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Ending slavery a papal mission

ANNE GALLAGHER  THE AUSTRALIAN  NOVEMBER 08, 2013 12:00AM

JOHN McCarthy, Australia's ambassador to the Holy See, calls him "the new X-factor in global affairs". For the many millions who have watched the radical transformation of the Vatican over the past few months, "Papa Francesco" seems to be the real thing - a reformer with a heart and soul that lies firmly with the people.

I recently had the chance to observe this up close. The Pope had instructed his bishops to come up with a plan for him to engage on the issue of human trafficking. The statistics are frightening. At least 27 million people are trapped in modern forms of slavery in factories and brothels, on farms and fishing boats, even in private homes.

Every country is implicated; we all benefit from the market distortions that supply cheap goods and services produced by people who are forced to work for little or no pay under terrible conditions. The recent factory fire in Bangladesh that claimed more than 1000 lives lifted a small edge of the veil that protects us from knowing too much about the real cost of what we eat, wear and use.

In modern times, the transfer of power from one pope to the next has rarely resulted in sudden or dramatic changes. The Vatican is steeped in traditions that date back 15 centuries. Since the day he stepped up as leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, Francis has proved to be a rule-bender.

Long-serving cardinals have been dismissed, Vatican finances are under forensic scrutiny, even travel entitlements have been revised on the basis of the Pope's reasoning that "you cannot know Jesus in first class".

When the migrant smuggling tragedy occurred in Lampedusa, he went straight to the recovery site, organised the blessing of the bodies of children, women and men as they were brought to shore, expressed "shame" and spoke passionately against "the globalisation of indifference".

Through words and actions he has taken on the cause of the poor, the persecuted, the abandoned, the sick and the marginalised with an energy that has surprised everyone.

The shock of such changes has been almost eclipsed by the Pope's unusual approach to his own position. Francesco doesn't sit on a throne but on a simple white wooden chair. The Vatican car that picked me up from the airport was much fancier than the Ford Focus I spotted the Pope getting into the day I arrived. Rejecting the palatial papal apartments, he has set up residence in the Vatican's modest guesthouse, which is used for visiting priests and the occasional outsider.

For the discussions on trafficking, I was there for three days, spotting him in the lift lobby and regularly taking meals in the same dining room. There is no rising when the Pope walks in for breakfast. The hum dies down for a minute, but the atmosphere soon returns to normal. On the first day of our meeting, as he graciously and cheerfully greeted each of us, Catholics and non-Catholics alike were entranced by this gentle, modest man.

Like so many challenges facing our fractured, troubled world, human trafficking is not amenable to a
quick, technical fix. More than money or expertise, it requires moral and spiritual leadership - someone of courage and stature to stand up and say "this is wrong, this must stop".

Politicians, policymakers and advocates such as myself have done our work. We've created the laws and the institutions, trained the police and set up the shelters. But little has changed. Human exploitation has built our world and continues to power global economic growth. Further progress will be impossible unless the international community - all of us - face up to a shared complicity and a shared responsibility.

Perhaps this Pope can be the person to imagine for us a better world - and encourage us to live up to our better selves. I hope he succeeds.

Anne Gallagher is an international lawyer working on human trafficking and slavery.