News
Q&As



Sr. Anne Victory of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary speaks at the podium after receiving her award at the Sisters Anti-Trafficking Awards, held in Rome in May 2024. (Courtesy of Stefano Dal Pozzuolo)



by Joanna Kozakiewicz

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January 7, 2025

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Sr. Anne Victory is a member of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary, where she serves as a member of the leadership team. Victory has a master's degree in nursing from Ohio State University. She served for 32 years as a hospital nurse clinician, educator and administrator. She also served as a director of staff education and vice president of mission at Community Health Partners, Lorain, Ohio, now Mercy Health-Lorain and part of the Bon Secours Mercy Health System.

Presently, she is actively engaged in fighting human trafficking as a volunteer for the Collaborative to End Human Trafficking, based in Cleveland, Ohio, where she served as the director of education for 11 years. She is also active with the U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, now known as the Alliance to End Human Trafficking, and was the organization's board president from 2016 to 2020.

Victory is one of the three laureates of the 2024 Sisters' Anti-Trafficking Awards, or SATAs, held at the Augustinianum in Rome in May 2024. According to the International Union of Superiors General, or UISG, the awards honor three women who have demonstrated exceptional courage, creativity, collaboration and achievement in protecting their communities from human trafficking. This award was a collaborative initiative of the UISG, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (a major funder of Global Sisters Report) and the Arise Foundation. Victory is the recipient of the Servant Leadership Award for excellence in network building.

Victory agreed to an interview with Global Sisters Report to speak about her efforts to put an end to human trafficking.

***GSR*: Can you introduce yourself and speak about your background?**

Victory: My name is Anne Victory. I have been a Sister of the Humility of Mary since 1962. My background is in health care. I worked in the field as a clinician, educator and administrator for 32 years and then served in leadership for eight years. After that, I didn't know what I would do next, but I had been involved with the Collaborative to End Human Trafficking in Cleveland, Ohio, since its founding in 2007. After my service in leadership, I knew it would be hard to go back to nursing because I had been away from it for so long. The opportunity came to apply for the director of education position with the Collaborative, and I served in that position for 11 years.

I now volunteer as a speaker for the organization and for the Alliance to End Human Trafficking, the national organization part of the Talitha Kum Network. Because of my health care background, I view human trafficking as a public health issue and often speak to health care providers about the issue.

What is your specific involvement right now?

My major work now is as a member of the leadership team for the Sisters of the Humility of Mary. There are four of us on the team responsible for facilitating the life and mission of the congregation with all that entails, especially in these challenging times, which are very different from the last time I was serving in leadership. I also connect with human trafficking through my volunteer work. I volunteer in the field of human trafficking by giving presentations when I am able.



The three awardees at the Sisters Anti-Trafficking Awards are pictured: From left are Sr. Grasy Luisa Rodrigues of the Canossian Daughters of Charity, from India, who won the Common Good Award for courage and creativity; Sr. Marie Claude Naddaf, of the Good Shepherd Sisters, from Lebanon, who won the Human Dignity Award for lifetime achievement in addressing exploitation; and Sr. Anne Victory,

who won the Servant Leadership Award for excellence in network building. (Courtesy of Stefano Dal Pozzuolo)

What advocacy work do you do related to fighting human trafficking?

When we speak of advocacy work, we do that in a few different ways. The first is raising awareness because unless people understand the issue, they can't do anything about it. We have always advocated for the needs of those victimized by this crime, whatever those needs may be, and they are usually pretty complex. We also occasionally have opportunities to advocate for better laws or enforcement of laws within the guidelines of being a nonprofit organization.

How did you come to volunteer for this specific issue?

It was way back in 2006 when members of seven religious congregations in Cleveland attended a seminar on immigration. When the term "human trafficking" came up, we didn't know what it was. When we learned about it, we were horrified to think that it even happened anywhere, much less that it was happening right in our neighborhoods, and we were totally unaware. We decided we had to work on the issue together since the issue is too big for any group to do alone.

It soon became clear what we could and could not do. We represented different professions, including counselors, social workers, nurses, attorneys, administrators and educators around the table. As we talked about it, we thought one of the first things we had to do was let people know this was happening. So, awareness raising through educational offerings became our first effort. Then, we also realized that advocacy was needed for better laws, enforcement of existing ones, and for the needs of victims.

We knew that we would not be the ones called to direct caregiving, but we all had networks of people who do direct care of persons who were likely being victimized by human trafficking, including health care providers, social workers, law enforcement personnel and others. We decided to find out from the professionals in the local agencies whether they were encountering victims of human trafficking among those we were already seeing in our area.

We did a small study. It wasn't very formal, but we had a series of interview questions that we asked of about 30 different agencies in greater Cleveland, Ohio.

The predominant response was they didn't know what we were talking about. They were clueless at the beginning. They would ask, "Oh, you mean drugs?"

When we described what we meant and the nature of the people that perhaps they were seeing, they responded, "Oh yeah, we see people like that," but they hadn't named it "human trafficking."



Sr. Anne Victory gave a presentation on human trafficking to immigrant women at Catholic Charities Migration and Refugee Services in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2015. (Courtesy of A Nun's Life Ministry)

Based on that survey, we found out a lot — that our safety net agencies, so to speak, really didn't know [about] the issue, did not easily work with other agencies in the area, and tended to compete for scarce funding for their services. Most, however, were open to learning more together.

This "connecting services" effort became the third aspect of our work at the Collaborative. Over time, those relationships have been established and strengthened. At this time, the Collaborative works with over 75 organizations and

agencies in the greater Cleveland area. I am still amazed that that has happened. Collaboration, we learned, really takes being committed to the issue, focusing on the mission, bringing our best to the table, and sharing our expertise and resources for the sake of those trafficked.

We had the audacity to name ourselves the Collaborative to End Human Trafficking, and then we had to grow into what collaboration really means! It takes relationship-building on a regular basis, realizing that we won't agree on everything, but there's a whole lot of positive energy that comes from the effort. It may be messy at times, but having that sense of perseverance is key because the work is so important.

Why is this ministry work so important to you?

From the very beginning of my community, our mission has been to bring more abundant life to God's people, especially those who are poor and marginalized. Trafficked persons at this time in our history are the ones on the margins, those who are poor in so many ways. It has become a passion for me to do whatever I can to make a difference for them.

Does it make a difference? I don't know. If it does, I am grateful. The "difference" part is God's work. I want to make myself available for whatever it is that will benefit those who are suffering from this horrific crime.

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In your opinion, how do we put an end to human trafficking as a society?

I think it will be a lifelong mission for people of goodwill who want to get rid of it, to see that human trafficking is harmful to every human person and every community. That kind of change of heart is necessary because we are all connected as one human family. Those who suffer the most are those who are the poorest.

This issue is connected to other major issues that are going on all around us, such as climate change, migration, poverty, racism, addictions and violence. They are all connected. Whatever work we can do to end those things can bring about a better life for the people of God. It really does take us working together on this.

Can you elaborate on how all of these issues are related?

Traffickers focus on those who are vulnerable for any reason. Persons who are affected by climate change, poverty, violence or war, for instance, may have to move somewhere because they can't support or provide safety for their families. Being on the move, they become vulnerable. Those suffering from gun violence or gangs have to move for safety. Those discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity or other differences have to find a safe place where they won't be so disrespected. The traffickers know this and will promise anything to get their "prey."

So much of this happens online, and you don't even know who you are talking to. You think you are talking to someone who is your friend, but they want to exploit you. Online exploitation became even more prevalent during COVID. Sometimes, parents became desperate for some sort of income just to support their families, but they couldn't work because of the disease. So, they were promised a "job," and it led to either forced labor or sexual exploitation.

It is about money and power and the abuse of both. That's what I mean when I say these things are connected. It may be kids who have no friends or are bullied at school, and that puts them in a position where someone will exploit them. There are multiple vulnerabilities in this complex issue. It can happen in so many different ways.



Pictured before the SATAs ceremony in Rome in May 2024 are, from left: Sr. Carol Anne Smith, pastoral leader of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary; Sr. Anne Victory; Sr. Ann Oestreich, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, board member and past president of the Alliance to End Human Trafficking; and, with her back to the camera, Sr. Sally Duffy of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, current president of the Alliance to End Human Trafficking. (Courtesy of Stefano Dal Pozzuolo)

What are effective strategies to reduce the demand for human trafficking and protect those who are vulnerable?

There are multiple effective strategies, depending on the circumstances. One, of course, is education and awareness. Everybody needs to know — children need to know what to look for, parents need to be aware of what's happening with their children online, and kids need to know how to stay safe wherever they are, especially online, because they are not afraid of the technology.

With forced labor, knowing what products we are purchasing and if there is slave labor in that supply chain is another strategy. Knowing what companies make the products you like, investigating and finding out if they have slave labor in their supply chain, and letting the company know you are not purchasing that anymore unless they get the slave labor out of it. It's challenging, yet raising people's awareness of the fact that it happens is necessary.

There is a survey on slaveryfootprint.org called "How many slaves work for you?" It's a *slavery footprint*, and it's entertaining because it uses pictures and has questions about your lifestyle. After you answer the questions, you get a number, and that indicates how many slaves work for you to maintain your current lifestyle. It is shocking! I did it quite a long time ago, and my number was 18. I was horrified! Then, the website gives some suggestions on how to reduce that number. A lot of it is becoming a much more informed consumer.

If you are an investor, how do you invest in companies with standards around socially responsible investing? We can't end it alone; it's about power and money, and we know they are huge drivers of many countries' economies and philosophies, including our own. It takes a lot of perseverance, but it's necessary, and I am not willing to give up until we make a little progress.

Another thing to be concerned about is a cultural matter. If there were no demand for sexual exploitation or cheap products, there would be no human trafficking, but we know there is a demand for both. Pornography feeds into sexual exploitation. The fact [is] that penalties for those who abuse women and men are not very strong in many cases. So many victims are too afraid to speak up or don't know what to call it, so the data isn't there. The evidence isn't there for the prosecutors to make a conviction or exact a strong penalty, so there's a whole lot of work to do.

I don't know if we will reduce it soon, but people are more aware now, so I guess that's some progress, but we still have a lot to do.



Sr. Mary Barron, president of the International Union of Superiors General, and Sr. Anne Victory at the Sisters Anti-Trafficking Awards in Rome (Courtesy of Stefano Dal Pozzuolo)

How do you go about protecting your communities from human trafficking?

When we give presentations, we always give people practical actions that they can take so they become empowered to do something. Whether that's telling two people about what you learned, knowing whom to call if something is happening in the community, or contributing to organizations that help victims/survivors, they are doing something. We always give them phone numbers they can call for help, including local or national hotlines, human trafficking task forces, police departments, local rape crisis centers, and others who serve survivors. There are still not enough resources for survivors, not enough housing or long-term help for the trauma people have experienced, so more work is needed.

What are the risks of social media?

So much of what we knew to be trafficking in the past, thinking of sexual exploitation, happened on the streets, and we called it prostitution. Now, much of that kind of "work" has moved online because social media is pervasive, and we can't get away from it. Anyone with a cellphone, including children, can get everything, and they do. Many may not be discriminating enough to know what is the truth, who is a real friend, or what is a scam.

I don't envy parents or grandparents trying to keep their children safe. This kind of perversion has infiltrated into games children play online. They think they are playing with a friend, but it may not be a friend at all. The trafficker tries to entice them with compliments, by requesting to "Send me a picture of yourself, I promise I won't send it anywhere," and then that picture is out there. Kids think it goes away, but it doesn't. It may be found in a pornography site on the dark web.

We all need to become very savvy about how to use the good things of the internet and not the aspects that are so evil.

I was reading yesterday about artificial intelligence being able to create images and pictures, exploit them and make them look very real. So, a person's reputation is at stake. It's horrific. What are the ethics related to social media? It becomes bigger and bigger in my mind. I don't think we will be done for a while.

Do you attend meetings at Capitol Hill to speak to senators and representatives? What does your involvement look like as a religious sister?

We go to Capitol Hill occasionally to meet with our senators and representatives. I do it as a member of the Alliance to End Human Trafficking, which is the national group in the U.S. (it used to be called the U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking). We changed our name to be more inclusive because it's not just Catholic sisters, and it certainly can't be for the future. The Alliance is a broader term and welcomes more. We always prepare in advance for the visits, and the Alliance's advocacy committee prepares us by identifying pending bills that have an impact on human trafficking, giving us talking points, and helpful approaches that we may take in the conversations with the senators, congressional representatives and their staff members.

We make appointments in advance. Even though we may not see the senator or congressional representative, we have found that talking to their staff is always

valuable, sometimes because they tend to be much more informed. It's always an interesting process, and we have interesting conversations where we discover who is really behind something and who knows very little about the issue. Then we follow up. If possible, we go to their local offices to meet with them. I also often send letters to address a particular issue as it comes up related to human trafficking and ask for their support on these bills.



Almost 200 guests were present at the Sisters Anti-Trafficking Awards, held in Rome in May 2024. (Courtesy of Stefano Dal Pozzuolo)

Have these meetings been successful so far?

I don't know because things in Congress take a long time. But having gone a couple of times to some offices now, the staffers recognize us. They know we are there to talk about the issue, so that's progress.

Most recently, you won the Servant Leadership Award at the SATAs (Sisters Anti-Trafficking Awards) in Rome in May 2024. How does it feel to

be one of the three awardees?

I was overwhelmed by the award. I never expected it and didn't even know who nominated me. I later found out it was my colleagues from the Alliance to End Human Trafficking. I was just amazed. This was international, and that's what amazed me. There were over 120 applications. Why me? And I am still pretty in awe because it's not about me but about the work we do together. I often say I just try to stay out of God's way so God [can] do the work needed.

I accepted the award on behalf of the most vulnerable and have suffered the most and on behalf of my colleagues around the world who work on this issue. There is no way to do this alone. It's a global sisterhood and brotherhood that needs to address human trafficking in all of its forms. But it was a huge honor that I never expected.

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>
> —Sr. Anne Victory
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Do you feel you have made a difference in fighting human trafficking?

I don't know if I have made a big difference, but I know people are more aware of the issue, and that's a difference. If that's a step along the way, I am grateful. If other people have learned what they need to know or find some safety for themselves or redemption in their minds because they have learned about this and they were the victims, that's a difference.

I recently attended a Human Trafficking Summit in Columbus, Ohio, and went to three breakout sessions. I was amazed that all three were led by people I had taught at some point throughout the 11 years I was doing the work. To see that is rewarding. I would have done the work anyway, but knowing that it has made a difference for them and those they serve seems like a big difference.

What difference can a religious sister make in fighting human trafficking?

This is a tough one to answer because I think it would be very individual. For me, it's following the call that I have received, responding to it and doing that every day, and being faithful to the mission, the mission of the Gospel. If that makes a difference, then that's what is important. If that's what people see, acknowledge or identify with then that's what's important. It's not about me; it's about the mission, about serving God's people.

Is there anything else you would like to add that this interview did not cover?

A person's professional background or ministry can make a difference in raising awareness within their profession. As a nurse for many years, I knew I had to get the issue in front of my health care colleagues. They see patients daily who likely could have been trafficked or are being trafficked. Helping them understand who they are seeing or how to respond to them is critical.

You don't have to go out and do something different; do what you do and do it well and realize that people with whom you engage in your current ministry or profession can help. I have learned a lot from my colleagues who are sexual assault nurses or who work with the legal teams or in law enforcement or social work.

They know how to do the trauma work that patients who have been trafficked need. They must respond to their clients with sensitivity so they do not "retraumatize" them because of their interactions. I think anyone in any profession needs to learn how to interact with such vulnerable people in a manner that is very trauma-informed, compassionate and nonjudgmental.