

“Natasha”: more than just a name

by JANET ANSTEAD

THE FIRST TIME I VIEWED THE CBC DOCUMENTARY “Sex Slaves”, I was appalled. I was numbed by the facts that this program – inspired in part by Victor Malarek’s book “The Natashas” – presented: the sheer numbers of women who are trafficked, many duped by bogus recruiters promising legitimate employment, some betrayed by acquaintances and even family, and others simply abducted; the systematic way in which women are raped and beaten in order to break their spirit and render them compliant; and the way they are re-victimized and re-stigmatized by the legal system should they escape or get caught up in a police raid. Trafficking ranks with arms-dealing and drug-dealing as the major sources of income for organized crime, and, yes, this is a problem all around the world.

But more than just presenting the facts, this documentary put a human face on the issue. It introduced a woman, now HIV-positive, who is too ashamed, too damaged, to return to a sense of normalcy. There was a young single mother whose family had been devastated by health problems following the Chernobyl accident, who escaped her life on the street only to willingly return to it with the futile hope that she could earn money to pay for life-saving surgery for her brother. And there was the story of an anxious husband who went undercover to try and find his pregnant wife, who was sold by an acquaintance to the brothels of Turkey.

Once we peer into these faces we are emotionally engaged. But as I viewed the documentary a second time, I was challenged with a deeper question: why must we rely on documentary producers to “put a human face” on this tragedy? Isn’t it cruelly ironic that we worship a God who assumed a human face, yet we are all too willing to disregard or even deny the human face of one another?

While on an excursion to an ancient ruin in Turkey this past summer, I found out from one of my traveling companions that if someone in that country referred to a woman as a “Natasha”, they were calling that woman a whore. My poor unsuspecting companions were immediately treated to a sermon on the issue of trafficking: I told them about Turkey’s role as one of the major “receiving” nations; the role of Eastern Europe as one of the major “sending” regions; the underlying economic causes that made women from this area particularly susceptible to trafficking, sexual exploitation and abuse. My companions, residents of a small rural centre in Southwestern Ontario, were left breathless by the encounter. Many of us, living in the comfort and complacency of an average Canadian life, have no idea of the magnitude of the problem of trafficking in this world, nor how close to home we can find it if we but open our eyes.

The Turkish use of “Natasha” dehumanizes all women, not just those who are caught in the web of suffering and abuse in that country. The term “whore” is equally denigrating. But a trafficked woman is not a “whore”; she is a victim. To lump trafficked women together under the label “Natasha” or “whore” steals their individual stories, their individual suffering and their individual dignity. And let us not remain blind to our own neighbours – for example, why is it that the victims found on the infamous B.C. farm are named only as “sex-trade workers”? That is not who they are; each of them is someone’s daughter, sister, friend. First and foremost, they are beloved daughters of God.

Jesus challenged the systems and authorities of this world by turning the concept of value on its head. For value was not to be located in this world – in power or prestige, assets or accumulations. Value is located in two sources – in the Kingdom of God, and in the intrinsic dignity, beauty and belovedness of every human being: those we are called over and over and over again to love.

Surely, as Christians – as those who believe in God Incarnate – is it not our call to “put a human face” on every human being? We are all created each with our own face, a face of beauty, dignity and uniqueness. But what we are called to do is see – really, truly see – the faces of all. Christ encountered a Samaritan woman who was bold enough to engage him in a conversation, a Syrophenician woman who would not take “No” for an answer, a Canaanite woman who crept up and touched his cloak, and an unnamed woman who anointed him with fragrant oil. Each of these women was in some way an “outcast”, yet Christ honoured them. Each of these women was unique; like every single woman that ever has or ever will walk this earth, they are beloved of God, our sisters from whom we must never turn our faces away.

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