

From brainy tomes to advocacy: Academy joins anti-trafficking fight

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — For an international group of researchers and scholars, serving at the pleasure of popes had meant producing lots of papers on important topics. But with Pope Francis, they are moving from publication to advocacy.

Margaret Archer, a British sociologist and president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, said that in the academy's 20-year existence, its specialists in philosophy, economics, sociology, law, political science, religious studies and history "have produced enormous books each year — enormous books, unreadable books, completely academic books."

"What has happened to them? Well, they have gathered a lot of dust and have had not very much impact," she told reporters at the end of the academy's plenary assembly April 17-21.

But things changed. "We have a new pope. We have a new model of action and, for the first time, PASS feels it can be useful. That's what we are there for," she said. "We are not decorative. We're not novelists; we're not creative. We should be very useful."

When it was established by St. John Paul II in 1994 and again when Pope Benedict XVI was elected in 2005, academy officers wrote formal letters to the pontiffs offering the scholars' services and inquiring if the pope had a particular topic for them to explore.

When Pope Francis was elected in 2013, "we wrote the usual polite letter," she said. "What we have previously received were very much pro-forma (letters) that said, 'Oh, we are grateful for your work; please continue.' So we did and we produced more of these big books."

But in May 2013, Pope Francis himself responded — in his own handwriting, in Spanish, on the back of an envelope: "I think it would be good to examine human trafficking and modern slavery. Organ trafficking could be examined in connection with human trafficking. Many thanks, Francis."

Pope Francis has been part of the fight against human trafficking and modern forms of slavery — including prostitution and forced labor — since his days as archbishop of Buenos Aires. He has made the issue one of the priorities of his pontificate and has called for formal international recognition of trafficking as a "crime against humanity."

In November 2013, the academy of social sciences and the much older Pontifical Academy of Sciences, hosted a workshop designed to bring everyone up to speed on the size of the problem

and to begin exploring policies and tools the natural sciences and the social sciences could bring together to stop human trafficking.

Some members of the academy also participated in an April 2014 meeting at the Vatican, organized by the bishops of England and Wales, that brought together victims of trafficking and national and international police forces, including Interpol. Archer said the social scientists were fascinated to hear about the tools law enforcement officers use to detect trafficking — for example, using thermographic cameras to scan cargo ships for people hidden in crates or in the hold.

While sharing academic research is still part of their brief, the academy's 25 members — who come from 14 countries — are focusing their research on practical, enforceable steps that can be taken to stem trafficking.

First, Archer said, they are hoping to convince the United Nations and its member states to include “eradicating human trafficking” as one of the international community's development goals for 2015-2030. States make commitments to specific plans to achieve the goals.

Second, academy members are urging governments around the world to recognize the difference between persons who voluntarily immigrate without permission and the victims of trafficking, who are tricked or forced to work in a country that is not their own.

Stefano Zamagni, another academician, said the laws of most countries rely on testimony by a trafficking survivor in order to convict the trafficker. If the victim is considered an “illegal immigrant,” he said, there is almost no way to persuade him or her to testify. In addition, he said, academy members will urge their governments to grant asylum to survivors to ensure they do not face deportation.

A third step, said academician Pierpaolo Donati, will be widespread religious, moral and consumer education to eliminate the demand for trafficked persons — including prostitutes, forced domestic workers and organ donors — and for products they produce, which range from clothing to diamonds to components for cellphones.

Archer said the only way to end trafficking for human organs is to make freely donated organs more widely available. She said she told Pope Francis that the church should encourage all Catholics to carry organ donor cards.

The academy president went a step further at her media briefing, expressing the hope that one day governments would distribute “non-donor” cards; anyone who does not sign one would be considered an organ donor volunteer.

As for goods produced by children and others in indentured servitude and other forms of forced labor, the pontifical academy plans to work with a variety of groups already promoting certification of supply chains. Consumers should boycott goods that cannot be certified as made without slave labor, Archer said.

In a world where many people think religions should be a strictly private affair, she said, “maybe this helps show that we can be of some practical use, which people who have no faith at all will recognize as a good thing.”