

INSIDE THE VATICAN

"You Don't Have to Go to Rome to Get Inside the Vatican!"



Top Ten People of 2007

#9 - SR. EUGENIA BONETTI

By Fabio Bernabei

A year ago, in November 2006, in his message for the 93rd World Day for Migrants and Refugees, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that immigration and exploitation are

acquiring an ever more "feminine" face and that it is urgent for us to know "how to read the signs of the times." The "feminization" of the phenomenon leads, in some cases, to exploitation and slavery in which "there are women and girls destined to be exploited in the field of work, almost like slaves and -- not rarely -- also in the sexual industry."

There is a prophetic role for faith-based organizations in addressing the modern-day form of slavery, sex trafficking. So says Italian **Sr. Eugenia Bonetti**, M.C., herself a prophet, committed activist and today responsible for the anti-trafficking initiatives of the USMI (a coalition of 627 women's congregations), an *ad hoc* office created in the year 2000 to address the issue of immigrant women who have become victims of human trafficking. Sister Bonetti was born 68 years ago in Bubbiano, a little town located near Milan. "I was born and raised in a family with five sisters and one brother all older than I," Sister Bonetti told us. "My baptismal name is Maddalena. At the age of 14, I read in a religious magazine the story of a nun killed by Mau Mau rebels. Her name was Eugenia and I said to myself: 'I'll take her job.' In the end, I did take up her job -- and her name, too." She entered the congregation of the Consolata Missionary Sisters. She has committed herself to fighting the exploitation and injustice suffered by trafficked women - something she has seen first-hand over her 24-year career as a missionary in Kenya, and then as coordinator of anti-trafficking strategies in Turin and now in Rome.

In 1997, she attended a postgraduate course at the Missionary Institute of London, affiliated with Middlesex University. She was awarded an MA in applied theology (peace and justice studies) after completing a year's worth of research on the complex issue of human trafficking in Europe. Sr. Eugenia and her "team" of some 200 sisters throughout Italy working full-time in anti-trafficking initiatives, have opened their homes to provide shelter, security and care to hundreds of victims of trafficking.

In these 110 shelters, young women are offered safety and a chance to rebuild their sense of self-worth, healthy human relationships and to make plans for their future. Sr. Eugenia spends her time visiting the shelters, lobbying police and parliamentarians to make changes in the laws, and speaking to groups around the world about trafficking. Motivated by Jesus' teaching, that "whatever you did to the least of these... you did to me" (Matt 25:40), Sr. Eugenia points out that trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation is a global epidemic that is run by organized crime and is third only to drug and arms dealing in the evil profits that it reaps.



Every year, an estimated 120,000 women are trafficked from Eastern Europe to Western Europe, millions of women are trafficked in India, 50,000 are trafficked from Africa to Europe, tens of thousands are trafficked from the former Soviet Union into the Middle East, the Arab Emirates and Israel, and 50,000 people are trafficked into or through the U.S. as sex slaves or domestic workers. It is estimated that more than 3,000 women are trafficked into Canada annually.

Trafficking thrives where poverty, economic disparity and lack of employment opportunities exist. Women make up 70% of the world's poor and bear the heaviest burden. Under the leadership of Sr. Eugenia, the sisters of USMI's anti-trafficking sector have been successful in helping detainees enter rehabilitation programs in Italy. Sr. Eugenia's experience has been critical in the formulation of a Vatican-U.S. embassy-sponsored project to provide anti-trafficking skills and strategies to groups of religious sisters in Italy, Nigeria, Albania and Romania - in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The U.S. Department of State recently recognized her work in its annual Trafficking in Persons Report, naming her an anti-trafficking heroine. In October 2006, she addressed people representing 18 faith-based organizations in Canada who gathered for the first time to share information, resources and strategies. In October 2007 in Rome at a six-day international working seminar sponsored by the Vatican and the U.S. embassy, she was key in launching an international, interdenominational religious anti-trafficking network - the first of its kind.

This hero of faith in action, toiling to help some of the most abused women in the world, is one of *Inside the Vatican's* "Top Ten" people of 2007.