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Liberation and Lament: A Public Theology for the Victims of Human Trafficking in the African Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines human trafficking in Africa through a theological lens, integrating Catholic social teaching, African theology, and public theology to develop a comprehensive response. It explores human trafficking as both a social and spiritual crisis, analyzing its historical, structural, and cultural dimensions, with particular attention to gendered vulnerabilities, poverty, and displacement. The study situates victims' experiences as *loci theologici*, offering a theological reflection that combines lament and liberation as complementary modes of engagement.

KEYWORDS: Human trafficking, African theology, Catholic social teaching, liberation theology, lament, public theology, pastoral praxis, Ubuntu



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1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a profound social and moral crisis that afflicts millions globally, with Africa experiencing some of the highest vulnerabilities due to historical, economic, and socio-political factors. Defined by the United Nations as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of threat, force, coercion, or deception for exploitation (UNODC, 2020, p. 12), trafficking violates human dignity, undermines communities, and constitutes a flagrant breach of ethical and theological principles. In the African context, trafficked persons particularly women and children face intersecting vulnerabilities including poverty, gender inequality, armed conflict, displacement, and cultural practices that limit their autonomy (Oduyoye, 2004, p. 47; Magesa, 1997, p. 64).

1.1 Rationale and Significance

Despite the severity of the crisis, theological engagement in Africa has often been muted. Many Church responses remain confined to charitable interventions or moral exhortation, with limited integration of systemic analysis and public advocacy. This gap is especially critical considering the Catholic Church's historical and ongoing moral authority in African societies. By combining **theological reflection, pastoral praxis, and social analysis**, this study addresses the urgent need for a **faith-based, contextually grounded, and action-oriented response** to human trafficking.

The study is significant for multiple reasons. First, it situates trafficking within a theological framework, identifying it as both a **structural sin** and a violation of the **imago Dei**—the divine image in each human being (John Paul II, 1987, para. 36). Second, it integrates African ethical perspectives, particularly **ubuntu**, highlighting the communal dimensions of suffering and moral responsibility (Tutu, 1999, p. 35). Third, it provides actionable strategies for the Church and society to engage trafficked persons, confront exploitative systems, and foster structural transformation.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in **liberation theology**, which emphasizes praxis-oriented reflection and moral responsibility toward the oppressed (Gutiérrez, 1973, p. 11). Liberation theology highlights the interconnection of **faith, justice, and social transformation**, providing a robust framework to interpret human trafficking not merely as an isolated social problem but as a systemic and theological issue. Complementing this, African theological concepts of **ubuntu** and communal moral responsibility inform the analysis, emphasizing relational personhood, solidarity, and the imperative of restoring social and spiritual harmony (Magesa, 1997, p. 92).

The framework also incorporates **Catholic social teaching (CST)**, particularly principles of **solidarity, human dignity, and the preferential option for the vulnerable** (Francis, 2020, para. 85). These principles provide ethical guidance for pastoral interventions and public advocacy, ensuring that theological reflection translates into concrete action.

1.3 Methodology

The study adopts a **qualitative theological methodology**, integrating **contextual analysis, biblical exegesis, doctrinal reflection, and African ethical insights**. It draws upon theological texts, Church documents, African moral philosophy, and reports from international organizations such as the UNODC and ILO (2020–2022). A **theology-from-below approach** is employed, prioritizing the experiences of trafficked persons as sources of theological insight. The method includes **hermeneutical analysis** to interpret Scripture in dialogue with African realities, and **critical social reflection** to examine structural and cultural factors enabling trafficking.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The paper unfolds in three main parts. **Part II** analyzes the African context of trafficking, exploring structural vulnerabilities, gendered exploitation, and the Church's silence, and develops **lament as a theological act of resistance**. **Part III** proposes **liberation as theological praxis**, outlining pastoral, educational, and advocacy strategies, and situates them within a **public theology framework** for collaborative action. The final section concludes by emphasizing hope, solidarity, and the moral imperative for the Church to act prophetically in defending human dignity.

1.5 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does human trafficking manifest in Africa, and what are its structural, cultural, and spiritual dimensions?
2. How can lament function as a theological and epistemological tool for naming suffering and resisting complicity?
3. In what ways can liberation theology, integrated with Catholic social teaching and African ethical principles, inform practical responses to trafficking?
4. How can the Church engage in **public theology** to advocate for systemic change, provide pastoral care, and foster communal transformation?

1.6 Contribution to Knowledge

By integrating African theology, Catholic social teaching, and public theology, this paper contributes a **contextually grounded, theologically robust, and action-oriented approach** to human trafficking. It demonstrates that theology is not merely reflective but **practically transformative**, capable of guiding the Church and society toward justice, healing, and the restoration of human dignity.

2. The African Context — The Web of Exploitation and Silence

Human trafficking in Africa represents an intersection of historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural realities that perpetuate human suffering and exploitation. While the phenomenon is global, its African manifestations are shaped by **colonial legacies, systemic poverty, gender disparities, armed conflict, and fragile governance structures**. The theological task in this context is not merely to describe these realities but to discern how they constitute forms of **structural sin** in social, political, and economic systems that institutionalize injustice and dehumanization (John Paul II, 1987).

2.1 Historical and Structural Roots

The persistence of trafficking across Africa cannot be understood apart from its **historical continuity with slavery and colonial exploitation**. The transatlantic slave trade and subsequent colonial economies normalized the commodification of African bodies, embedding in social consciousness a dangerous tolerance for human objectification. As Laurenti Magesa (1997) observes, colonialism disrupted the moral fabric of African life by introducing hierarchies of power and economic dependency that devalued communal integrity (p. 64). Postcolonial African societies inherited these fractured structures, which today manifest as unequal access to resources, corruption, and systemic marginalization.

In many African nations, **economic vulnerability** fuels human trafficking. The International Labour Organization (2022) reports that millions in sub-Saharan Africa remain in forced labor and sexual exploitation due to extreme poverty, unemployment, and displacement (p. 12). Structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s, designed to stabilize African economies, often deepened poverty, weakening state welfare systems and driving people into informal economies where traffickers thrive. These economic realities form what John Paul II (1987) termed “*structures of sin*” systemic patterns of greed and domination that exploit the weak and distort moral conscience (para. 36).

2.2 Gender, Migration, and Exploitation

Gender inequality remains a central driver of trafficking in Africa. Women and girls constitute the majority of victims, especially in the contexts of domestic servitude, forced marriages, and sexual exploitation. African cultural systems, while often affirming women’s dignity, have also harbored patriarchal biases that limit female agency. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2004) argues that when traditional structures fail to affirm women as full moral agents, they create vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit (p. 47). For many African women, migration in search of economic survival becomes a perilous journey into coercion and exploitation.

Conflict and instability further intensify the crisis. In regions like the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Central Africa, **displacement caused by war and climate change** leaves communities at the mercy of traffickers who promise safety or employment. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) highlights how armed groups use trafficking as a revenue source, abducting women and children for forced labor or combat roles (pp. 62–64). The Church’s pastoral response, therefore, must go beyond moral condemnation it must engage the political and economic systems that make trafficking profitable.

2.3 The Silence of the Church and Society

While civil society and international organizations have mobilized against human trafficking, **theological reflection and ecclesial engagement have often remained muted**. Emmanuel Katongole (2017) notes that African Christianity sometimes “domesticates suffering,” spiritualizing social pain rather than confronting its structural causes (p. 23). This ecclesial silence, whether born of fear, complicity, or theological inertia, constitutes what can be called a “moral absence.” In Catholic theological terms, it is a failure to practice *solidarity*, one of the core principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

The prophetic mission of the Church requires a different posture one of moral clarity and compassionate activism. Pope Francis (2020) insists that indifference to human suffering “marks a retreat from humanity itself” (*Fratelli Tutti*, para. 68). A public theology that seeks to confront trafficking must thus begin with a **conversion of ecclesial imagination**: from passivity to prophetic witness.

Theological silence is often reinforced by **cultural taboos** surrounding discussions of sexual violence, forced labor, and migration. In many African societies, victims of trafficking experience stigma and shame, particularly when they return home. Traditional notions of purity and social honor often cast blame on victims rather than perpetrators. Benezet Bujo (1992) reminds theologians that authentic African morality arises not from blame but from restoring relational harmony “life must always be promoted, never diminished” (p. 78). Therefore, theological engagement must recover the communal moral horizon of *Ubuntu*, wherein every person’s suffering implicates the community as a whole.

2.4 Trafficking as a Violation of Ubuntu and Imago Dei

The doctrine of Imago Dei, articulated in Genesis 1:26–27, affirms that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. This doctrine conveys that each person possesses inherent dignity, relational capacity, and moral responsibility. Being created in God’s image entails more than physical existence; it encompasses relationality with God, ethical responsibility, and participation in creation.

From a theological perspective, trafficking fundamentally undermines these aspects of Imago Dei. It treats human beings as instruments or commodities, denying their intrinsic worth and relational capacities. By so doing, it contravenes the foundational principles of **Imago Dei** the belief that humans are created in the image of God. Pope Francis has described trafficking as a crime against humanity that seriously damages the dignity of the person and wounds the broader human community. In this sense, trafficking is not only a legal or social offense but also a spiritual and moral violation of God’s intention for human beings.

Ubuntu on the other hand, widely expressed in the aphorism “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (“a person is a person through other persons”), is an African philosophical and theological principle emphasizing relationality, communal responsibility, and shared humanity. It asserts that an individual’s identity and flourishing are inseparable from the well-being of the community. Ubuntu is both an ontological claim about the nature of human personhood and an ethical vision for how humans should relate to one another.

While Imago Dei grounds human dignity in divine ontology, the African ethical concept of **Ubuntu**, emphasizes the relational and communal nature of personhood. It underscores that humanity is realized through community, mutual respect, and interdependence. This paper explores how human trafficking breaches these theological and ethical frameworks, highlighting the need for responses that restore both individual dignity and communal integrity.

In Ubuntu theology, human dignity is realized not in isolation but in mutual recognition, care, and relational accountability. Therefore, violations of human dignity are also violations of communal integrity. The relational disruption caused by trafficking contravenes Ubuntu by isolating individuals, reducing them to instruments for others’ gain, and undermining the moral fabric of the community.

At its deepest level, human trafficking is a **spiritual and theological violation**. It desecrates the *imago Dei* the divine image that confers intrinsic worth on every human being (Vatican Council II, 1965, para. 12). To treat another human being as a commodity is to reject God’s creative act and rupture communion with both God and neighbor. The African worldview expressed in *Ubuntu* (“I am because we are”) converges profoundly with this theological anthropology. Both affirm that personhood is relational, communal, and sacred.

When human beings are trafficked, this web of relational being is torn apart. The trafficked person is reduced to an object, stripped of community, and alienated from their spiritual identity. As Oduyoye (2004) emphasizes, “the denial of another’s humanity is the denial of one’s own” (p. 54). This makes trafficking not only a social injustice but a **spiritual pathology** a collective alienation that cries out for theological healing.

2.5 The African Church in the Face of Structural Sin

Catholic Social Teaching provides a robust theological lens for interpreting these realities. John Paul II’s notion of *structures of sin* (1987) calls the Church to expose and transform social mechanisms that perpetuate exploitation. Pope Francis (2013) expands this in *Evangelii Gaudium*, urging the faithful to “touch the suffering flesh of others” and move from indifference to mercy (para. 270). For African theology, this means that the Church cannot remain a distant observer. It must embody the **praxis of solidarity**, aligning its pastoral, theological, and social mission with the liberation of the trafficked.

This theological commitment is not abstract. It requires institutional courage creating networks of pastoral care, engaging governments, educating communities, and challenging the economic systems that normalize exploitation. The prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures and the liberative mission of Christ both call the Church to name evil, lament injustice, and act for transformation.

2.6 From Description to Theological Discernment

While the descriptive analysis of human trafficking highlights its social, economic, and psychological consequences, a theological approach allows for a deeper moral and spiritual evaluation of the phenomenon. The frameworks of **Ubuntu** and **Imago Dei** provide complementary lenses through which trafficking can be discerned as a profound violation of God’s intention for human life and of communal human flourishing. The task of theological discernment in this context is to read the signs of the times, identifying how human actions either conform to or contravene the divine ordering of human dignity and relationality.

From the perspective of **Imago Dei**, every human being bears God’s image, imprinted with intrinsic worth, freedom, and relational capacity. Trafficking directly contravenes this divine imprint by reducing persons to instruments of economic gain or sexual gratification, treating them as commodities rather than relational beings. Theologically, this is more than an ethical failure; it constitutes a moral rupture with God’s creative intent. *Imago Dei* entails that humans are not merely functional agents but moral subjects endowed with the capacity to participate in God’s creative and redemptive work. Trafficking obstructs this vocation, denying victims the opportunity to realize their divine potential and relational responsibilities. Discernment here requires recognizing that any human practice or social structure that systematically dehumanizes persons cannot be morally justified, and indeed constitutes a participation in sin against God and neighbor.

Complementarily, **Ubuntu** provides a communal dimension that enriches theological discernment. *Ubuntu* emphasizes that a person’s humanity is realized through their relationships with others: “I am because we are.” In the context of trafficking, victims are isolated, alienated from family and community, and stripped of the networks that give meaning to their existence. Trafficking, therefore, is not only an offense against individual dignity but a wound to the social and moral fabric of the community. The discernment process here involves evaluating the relational consequences of social practices: actions that erode trust, mutual responsibility, and the shared recognition of human worth are inherently destructive to both communal and individual flourishing.

The integration of **Imago Dei** and *Ubuntu* also illuminates the interdependence of individual and communal ethics. Trafficking undermines not only the victim’s dignity but also the moral responsibility of the wider society, implicating traffickers, bystanders, and systems of complicity. Theological discernment, therefore, extends beyond personal ethics to structural evaluation: it calls for reflection on societal complicity in economic, cultural, and political systems that permit exploitation. From this vantage point, discernment is both evaluative and prophetic—it identifies moral failings and calls for restorative action that reconciles victims with their communities and restores social and spiritual integrity.

Furthermore, theological reflection informed by Imago Dei and Ubuntu insists that human flourishing cannot be reduced to mere survival or economic functionality. Flourishing is relational, ethical, and spiritual, encompassing the dignity of the person and the health of the community. Discernment, in this sense, involves not only judging trafficking as morally wrong but envisioning practices, structures, and communities that actively cultivate human dignity, relational healing, and social cohesion. This moves the discussion from ethical description to transformative action, highlighting the theological mandate to resist exploitation, restore community, and uphold the sacredness of human life.

In sum, theological discernment using Imago Dei and Ubuntu provides a robust evaluative and moral lens: trafficking is not merely a crime against persons but a violation of divine intention and communal integrity. It challenges both individuals and communities to respond with justice, care, and transformative action that restores the relational and sacred fabric of human life.

Thus, the African context of human trafficking is not merely a sociological background for theology; it is the **very locus of revelation and discernment**. The cries of the trafficked become, in a theological sense, the cry of Christ crucified in the African body. Katongole (2017) suggests that “to listen to Africa’s pain is to listen to God’s lament within history” (p. 46). The victims’ suffering exposes the failure of systems, but it also reveals the enduring presence of God amid oppression.

The task before theologians, therefore, is to interpret this context through faith—recognizing in the trafficked body both the wound of sin and the possibility of redemption. Only by taking the African context seriously can theology move from moral abstraction to prophetic engagement, preparing the ground for the next theological movement: **lament as resistance**.

3. Lament as Theological Resistance

Human trafficking in Africa is not only a social and economic catastrophe but also a theological wound that demands a language of response beyond policy or activism. The first theological movement in such a response is **lament**. Lament is both **a cry of protest and an act of faith**, an expression of suffering that refuses to normalize evil. Within the biblical and African traditions, lament becomes a theological space where pain is named, solidarity is enacted, and divine justice is invoked against oppression. In the face of human trafficking, lament functions as **resistance**—a refusal to accept the commodification of God’s image in human flesh.

3.1 Biblical Foundations of Lament

In the Hebrew Scriptures, lament is central to the faith of Israel. The Psalms of lament, the Book of Lamentations, and the prophetic writings all portray lament not as despair but as the language of **faithful protest**. Walter Brueggemann (1984) observes that lament “is an act of bold faith because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is” (p. 52). By naming suffering and injustice before God, lament acknowledges both the reality of pain and the belief that God’s justice can and must intervene.

In the prophetic tradition, lament is inseparable from denunciation. The prophets do not merely express sorrow; they hold their communities and leaders accountable for systemic evil. Amos’ cry, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24), is a lament that transforms grief into moral urgency. Similarly, Jeremiah’s tears over Jerusalem (Jeremiah 8:21–9:1) reveal a divine pathos God’s own grief at human betrayal and oppression.

The New Testament deepens this theology of lament through **Christ’s cry on the cross**. When Jesus cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34), he enters into the full depth of human suffering, uniting divine compassion with the pain of the oppressed. Megan McKenna (2001) interprets this cry as “the ultimate solidarity of God with victims” (p. 118). In Christ’s lament, theology discovers that divine love is not detached from human agony; it is present within it.

Thus, lament is not an expression of hopelessness but an act of **theological truth-telling**. It names injustice as sin, refuses denial, and calls upon God to vindicate the oppressed. In this sense, lament becomes a political and theological act it exposes the world’s false peace and summons divine and human action.

3.2 Lament in African Cultural and Theological Contexts

In African societies, lament has always played a vital role in community life. Mourning rituals, songs of sorrow, and public weeping express not only personal pain but **communal solidarity**. In traditional African cosmology, grief is never private; it is a shared moral event. Laurenti Magesa (1997) notes that African mourning rituals “heal by restoring balance to the community and affirming the sacredness of life” (p. 134).

This communal understanding of lament resonates deeply with the biblical tradition. It suggests that theology in Africa must recover lament not as sentimentality but as **a moral and communal practice** a form of public theology. When a person is trafficked, it is not only the victim who suffers; the entire moral fabric of the community is wounded. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2004) writes that “the pain of one is the pain of all, and silence before suffering is itself a moral failure” (p. 88).

Unfortunately, in many African Christian contexts, lament has been muted by theologies that emphasize triumphalism, prosperity, or spiritualized patience. Emmanuel Katongole (2017) critiques this tendency as “a domestication of suffering” that robs the Church of its prophetic edge (p. 31). A theology that cannot lament loses its power to resist. The recovery of lament as a theological category thus represents a reawakening of the Church’s prophetic and pastoral vocation.

3.3 Lament as a Prophetic Refusal of Silence

Lament, when integrated into theological reflection on human trafficking, becomes a **prophetic refusal of silence**. It resists both social apathy and ecclesial complacency. Brueggemann (1986) argues that lament “is the voice that breaks through the royal consciousness” that is, it disrupts systems of power that seek to suppress suffering (p. 66). In the African context, the “royal consciousness” manifests in political corruption, gendered violence, and economic exploitation all of which rely on the suppression of victims’ voices.

To lament publicly is to unmask these systems. It is to declare, in the words of Pope Francis (2013), that “no one must remain indifferent before the suffering of others” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 193). The Church’s liturgy, preaching, and pastoral ministry can therefore become sites of lament that awaken moral awareness. Theologically, lament redefines holiness: not as separation from the world’s pain, but as compassionate participation in it.

For African theology, this requires a reorientation of liturgical and pastoral practice. The Eucharist, for example, can be celebrated as both **lament and hope**—the remembrance of a broken body that anticipates resurrection. To lament the trafficked bodies of the exploited is to join Christ’s lament over the world’s sin. As Bujo (1992) emphasizes, “African morality cannot separate religion from life; it is life-centered and must respond to suffering concretely” (p. 102). Thus, lamenting before God includes the responsibility to act in defense of life.

3.4 The Church’s Lament as Solidarity with the Trafficked

In theological terms, lament creates **solidarity between the Church and the crucified of history**. When the Church laments, it stands beside the trafficked and oppressed as a community of compassion and truth. This echoes the Pauline theology of the Body of Christ: “If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). Lament reconstitutes the Church as a wounded but compassionate body, mirroring Christ’s own compassion.

Pope Francis (2015) in *Laudato Si’* reminds the Church that “we have forgotten how to weep” (para. 53). To lament is therefore to recover humanity itself. For African communities, where grief is often shared through song, dance, and ritual, lament can become a powerful pastoral tool for healing victims of trafficking. Liturgies of lament—prayers, symbolic rituals, and communal storytelling—can transform pain into collective resistance and spiritual empowerment.

Moreover, lament has **epistemological significance**: it opens a new way of knowing. Elaine Graham (2013) describes lament as a “hermeneutic of wounded knowledge” that allows theology to learn from the margins (p. 41). The cries of trafficked persons are not simply data for moral reflection; they are sources of revelation. To listen to their lament is to encounter God’s voice within history’s wounds.

3.5 The Transformative Power of Lament

Lament is not the end of theology but its beginning. It moves from naming evil to anticipating transformation. In African spirituality, mourning often culminates in rituals of **reconciliation and renewal**—a recognition that life continues and must be healed. Similarly, biblical lament ends in praise not because suffering disappears but because faith perceives God’s faithfulness amid it.

Katongole (2017) describes lament as “the birthplace of hope” (p. 89). This theological insight is crucial for confronting human trafficking: only by passing through lament can the Church speak credibly of liberation. A theology that ignores suffering risks becoming ideology. Lament ensures that theology remains incarnate—rooted in real pain and real grace.

Theologically, lament embodies the **paschal pattern**: death, silence, and resurrection. In lament, the Church enters into Good Friday; in liberation, it anticipates Easter. The trafficked bodies of the oppressed thus become sites of divine encounter, where God’s compassion and justice intersect. The Church’s role is to make this intersection visible through prophetic witness, pastoral care, and advocacy.

3.6 Lament as the Church’s Public Witness

Public theology insists that faith must engage the world’s suffering in visible, dialogical, and transformative ways (Kim, 2011, p. 23). When lament becomes public, it challenges the political and economic systems that enable trafficking. The Church’s lament should therefore extend beyond liturgy to **public witness**—vigils, statements, and actions that confront injustice.

The African Church’s prophetic mission includes lamenting before the world, not only before God. As Katongole (2017) argues, “to lament publicly is to refuse to be comforted by lies” (p. 92). Such lament exposes complicity and invites conversion. It transforms the Church into what Pope Francis (2020) calls a “field hospital,” tending to the wounded and confronting the causes of their wounds (*Fratelli Tutti*, para. 70).

In this sense, lament becomes a **spiritual discipline of truth-telling**, a moral stance that unites prayer and protest. It transforms theology from abstract speculation into compassionate praxis. As African theologians have long affirmed, theology must “speak with tears” if it is to heal the wounds of the people (Magesa, 1997, p. 139).

In conclusion, lament as theological resistance reclaims theology’s moral power to confront evil without losing faith in God’s justice. In the African context of human trafficking, lament unites biblical faith, African communal wisdom, and Catholic compassion into a single act of protest and hope. It exposes silence as complicity, transforms grief into solidarity, and prepares the way for the next theological movement—**liberation as praxis**.

Through lament, theology becomes public truth-telling; through liberation, it becomes transformative action. These two movements together constitute the heartbeat of a theology that can confront human trafficking with both tears and courage.

4. Liberation as Theological Praxis

If lament is the first act of theological honesty in the face of human trafficking, then **liberation** is the corresponding act of theological responsibility. In confronting human trafficking, theological reflection must move beyond mere ethical critique or social description to a praxis-oriented approach that envisions and enacts human liberation. Drawing on both the Christian doctrine of **Imago Dei** and the African ethical framework of **Ubuntu**, liberation theology provides a model in which the liberation of the oppressed is inseparable from both spiritual and communal restoration.

Liberation, in this context, is not simply freedom from physical or economic bondage, but the holistic restoration of dignity, relationality, and human flourishing. The cry of the trafficked cannot remain a passive sound; it calls forth a praxis—an engaged theology that transforms compassion into action. Within the Christian and African theological traditions, liberation is not merely political emancipation; it is a **comprehensive transformation of life**, social structures, and relationships grounded in the Kingdom of God. It is theology enacted in history.

In essence, liberation as theological praxis is not passive reflection but active engagement. It calls the Church, theologians, and communities to embody God's vision for humanity by dismantling oppression, restoring relational integrity, and affirming the sacred worth of every human being. It transforms theology into action, ethics into praxis, and moral discernment into concrete steps toward human flourishing and social justice.

4.1 From Lament to Liberation: The Logic of Praxis

Liberation emerges as a transformative praxis that integrates ethical discernment, communal responsibility, and structural change. It is transformative in three key dimensions: **Personal Transformation whereby** Victims are restored to a sense of agency, self-worth, and spiritual dignity, recognizing their status as image-bearers of God; **Communal Transformation where** Communities are educated, empowered, and mobilized to prevent trafficking, reintegrate survivors, and cultivate cultures of solidarity and mutual respect; and finally **Structural Transformation where** policies, economic systems, and social norms that enable exploitation are challenged and reformed, creating conditions that safeguard the dignity and freedom of all persons.

Hence the transition from lament to liberation follows the **Paschal logic** at the heart of Christian faith. Lament names the cross; liberation enacts resurrection. As Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973) famously articulated, liberation theology begins with the recognition that “theology is a second act” that is, reflection arises from engagement with historical struggle (p. 11). Theology must therefore emerge from, and return to, the praxis of those who seek freedom.

In the African context, this insight has taken on unique forms. African theologians have insisted that liberation must integrate **spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions**. John Mbiti (1970) emphasized that salvation in African consciousness is “this-worldly” (p. 187): it concerns the well-being of the whole community, not merely the individual soul. Similarly, Laurenti Magesa (1997) described African Christian ethics as “life-affirming,” oriented toward the preservation and flourishing of life (p. 64).

Applied to the problem of human trafficking, this means that liberation cannot be limited to legal or political reform alone. It must include **the transformation of relationships, values, and systems** that allow exploitation to persist. The theological response, therefore, must be both **prophetic and practical** it must denounce evil and announce hope.

4.2 The Theological Foundations of Liberation

Liberation as a theological category finds its roots in **Scripture** and **Catholic social teaching**. The Exodus narrative provides the archetypal image of God as liberator: “I have seen the misery of my people... and I have come down to deliver them” (Exodus 3:7–8). God's saving action is not abstract but historical, involving concrete deliverance from bondage. Similarly, Jesus' mission, as proclaimed in Luke 4:18–19, identifies liberation as the heart of the Gospel: “to bring good news to the poor... to let the oppressed go free.”

This liberation is both **personal and structural**, encompassing forgiveness of sin and the dismantling of oppressive systems. As Leonardo Boff (1987) argues, the Gospel compels Christians to “confront the causes of misery, not only its effects” (p. 48). Pope John Paul II (1987) affirmed this vision in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, noting that authentic development and liberation are “the work of the whole person and of every person” (para. 33).

In African theology, liberation has always been relational and communal. It is not achieved in isolation but through **ubuntu**—the conviction that “I am because we are.” Desmond Tutu (1999) interprets ubuntu as a theological anthropology rooted in divine communion: “We are made for interdependence, for complementarity, for family” (p. 35). Human trafficking shatters this communion by turning persons into commodities; liberation restores it by reasserting the sacredness of personhood.

4.3 Catholic Social Teaching and the Preferential Option for the Vulnerable

Catholic social teaching (CST) provides an ethical framework that complements African liberation theology. At its core lies the **preferential option for the poor**, which demands that society and the Church prioritize the dignity of the most vulnerable. Pope Francis (2020) reiterates this in *Fratelli Tutti*: “Our faith calls us to recognize Christ himself in each of our abandoned or excluded brothers and sisters” (para. 85).

In the context of human trafficking, the preferential option translates into **concrete pastoral, educational, and advocacy initiatives**. The Church is called to accompany victims, to challenge systems of exploitation, and to advocate for policies that promote justice. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2004) defines this task as *diakonia of truth*—the Church’s service to truth in the public sphere.

African Catholic leaders have embodied this vision through initiatives such as the **Talitha Kum Network**, which mobilizes women religious across the continent in the rescue, rehabilitation, and empowerment of trafficked persons. These ministries reveal liberation theology in action: theology as healing, as accompaniment, as empowerment.

Yet liberation is not only external; it is also **spiritual conversion**. Pope Benedict XVI (2009) in *Caritas in Veritate* reminds that “integral human development presupposes the responsible freedom of the person and the capacity for conversion” (para. 18). The traffickers themselves, and the societies that tolerate their actions, require liberation from greed, indifference, and fear. Hence, liberation theology must speak to both victims and perpetrators, offering a path toward reconciliation and transformation.

4.4 Liberation as Public and Political Theology

Liberation theology becomes **public theology** when it enters dialogue with society to shape moral imagination and policy. Elaine Graham (2013) defines public theology as “theology that seeks to contribute to public discourse about the common good” (p. 27). For the African Church, this involves challenging economic and political structures that enable trafficking poverty, gender inequality, corruption, and lack of education.

Human trafficking thrives where **dehumanization is normalized**. Public theology must therefore confront ideologies that reduce persons to objects of labor or desire. It must ask not only how to rescue victims but how to reconstruct moral economies. Paul Tillich’s (1951) theology of culture offers a useful lens here: sin manifests in structures that distort being, while grace restores being-in-communion (p. 62). In this sense, liberation is a **grace-infused social reconstruction**.

The African theological task is to articulate this vision in ways that resonate with local contexts. Katongole (2017) calls for a “theology of interruption” a praxis that disrupts cycles of violence by imagining alternative communities (p. 111). Such theology does not remain at the level of critique; it builds new social possibilities rooted in compassion and justice.

In Kenya and across Africa, liberation as public theology could manifest through **community-based reintegration programs, education for prevention, and advocacy for policy reform**. These are not merely social projects; they are expressions of faith that the Kingdom of God can take form in history. As Gutierrez (1973) insists, “to know God is to do justice” (p. 205).

4.5 Liberation and the Church’s Prophetic Mission

Liberation theology situates the Church as a **prophetic community** called not only to console but also to challenge. The Church’s credibility depends on its willingness to speak truth to power and to stand with victims even at great institutional cost. Pope Francis (2013) calls this “a Church that is poor and for the poor” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 198).

In Africa, prophetic witness must address both **external systems of oppression** (economic exploitation, migration policies, gendered violence) and **internal ecclesial complacency**. The Church itself must undergo continuous conversion to remain a credible voice for liberation. Emmanuel Katongole (2011) warns that “without conversion, the Church risks blessing the very systems it should challenge” (p. 76).

Prophetic liberation demands **embodied witness** solidarity that goes beyond charity to justice. This may involve public statements, partnerships with civil society, and the reallocation of ecclesial resources toward anti-trafficking ministries. Theological education, too, must form ministers capable of integrating social analysis with pastoral action. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2004) emphasizes, “theology must be done in the streets as well as in the sanctuary” (p. 102).

4.6 Liberation as Healing and Reconciliation

In African cosmology, liberation is inseparable from **healing**. The wound caused by human trafficking is not only social but spiritual it fractures individuals, families, and communities. Healing, therefore, becomes a theological task. Magesa (1997) affirms that “to heal is to restore harmony with God, the self, and the community” (p. 145).

The Church’s pastoral mission must include healing of memories and rebuilding of hope. Rituals of reconciliation, counseling, and community reintegration are essential dimensions of liberation praxis. The **sacramental life of the Church**, particularly the Eucharist and reconciliation, can serve as sources of renewal for victims and communities alike.

Liberation also requires **forgiveness**, though not as passivity. Forgiveness in Christian theology is an act of freedom, a refusal to be defined by the oppressor’s violence. It opens space for new futures. Yet forgiveness must be grounded in truth and justice; without accountability, it risks becoming cheap grace. Thus, a theology of liberation must balance **mercy with justice**, affirming both divine compassion and moral responsibility.

4.7 The Eschatological Dimension of Liberation

Ultimately, liberation theology is sustained by **eschatological hope**. It anticipates the full realization of God’s reign where all tears will be wiped away and all oppression ended (Revelation 21:4). This hope is not an escape from history but a source of endurance within it. As Moltmann (1993) observes, “the hope of resurrection is the power that makes resistance possible” (p. 19).

In African Christianity, eschatological hope is deeply incarnational it affirms that God’s future has already begun in acts of justice and solidarity. Every effort to free, heal, and empower trafficked persons becomes a foretaste of the Kingdom. Liberation, therefore, is both **already** and **not yet** a present task and a future promise.

This eschatological orientation prevents theology from despairing amid suffering. It allows theologians, pastors, and activists to persist in the long struggle for justice with courage and faith. As Desmond Tutu (1999) reminds us, “Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate” (p. 142). Such conviction is the heart of liberation praxis.

Liberation as theological praxis transforms lament into constructive resistance, compassion into policy, and faith into justice. It embodies the Church’s vocation to participate in God’s liberating action in history. In the African struggle against human trafficking, liberation theology offers both **a moral vision** and **a pastoral method** a way of seeing, judging, and acting that unites spirituality, ethics, and social transformation.

Through lament, theology learns to weep; through liberation, it learns to act. Together, these form a theology of compassion and courage a **public theology of resistance and renewal** that confronts trafficking not merely as a social problem but as a theological scandal and an opportunity for redemptive praxis.

In sum, human trafficking, as both a violation of Imago Dei and a disruption of Ubuntu, demands a liberationist response that is both theological and practical. Theological praxis rooted in liberation recognizes the dignity of victims, restores communal bonds, and challenges systemic structures that perpetuate exploitation. By integrating Imago Dei and Ubuntu, liberation praxis offers a comprehensive framework for confronting trafficking: one that heals, restores, and empowers, ensuring that human beings live fully in accordance with divine intention and communal humanity.

5. Theological and Pastoral Proposals

The preceding theological reflections on lament and liberation reveal that any credible Christian response to human trafficking must integrate **reflection and action, faith and justice, spirituality and structure**. This section outlines theological and pastoral proposals rooted in Catholic social teaching and African contextual theology that can guide the Church’s engagement in the struggle against human trafficking.

5.1 Forming a Theology from Below

The first proposal is methodological: theology must begin from **the experience of the victims**. Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973) insists that “theology is critical reflection on praxis in the light of the Word of God” (p. 11). This means that reflection follows listening. A theology that addresses trafficking cannot emerge solely from ecclesial offices; it must be formed “from below,” through dialogue with survivors, grassroots movements, and pastoral agents.

In Africa, this requires the creation of **theological spaces of listening**—workshops, synodal consultations, and parish networks where the stories of the trafficked can inform theological formation. Such listening echoes the synodal vision of Pope Francis (2021): a “Church that listens, that realizes that listening is more than hearing” (*Synod Preparatory Document*, para. 27).

This theology-from-below approach transforms the trafficked from objects of charity into **subjects of theology**. Their experiences become loci theologici sources for discerning God’s presence and the meaning of redemption amid suffering.

5.2 Recovering the Prophetic Dimension of the Church

The Church in Africa must reclaim its **prophetic vocation** as a moral conscience of society. The prophetic Church does not merely denounce evil; it embodies alternatives. Drawing from the biblical prophets and the witness of Christ, it calls for repentance, exposes complicity, and advocates for justice.

As Katongole (2017) observes, the Church’s mission in a wounded world is “to make visible the alternative imagination of God’s Kingdom” (p. 114). This involves public witness, advocacy, and symbolic acts of solidarity with victims. Bishops’ conferences, religious congregations, and ecumenical councils should issue joint **pastoral letters** that denounce trafficking and propose concrete policy reforms.

Prophetic witness also includes the courage to confront **cultural practices** that perpetuate trafficking—such as gender discrimination, economic exploitation, and the commodification of young people through false promises of migration. A truly prophetic Church must stand against both external and internal injustices, modeling transparency and justice within its own structures.

5.3 Reimagining Pastoral Accompaniment

Pastoral ministry must integrate **prevention, protection, and rehabilitation** as dimensions of liberation praxis. The Church’s pastoral agents priests, catechists, and religious should be trained in identifying, supporting, and accompanying victims. This accompaniment must be holistic, addressing **psychological, social, and spiritual healing**.

Magesa (1997) describes African ethics as “a life ethic grounded in compassion and communal responsibility” (p. 92). Accompaniment thus reflects the African understanding of community as healing space. Parish-based centers can serve as **safe sanctuaries** for victims, offering legal aid, trauma counseling, and vocational training.

Spiritual healing should also be integrated into pastoral care. Liturgies of lament, healing services, and the sacrament of reconciliation can help victims rediscover dignity. As Pope Francis (2015) notes in *Laudato Si’*, “healing relationships with others and with creation restores our relationship with God” (para. 66).

5.4 Theological Education for Justice

A critical dimension of pastoral praxis is the **formation of conscience and capacity** within theological institutions. Seminaries, universities, and formation houses must include human trafficking as a subject of theological and pastoral inquiry.

Curricula should integrate **social analysis, ethics, and Catholic social teaching**, fostering a generation of theologians and pastors who can link faith with justice. Elaine Graham (2013) stresses that theology must “equip the faithful for public reasoning” (p. 41). This means forming clergy and lay leaders capable of translating theological insight into policy dialogue and community action.

Theological research must also be collaborative, involving sociologists, economists, and legal scholars. This interdisciplinary engagement reflects the Catholic understanding of truth as **catholic universal, integrative, and dialogical**. In confronting trafficking, theology thus becomes both academic inquiry and moral leadership.

5.5 Building Ecclesial Networks of Action

The final pastoral proposal is structural: to combat trafficking effectively, the Church must strengthen **networks of collaboration**. Initiatives such as **Talitha Kum**, **Caritas Internationalis**, and **Jesuit Refugee Service** provide models of integrated response.

These networks embody a theology of communion in action. They reveal that the Body of Christ transcends borders and denominations. The African Church, through continental and regional episcopal conferences, can coordinate anti-trafficking campaigns that combine **education, advocacy, and rescue operations**.

Furthermore, collaboration with **Muslim and traditional leaders** is vital. Human trafficking violates the moral and spiritual values common to all faiths. Interreligious dialogue thus becomes a platform for united moral action. As the *Document on Human Fraternity* (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019) proclaims, “faith leads believers to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved” (para. 6).

6. Toward a Public Theology of Action and Collaboration

Lament and liberation find their fullest expression in **public theology** a theology that enters the civic arena to shape moral discourse, policy, and social imagination. Confronting human trafficking requires the Church not only to comfort the afflicted but also to challenge the structures that afflict them.

6.1 Theology in the Public Square

Public theology involves translating theological values into the language of **human rights, development, and social policy**. It is the Church’s participation in shaping the moral conscience of the nation. As Kim (2011) defines, public theology “seeks to interpret faith in terms meaningful to the wider society” (p. 18).

For African theologians, this means articulating liberation in dialogue with constitutional and economic frameworks. The Church must engage policymakers, educators, and civil organizations, advocating for laws that protect victims and punish traffickers. Public theology thus becomes **advocacy grounded in grace**—action motivated not by ideology but by faith in the God of justice.

6.2 The Church as Moral and Social Actor

The Church in Africa possesses immense **moral capital**; it occupies a unique position as both a moral and social actor in the fight against human trafficking. Grounded in its theological mandate to uphold the dignity of the human person, the Church’s moral authority derives from its teaching on **Imago Dei**, affirming that every individual is created in the image of God and possesses intrinsic worth. This moral foundation compels the Church to speak prophetically against practices that commodify or exploit human beings, positioning it as a voice of conscience in societies where trafficking occurs.

Pope Francis (2020) calls the Church to become “a home with open doors” (*Fratelli Tutti*, para. 276), where mercy and justice meet. Catholic universities and NGOs can organize research and policy dialogues on the root causes of trafficking poverty, unemployment, migration, and gender inequality.

As a social actor, the Church engages concretely through education, advocacy, pastoral care, and community development. Its extensive networks parishes, schools, religious organizations, and civil partnerships enable practical interventions such as prevention campaigns, support for survivors, and reintegration programs. Moreover, the Church’s social action is informed by **Ubuntu**, emphasizing communal responsibility and relational ethics; it mobilizes communities to protect vulnerable populations and foster solidarity.

By combining moral authority with practical engagement, the Church bridges ethical reflection and social praxis. It not only denounces injustice but actively works to dismantle structural conditions that enable trafficking, restore dignity to victims, and cultivate communal resilience. In this way, the Church exemplifies a holistic response, integrating spiritual, ethical, and social dimensions of human liberation.

6.3 Interreligious and Ecumenical Collaboration

Given Africa’s multi-religious context, combating trafficking requires **interfaith collaboration**. Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion all affirm the sanctity of human life. A public theology of collaboration thus seeks **common ethical ground** to foster unity in moral action.

Interreligious councils can issue joint declarations condemning trafficking, organize awareness campaigns, and support rehabilitation centers. This embodies what Orobator (2018) calls “interreligious solidarity for life” (p. 64) a unity that transcends doctrine in defense of human dignity.

Ecumenical collaboration among Christian denominations can also multiply impact. The World Council of Churches’ “Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe” provides a model that African churches could contextualize regionally. Together, these alliances constitute a visible sign of the Gospel’s power to unite for justice.

6.4 Digital and Global Advocacy

Human trafficking today is sustained through **digital networks**, online recruitment, and transnational syndicates. The Church’s public theology must therefore embrace **digital advocacy**. Catholic media, university platforms, and youth ministries can use social media to educate, mobilize, and expose trafficking operations.

Francis (2018) in his *World Communications Day Message* emphasized the need for “networks that build community rather than division” (para. 5). A theology of digital presence recognizes the internet as a moral space where truth-telling and pastoral care must occur.

African youth, equipped with faith-based digital literacy, can become **agents of awareness and advocacy**, transforming online spaces into zones of liberation rather than exploitation.

6.5 The Global Dimension of Solidarity

Finally, a public theology of liberation must situate African struggles within global systems. Human trafficking is a transnational phenomenon linked to global inequality, consumerism, and migration policies. The Church’s moral advocacy must therefore challenge both **local injustices** and **global complicity**.

As Boff (1987) notes, “The cry of the poor is one cry, even when it rises from different lands” (p. 74). The African Church’s prophetic voice can enrich global Catholicism by grounding universal social teaching in lived suffering. The *Synod for Africa* (1995) already envisioned this contribution, calling the continent to be “a Church that serves as the voice of the voiceless” (Ecclesia in Africa, para. 70).

Public theology, in this sense, is global discipleship: the Church participating in the transformation of humanity through solidarity, truth, and mercy.

7. Conclusion — Toward Hope and Human Dignity

The journey from lament to liberation forms the theological arc of a **faithful response to human trafficking**. In lament, theology learns to speak truth in the face of suffering; in liberation, it learns to act. Together, they constitute a **public theology of resistance and hope** an African theology that listens, heals, and transforms.

Human trafficking is not only a moral crisis but a theological scandal. It profanes the image of God and fractures the communal soul of Africa. Yet within this suffering lies a call to renewal. Theology must become **pastoral action, prophetic advocacy, and spiritual healing**.

The African Church stands at a kairos moment: called to reclaim its prophetic identity, to form leaders of conscience, to collaborate across faiths, and to bear witness to the sanctity of every human life. Through lament, it remembers the wounded; through liberation, it rebuilds hope.

In the words of Tutu (1999), “We are prisoners of hope” (p. 143). Such hope is not naive optimism but **eschatological courage** the conviction that God’s justice will prevail and that every act of compassion participates in the coming Kingdom.

Thus, the theology of lament and liberation becomes the heartbeat of an African response to trafficking: weeping with the crucified, acting for their resurrection, and proclaiming with faith that life, not death, has the final word.

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