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Trafficking



Pope Francis meets members and supporters of Talitha Kum in his residence at the Vatican Feb. 7, 2025, the International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking, which he established. Maryknoll Sr. Abby Avelino, international coordinator of Talitha Kum, is seen in front of the pope. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Catholic sisters across Africa and around the world are calling on Pope Leo XIV to continue one of Pope Francis' most passionate missions: the global fight against human trafficking.

The late Pope Francis, widely celebrated for his outspoken advocacy for the marginalized and oppressed, made combatting human trafficking a priority of his papacy. He repeatedly described it as a "crime against humanity" and a "modern slavery," calling for both spiritual and institutional responses. His efforts significantly raised global awareness of the issue, especially in Africa, where thousands of people fall victim to traffickers each year.

"Pope Francis said human trafficking is a wound in contemporary society and urged us to be moved by the stories of its victims — both those heard and those silenced," said Sr. Jackline Mwikali Mwongela, a Loreto Sister from Kenya and a longtime anti-trafficking advocate.

Early in his papacy, Francis directly addressed the root causes of trafficking — poverty, conflict, gender inequality and lack of opportunity. He often brought attention to these issues while traveling. During visits to African nations like Mozambique, Kenya and the Central African Republic, he emphasized justice, education and inclusion as key tools in preventing exploitation.

While visiting Kenya in 2015, for example, Francis met with youth groups, slum residents and community leaders. He spoke about the need to create real opportunities for young people, recognizing that traffickers often exploit their desperation with false promises of jobs and education abroad.

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Pope Francis "openly condemned social ills that infringed on the dignity of the human person," said Sr. Olivia Umoh, the national coordinator of Talitha Kum Ghana and director for Safe-Child Advocacy. "He demonstrated deep and profound love for the poor and the weak and called on the church and society to go out to those in the periphery."

Maryknoll Sr. Abby Avelino, international coordinator of Talitha Kum — the global network of Catholic sisters combating trafficking — praised the late pope's deep,

consistent and urgent focus on the issue.



Maryknoll Sr. Abby Avelino holds a photo of St. Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese saint and former slave. Avelino was attending the UISG plenary in Rome that coincided with the conclave, photographed May 7, 2025. (GSR photo/Soli Salgado)

"One of his first major actions was establishing the International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking, tied to the feast of St. Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese saint and former slave," Avelino said. "It became a global rallying point for the church."

A lasting impact

Among Francis' most notable contributions was his support for the Santa Marta Group, which unites law enforcement and church leaders to confront trafficking collaboratively. This initiative has strengthened partnerships across African borders, aiding efforts to dismantle trafficking operations.

He also championed Talitha Kum, a network of Catholic sisters that operates in more than 80 countries. These sisters work at the grassroots level, providing shelter, education and reintegration support for trafficking survivors.

Francis consistently stood with migrants and called for humane migration policies. He encouraged the church to be a beacon of protection and dignity for displaced people.

"His repeated advocacy against human trafficking influenced the United Nations and many governments to strengthen anti-trafficking laws and victim support programs," said Sr. Eucharia Madueke of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Nigeria. Madueke coordinates the Women Empowerment Project at the Africa Faith and Justice Network.

"It has also inspired faith-based and humanitarian organizations to increase their commitments of rescuing and rehabilitating victims," Madueke said.



Mary Mugo from Nairobi, Kenya, wears a T-shirt that reads "Pray Against Human Trafficking" as she joins other young people in Rome's central Santa Maria in Trastevere Square Feb. 6, 2024, to raise awareness about human trafficking. Mugo is "youth ambassador" in Kenya for Talitha Kum, an international network organized by religious fighting human trafficking. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Francis said that the church must not only offer charity, but act as a global conscience — urging systemic change to prevent future exploitation.

Mwongela said Francis' leadership pressured governments to prioritize anti-trafficking initiatives. His calls for ethical governance, just economies and compassionate migration policies were not just symbolic, she said — they prompted the allocation of real resources to protect the vulnerable.

Hopes for Pope Leo XIV

With Pope Leo XIV now at the helm, Catholic sisters and advocates are hopeful that the momentum built under Francis will continue. Leo is already seen as someone

who deeply respects Francis' legacy and has a strong track record of championing similar causes, especially those tied to social justice and inclusion.

"I hope the new pope will urge governments to take stronger action against human trafficking," said Umoh, a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. "We cannot afford to lose momentum in this fight. There are too many lives at stake."

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Sisters also emphasize the importance of involving young people in anti-trafficking efforts.

"Young people are full of energy and creativity," Mwongela said. "They can lead awareness campaigns, support survivors, and build safer communities. I hope the new pope encourages their leadership and helps them find their voice."

She also called for greater collaboration between clergy and religious sisters.

Leo's choice of name pays homage to Pope Leo XIII, known for his advocacy for workers' rights and social reform in the 19th century. Many sisters see it as a sign that the new pope will continue in the progressive footsteps of his predecessor.

"We are inspired by Pope Francis's legacy and very grateful for his support," Avelino said. "We will surely miss him, but his message and legacy will remain with us, guiding us forward."

"My prayer is that the next pope will ensure this mission of fighting human trafficking continues, and Pope Francis's legacy will live in our actions."

Soli Salgado contributed to this report from Rome.

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.