are frequent, brought on by the psychological stresses of *voodoo* and fear of retaliation against their family members back home.

The Victim: Object or Person?

On the street the "prostitute" completely loses her psycho-physical identity, her personal dignity and her freedom of choice. She comes to consider herself an object, a thing, a piece of merchandise. She must live as an illegal, a social and cultural outcast, with only one option open to her - to demand payment for a sexual service - yet keep none of her earnings.

Sexual abuse degrades a person, empties her of her deepest values and destroys her womanhood, her femininity, her self-esteem, her concept of love, her interior beauty, and her dream of a peaceful future. Often on the street, a person assumes an attitude of self-defence, expressed with noise, vulgarity, violence and aggression. She lives a contradictory reality: on the one hand she is courted by the "client" and on the other criticized, condemned and rejected by the well-off, consumer society. She lives in isolation and carries a strong sense of guilt and shame. Restoring her balance and harmony is not an easy task.

Demand Drives Supply: The Consumers

In the chain of slavery of the Third Millennium, the consumer—or client—is one of the strongest links. In reality, he supports and fuels the sex industry.

Often in the area of relationships and affection, men have opted for a short-cut using "masculine" methods that do not allow for—or require—discussion nor make him feel uneasy. In many cases, men consciously prefer to pay for sex because in that scenario the woman does not interest him and is not considered to be a person, but only an object upon which he can vent his personal frustration, insecurity, and need for possession and dominion over another individual.

In this manner, sex becomes banal; it is no longer considered to be a reciprocal gift, interpersonal communication or a loving relationship, but is turned into an economic transaction. The fact that there are so many "prostitutes" - the poor, defenceless women, with no identification papers, no legal status, no rights and no family- on our streets, forced to sell their bodies, is a proof that there is a high demand, and that these women are seen as the answer to these needs. For women, their involvement is not a personal choice.

The customers—whose average age falls between 18 and 70, but is not limited to that broad group—come from all walks of life and regularly use and abuse these "street slaves." Seventy per cent of the clients are either married or co-habiting with a partner.

Unfortunately, little is known and said about the clients who at night look for "prostitutes" to be "used" and then discarded like rubbish. This act, copies the slogan and practice of our consumer society: "Use and discard." We so often speak of prostitution as a woman's issue, while really we must begin to address it as a man's problem.

Many faith-based organisations and NGOs raise awareness about the victims of human trafficking in response to their needs, while, unfortunately, the issue of the consumers is very seldom taken into account. A lot still needs to be done to address not only the supply side of this phenomenon, but moreover the demand aspects.

Time for Questions and clarification

PART TWO

The Prophetic Role of Faith-Based Organisations and the Social Problems

Why do organisations based on faith and Christian principles get interested in socio-existential problems? Why have organisations characterised by spiritual-religious-Christian denotations have always noted the emergence of social situations of misery and poverty and have sought to respond to the needs of the time long before the state became aware of it? Because this is part of the prophetic role of believers who follow the command of Christ: "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do it unto me." (Matthew 25:31-46) This can easily be seen in the fields of education, health, social assistance to orphans, the aged, the handicapped and the marginalized of every time and place.

Even today, we witness a proliferation of voluntary societies whose members answer the new demands and fill the shortcomings of governmental structures. All this constitutes a great patrimony and richness, both for the donors and the receivers.

Women religious, with their specific charisms, are an integral part of this heritage.

Women Promoting Women

In the early 90's, when immigrant women started to be visible on our streets, Italian women religious were among the first to see a "*new sign of the times*", to acquire clear awareness of a growing phenomenon of trafficking in human beings, to understand its magnitude, and to offer women alternative solutions to their sexual slavery. When girls began escaping from their traffickers and asking for help, several convents accepted the challenge and the risk of the unknown by taking the girls in and hiding them behind their doors. At the outset, sisters faced many difficulties in assisting victims: language barriers, cultural differences, moral issues, public opinion and legal status. Very soon, in listening to their dramatic stories, the sisters came to understand that their "work" as prostitutes—still referred to as the 'world's oldest profession'—was *not* a choice they had made. We—women religious in Italy—came to realise that we were confronted by a new form of slavery.

This situation challenged our values, attitudes, traditions and our security, while at the same time it demanded immediate answers. Some female congregations responded positively with a prophetic intuition by providing shelters, language courses, skills training and job opportunities for the victims they encountered. In this new environment, victims were also able to heal the deep psychological and spiritual wounds

¹ Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2006)

caused by their dehumanising experiences. They were helped to regain their sense of self-worth, trust and hope. A major obstacle however remained for these victims: having no personal documents – taken away by traffickers -they could not claim any legal rights.

In 1996, with courage and determination, the Italian Union of Major Superiors (USMI), the Union of International Superiors General (UISG), Italian Caritas and a few other NGOs, approached several women parliamentarians to highlight the phenomenon of human trafficking. This started a lobbying effort for a new *ad hoc* legislation calling for “prevention, protection and prosecution.” The Immigration Decree No. 286, dated July 25, 1998,² crowned the efforts of collaboration between the Italian government and NGOs (See Appendix I & II). To date, Italy is the *only* European country that has granted legal status to trafficking victims through issuing residence permits and programs for full reintegration into society. Thanks to this legislation and the tireless efforts of various NGOs--religious women included--more than 5,000 trafficking victims/survivors have benefited from this programme and are fully reintegrated and settled in Italy.

Consecrated Women for the Dignity of all Women

At present, 250 sisters - belonging to 70 congregations - work in 110 projects in Italy, often in collaboration with Caritas, other public or private bodies, volunteers and associations, while maintaining their identity motivated by the Gospel imperative. Several hundred victims, from various different countries, are present in our shelters where they are assisted in rebuilding their broken lives.

Thus this service becomes the expression of a new *"fantasy of charity,"* which is also *"prophetic intuition,"* and the fruit of a new *"feminine genius"* of love, compassion and mercy. It is carried out in the following areas and means:

- **Outreach Units** as a first contact with the victims on the streets;
- **Drop-in Centres** to process the questions and identify the problems of women in search of assistance;
- **Safe Communities or Shelters** for programmes of social reintegration³;
- **Restoring Legal Status** through assisting victims in the acquisition of documents;
- **Collaboration** with embassies to obtain necessary identification documents;⁴
- **Professional Preparation** through language, skills and job training;
- **Psychological and Spiritual Assistance** to rediscover their cultural roots and faith, to regain their self-respect and heal the deep wounds of their experience;⁵

² In order to benefit from such a program, a woman must be a victim of violence, exploitation and forced prostitution; be willing to leave prostitution and seek help; be ready to cooperate with authorities by reporting the case to the police; be in danger of further violence, because of the testimony given; be willing to go through a social rehabilitation programme, mainly in a protected shelter where victims will be granted a permit to stay and work and a passport issued by their respective embassy.

³ There are roughly 100 family houses managed by nuns for programmes of human, social and legal reintegration, many of them welcome mothers with children or pregnant women to protect them and safeguard the gift of new life; the number of “girls” staying in any one community never exceeds seven, and the length of stay varies from 12-24 months, the time necessary for an adequate social reintegration to complete autonomy.

⁴ Since the beginning of our collaboration with the sector Trade in Human Beings, more than 2,000 passports have been issued by the Nigerian Embassy to comply with the procedure of residence permits according to Article 18.

⁵ Several religious are involved in the delicate ministry of interior healing to help young women overcome the traumas and deep wounds they carry within, in order to restore their own self-esteem. This is done through prayer

- **Contact with Monasteries** for the support of prayer for the "sisters of the night," knowing that: *"If Yahweh does not build the house, in vain do its builders toil"* (Psalm 127:1).

Our greatest strength and key to success in this ministry is join our efforts and network. The following initiatives carried out by inter-congregations are worth mentioning:

- ❖ **Anti-Trafficking Educational Kit** for religious communities, seminaries, schools, parishes and youth groups, available in six languages - English, Italian, Spanish, French, Polish, Romanian - has been prepared by a working group on Counter-Trafficking in Women and Children of the JPIC Commission of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG/USG). Versions in Portuguese, Albanian and German are also in the process of being printed;
- ❖ **Weekly Visits** by a group of 14 nuns - from 11 congregations and of 8 different nationalities - to one of the 14 Temporary Detention Centres in Rome, for the pastoral care of 180 women awaiting forced expatriation, after being detained for 60 days under the new Bossi-Fini Law, because they were found with no documents⁶;
- ❖ **A Training Programme for Women Religious** was carried out in 2004 - 2005 in various countries touched by the phenomenon of trafficking in persons: Italy, Nigeria, Albania, Romania, Thailand and the Dominican Republic. Additional courses are being planned for 2006 in Brazil, the Philippines and Portugal.⁷ The trainings were proposed by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, financed by the U.S. Department of State and carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in collaboration with UISG and USMI.⁸

Our Strategies

Throughout the last 10-15 years, much has been achieved in giving voice, protection and hope to many voiceless women; however, much more still needs to be done to break this new and invisible chain, to rescue our young girls and give them back their stolen dignity. This can be achieved only by:

- **Joining Efforts** for more informed consultation and greater cooperation with government, NGOs, religious organisations, and law enforcement in order to be more effective in eradicating this 21st century slavery. With an end goal being to eliminate corruption, illicit profits and the great demand from millions of "consumers" of paid sex; unfortunately, even today, the issue of 'demand' from consumers is very seldom addressed or highlighted.

and contact with the Word of God that helps a woman rediscover her femininity and Christian faith. Almost all of the women come from Christian families and have a strong sense of God and of the transcendent. Many experience strong feelings of guilt and therefore feel the need to be reconciled with God, with themselves and with their families. In addition, Nigerian women face the added threat of "voodoo rituals" which they are often forced to perform in front of the "witch craft man" before being brought to Italy. These rituals have a destructive and powerful psychological hold and impact on the women. As a result, many Nigerian victims suffer from mental illness.

⁶ For the past three years Sisters have been offering this ministry of mercy and comfort for religious and pastoral assistance, moral and psychological support to the many women in despair who do not want to go back home empty-handed and labelled as "prostitutes."

⁷ Another formation course for 24 women religious took place in 2004 in Poland; it was proposed and supported by USMI, sponsored and managed by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC).

⁸ The main aim of the courses was to offer women religious adequate professional preparation which would enable them to promote prevention in the countries of origin and the reintegration of victims through specific interventions. A book for such training has been produced in Italian and English.

- **Networking with Sending Countries** will form a strategic alliance. Aware of the great richness of our charism of charity and of the reality of our presence in all parts of the world, we are trying to make contact with the Conferences of religious in the countries of origin of the victims, especially those of Eastern Europe, to work in synergy between countries of origin, transit and destination. Our natural network and our specific charism could be of great help in preventing the exodus of so many young women in pursuit of better opportunities which quickly dissolve into real slavery;
- **Cooperating with Religious Women in the Countries of Origin** is another strategic approach. Our role and intervention for women in countries of destination can be effective only if it is in strict collaboration with the local Churches, Charitable Organizations and religious communities in the countries of origin. For the past few years there has been an effort to establish channels of cooperation with the Conference of Religious in Nigeria with noteworthy results. The aim of such collaboration is to:
 - ✓ establish consistent and timely exchange of information between USMI and other organizations, to monitor and understand the phenomenon on both frontiers and to discover new strategies of intervention;
 - ✓ promote wide-ranging awareness campaigns to prevent the "exodus" of young women from their families, schools and parishes towards "the promised land";
 - ✓ trace and protect the families of the victims against extortion and reprisal by the exploiters;
 - ✓ welcome and assist the social reintegration, through ad hoc projects, of young women who choose to return home on a voluntary base;
 - ✓ assist the large numbers of undocumented victims who are deported by European countries; considering 10-15% of them return home HIV positive.

Our Dreams: Some Proposals for Action

In spite of the results that have been accomplished, members of religious communities in Italy—together with other public and private forces—are aware of what still needs to be done. We still have many dreams to realise. We will work courageously, and with deep conviction, to reach our personal objective: To break all the chains of slavery and to make ourselves available to the last victim. This can be achieved only if we join our efforts and contribute towards a common goal: “to eliminate any form of human trafficking”.

We are further convinced that it is of prime importance to also focus our attention on the one who supports and increases the “paid sex market”--with his constant demands--the client. We see the "client" as a victim, too; a victim of the consumer system of modern life where everything can be bought - even the "vulnerability" of many immigrant women and the bodies of defenceless minors. We are called to join forces to form and inform, to revive the values of reciprocal respect, of interpersonal and family relations, and to find once again balance and harmony, particularly in the man-woman relationship.

Of Particular Urgency

- helping local Churches and religious congregations in countries of origin to face the emergency of mass repatriation through supporting victims in reuniting with their families, reintegrating into society-- even with financed projects;

- creating an effective and strategic network with all faith based organisations to respond positively to the new emergency, mainly in Eastern Europe in view of the new European enlargement;
- organising meetings with all women and religious groups working in different parts of Europe; this will allow us to meet, share our projects, study new strategies of intervention and stimulate strong legislative positions against trafficking and traffickers;
- urging Church's leaders in countries involved in "trafficking" to assume their responsibility by denouncing courageously this social scourge as Nigerian Bishops did in 2002 with a Pastoral Letter: "Restoring the Dignity of Nigerian Women";
- involving male clergy and religious congregations who, unfortunately, remain greatly absent from this battle and dialogue; their service would be critical, primarily with the formation of youth, for the support of broken families and moreover for contact with and rehabilitation of the "consumers";
- offering full collaboration to all public and private forces, lay and religious, who work in this sector towards a common effort of eradicating the "trade" forever;
- collaborating with the mass media to promote dissemination of accurate information and effective public awareness campaigns about the problem;
- creating an authentic network of communication and collaboration between Conferences of women religious in countries of origin, transit and destination, mainly between Central and Eastern Europe. This would assist all of us in information sharing, as well as in determining best practices for battling this scourge.

Conclusion

In accord with the new demands of a world that is constantly changing and in search of justice, solidarity, dignity and respect for the right of every person, especially the weak and the vulnerable, we are all called to risk by offering our contribution. Only by networking and working together can we find success in our ministry to break this invisible chain of human trafficking, and give new hope to broken and exploited women.

In rediscovering our own prophetic role in the Church of Christ, our faith-based communities and congregations of the third millennium will answer in a concrete and clear way the questions: Where is your sister? Where is your brother?

I conclude with the simple words of a prayer dedicated to Tina, a victim of trafficking who lost her life at the hands of traffickers. "Tina, forgive us" (See Appendix III).

Thank you for your attention.

Sr. Eugenia Bonetti MC
 "Counter-Trafficking" Coordinator
 USMI National - Rome
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