

The Saints Peter and Paul Peace and Social Justice Committee invites you to explore the Church's response to Modern Slavery

When we try to do what God asks us to do, we often find it simultaneously easier and harder than we anticipated. The surprisingly easy yoke with the surprisingly light burden can mark us out for surprising sacrifices.

Changing our consumer habits is one way each and every one of us can join Pope Francis in his fight to end modern slavery by 2020. In some ways, such changes constitute a relatively easy way to join the fight, especially around Christmas, when most of us will have plenty of opportunities to exercise compassionate consumerism. However, standing on the frontlines (or even in the rearguard) of this battle will open us up to being hit in areas that, for many Western consumers, are more sensitive than we would like to admit: price, quantity, and convenience.

Slavery generates \$150 billion of illegal profits per year, according to the International Labor Organization. Slaves exist in the supply chains of a wide variety of industries, often producing or processing the materials that go into the products we use or consume on a regular basis. It can be difficult for even the most informed and well-intentioned individual to know whether his or her purchases bear the imprint of slave labor. It is possible, as you read this, that you are surrounded by products touched by slave labor, including the cotton in your clothes, the metal in your cell phone, the ingredients in your cosmetics, the bricks in your building, and the furniture in that building. You may even be surrounding products touched by slave labor—indeed the food and beverages in your stomach may have been grown, harvested, caught, processed or otherwise produced by slaves.

Slavery in supply chains tends to resemble an experience related by Andrew Forrest, Chairman of Fortescue Metals Group (FMG), founder of the Walk Free Foundation, and a founding partner with Pope Francis in the Global Freedom Network. After his teenage daughter had a horrifying brush with slavery when she went to volunteer in Nepal at what she thought was an orphanage, but was truly a human trafficking marketplace, Forrest decided to take a closer look at his own business. Here's how he described one of his findings:

There were people working in FMG's supply chain whose passports were being held. Due to excessive fees paid to agents, the workers in the suppliers serving FMG had crushing debts to repay. They were unable to leave their employers and had no chance nor leverage to ever complain about the completely inhumane conditions in which they worked. Were the workers being deliberately enslaved by the supplier we dealt with? No – but through their failure to check recruitment practices of the companies serving them, and through their combined practices of holding passports, the company was creating conditions that allowed modern slavery to thrive.

In our global economy, supply chains are complicated things. Many are several tiers deep and span several jurisdictions around the world. Each tier or “link” in the chain may rely on representations from the link below that may seem to indicate that its operations are free of any forced labor. However, these representations can be inadequate, misleading, or completely false.

The good news is that while supply chains are complicated, the driving force behind the slavery that exists in them is simple: money. That means that we, as participants in the global economy, have a say in whether or not slavers stay in business.

While it is true that, as Pope Benedict XVI stated in *Caritas in Veritate*, “The Church does not have technical solutions to offer,” our Church leaders have directed us to some helpful resources. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) encourages consumers to consider purchasing from SERRV, a fair trade retailer that partners with Catholic Relief Services. While many major brands operate in a cloud of uncertainty regarding slave labor in their supply chains, Fair Trade products, which can be recognized by the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) logo, are a safer bet. Many of the beautiful, handmade products in the SERRV catalogue are particularly well-suited to the gift-giving seasons of our calendar. They can be purchased at www.serrv.org. The Peace and Social Justice Committee also sells a small selection of SERRV products at the Ministry Fair.

Unfortunately, most of us will only be able to make a small portion of our purchases via SERRV or any other Fair Trade retailer. This does not mean that we have to resign ourselves to the aforementioned “cloud of uncertainty.” We may not be able to see inside a company’s supply chain yet, but we can demand the ability to do so in the future. The USCCB website directs consumers to www.slaveryfootprint.org. Here, you can take an easy but engaging quiz to learn how much slave labor is likely to have gone into the products you already own or frequently purchase. At the end of the quiz, you will be provided with an easy way to contact companies who make these products in order to ask them to invest in greater supply-chain transparency, so that they can offer us greater assurance that their products are not tainted with slave labor. (Please note: this quiz addresses mature topics and parents may wish to take the entire quiz before allowing their children to do so.)

Pope Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in Veritate*, pointed out that “It is good for people to realize that purchasing is always a moral – and not simply economic – act. Hence the consumer has a specific social responsibility, which goes hand-in-hand with the social responsibility of the enterprise.” Well then, what about the “enterprise”? Many of our parishioners may own businesses or hold positions of influence where they work. The Global Freedom Network directs such privileged individuals to *Tackling Modern Slavery in Supply Chains: A Guide*, which can be downloaded for free at www.walkfree.org/business/. In the words of its publisher, the Walk Free Foundation, the guide “outlines step-by-step what companies can and must do to eliminate slavery from their business. The guide provides practical guidance and tools that businesses, governments, organizations and non-profits can start implementing immediately.”

We cannot pretend that making any of the above changes will be painless. One ethical purchase or practice may cost us the money and/or time required for several other delightful, but questionable options. However, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wisely articulated, true grace is never “cheap”; it is always “costly.” And yet, God affords grace to all. This is the model that we, though limited, must follow in whatever way we can, in whatever way we are called. The Peace and Social Justice Committee looks forward to providing you with more ways in which you can be a generous contributor to the Church’s efforts to end modern slavery.