

A Discussion on Human Trafficking

An Interview by Grace Volk

Dr. Joan Arcan, MA, PhD, is a theologian, teacher, and author. She has also spent an extended amount of time working to fight against human trafficking in Asia. Dr. Joan has a valiant and humble soul. Despite her many accomplishments, she describes herself as, “a poor fool, a beggar at the feet of God.” I had the pleasure of visiting with Dr. Joan via Zoom about her experience in Cambodia. We spoke about the many ways in which she aided individuals who have been affected by human trafficking, and in return, these individuals remain close to her heart. She lives out her vocation as a consecrated virgin in Southern California.

**Note, names have been changed in order to protect the privacy of individuals.*

GV: To kickoff, I thought we could do a brief overview of who Dr. Joan is and get some dates and things like that if you wouldn't mind. For instance, you have your doctorate. Where did you get your doctorate from?

JA: I received my doctorate from Marquette University. That's in philosophy, and then I have my Master of Theology from The University of Dallas.

GV: Was that before or after you went to Cambodia?

JA: It was before, but I've always had an interest in doing overseas missionary work ever since I was a little kid.

GV: Would you say you were always religious growing up?

JA: I grew up sort of moderately Episcopalian. My grandfather played the organ and built the organ at the Episcopal Church in my hometown in Arizona. So, everybody just always kind of went, just as a family thing, but I was never terribly serious. My family is not super devout,

except for my grandmother. She was pretty devout. She grew up Southern Baptist and she always made sure I was reading the Bible, etcetera... in a very gentle way, you know, not cramming it down my throat but always teaching me a little here and a little there.

GV: That's really interesting. How did you end up converting to Catholicism?

JA: I went through an atheistic phase for a while and even a goth phase in high school. (Laughs). I've always loved biology and science, and so for a while I thought, 'Well, science can give me the answers that I'm looking for and that's enough. That's sufficient.' Then I realized, 'Oh crap, science can't tell me why there's something rather than nothing.' It can't answer that question.

Then, I kind of went to the opposite extreme. I started devouring everything I could get my hands on in terms of world religions and spiritualities and all of that. It was in a new-age bookstore that I found the writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, of all places. I started devouring all of it. It was so beautiful. It was really reading the writings of the saints that led me to my vocation and to my conversion. I converted to Catholicism in 1993. At the time I was at a Newman Center at the University of Arizona, which was run by Dominicans so I had a sort of Dominican formation in part. My Dominican spiritual director encouraged my love for philosophy and theology, and I was consecrated twenty years ago.

GV: That sounds really similar to Edith Stein, and how she found Teresa of Avila.

JA: Yeah...Minus the goth and a new-age bookstore.

GV: You never know. Maybe if she was born at a different time she would be goth. (We both laugh). Was it the beauty behind Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross's works that led you to Catholicism, or was it the intellectual themes within their works that intrigued you?

JA: It was the beauty and realizing that God is not a feeling. That was really big too. That's a very strong theme in Saint John of the Cross, you know, that God can be in the darkness. He can be there even though you don't feel His presence.

GV: That's a very comforting thought to sit with. Did anything else impact you when reading their works?

JA: The intimacy that Saint Teresa of Avila had with God was very appealing to me. I had seen Christianity as kind of like a Sunday morning affair. You get dressed up and you go to Sunday morning service. Then, you go out and you have a nice brunch. That was how my family did things and then that was that. I wanted something that was a lifestyle, not just a Sunday morning social club. Then after reading their writings I was like, 'Wow. This is not just a social club. This is a whole way of giving your life to someone else.'

GV: Sort of shifting gears a bit, you received your doctorate and got your degree from the University of Dallas and then... What sparked your interest to go to Cambodia?

JA: I always had an interest in doing missionary work overseas, ever since I was a kid. I was always very inspired by Mother Teresa from a young age. Then my spiritual director – The Dominican at the University of Arizona – encouraged my studies so I went and did all my studies and still had, in the core of my heart, an interest in the mission field, but I never really knew where to start or what to do.

GV: Did you find yourself researching how to become a missionary? What resources did you find helpful when exploring this next chapter in your life?

JA: I watched a documentary called *Born into Brothels*. It's about the children who are born into the Red Light District in Calcutta. An English lady moved into the Red Light District to learn more about the trafficking that goes on there, and the children just came out of the woodwork. They were drawn to her, and they called her auntie. It was very beautiful and she just went. She was a photographer, not a teacher, not a counselor, not a nurse, nothing like that. It's just like by her moving there everything fell into place naturally, organically. She was able to teach the children the art of photography and then take their pictures and sell them in places like New York City to raise funds to start a school for them. I was very inspired by that documentary.

I thought, 'Wow. I don't have to join a group of missionaries or something. I can just go and roll up my sleeves, and I can go somewhere where I know there's a need.'

I then watched another documentary called *Nefarious*, specifically on sex trafficking. It was after watching that that I started learning about different anti-trafficking organizations, especially one called Destiny Rescue, and another one, Agape International Missions. I started doing stuff with these organizations, fundraising and what not, and then trying to raise more awareness among college students especially. I thought, 'Gosh. I should go do a short term trip.' So I did a short-term trip with Destiny Rescue.

At the time they had these two-week long trips you could do in southeast Asia, so Thailand and Cambodia. I did one of their mission trips. Then after the two weeks, I stayed in Cambodia for an extra two weeks during the summer to learn more about the country, and the people and the culture, and the issue of trafficking there because it's one of the worst spots in the whole world.

GV: Why is trafficking so common in Cambodia compared to other places in the world?

JA: There was a massive genocide there in the 1970's. They systematically killed up to a quarter of their own people, about 2 million people. They targeted first and foremost the teachers and the religious leaders. They forced people out of cities. They wanted to turn the whole country into a Communist-agrarian country where everyone is basically a poor starving peasant in the field.

He [Pol Pot] killed off the teachers so their educational system is really in shambles, and when you don't have educational and vocational opportunities for people, what very quickly

happens is traffickers take advantage of that. If you're starving to death and someone comes along and says, 'Hey, I've got a great job for you over here in another city or in another country. Come and you'll have a great job working at a hotel or a restaurant.' People are like, 'Yeah, sign me up.' Not realizing that it's a trick. They'll take you to a brothel and there you are stuck. They take away their papers.

There are so many abuses that take place especially when a country is in a situation like that. But the first time I went over to Asia, we went first to Thailand and then after that we went to Cambodia. I immediately fell in love with the people of Cambodia because it's impossible not to see Jesus in them. There's just something about them.

GV: Could you define that something? Was it joy, hard work? Was it kindness?

JA: There's just kind of... for most of them there's sort of an innocence. They're humble. I would say they're humble and gentle and joyful, for the most part. They have a beautiful humility and vulnerability because of their situation. They've suffered enormously, and yet, there's still a joy in them and I was like, 'Wow. These people are amazing.' I just really fell in love with the people and I've always been in awe of them because of what they've suffered and yet there's still a gentleness about them.

I met this man. He had been one of the only people to survive this concentration camp. Basically, it was like the Auschwitz of Cambodia during the genocide. They would take people there, torture them, get false confessions, and take them to what's called the killing fields. They would slaughter them with machetes. He was one of the only people to survive this torture camp. It's now a genocide museum, and I ended up living about two blocks from it when I moved over there. I read his autobiography and then I met him. I remember I was standing in line to meet him and have him sign his book. I thought, 'Oh my gosh. What is he going to be like? Is he going to be a bitter, crusty old guy?' But it was the exact opposite.

He took my hands in his hands and he looked at me. He just smiled, and it was this amazing smile and gentleness. I think that's what it would be like to see Jesus. I felt like I was the only person in the world and that he had a great, a very pure, beautiful love, and it gave me just a glimpse really of God's love and it was really... I can't even put it into words.

This man had suffered. His wife and two children were slaughtered, and he was tortured. The only reason they didn't kill him is because he's an artist and he was doing propaganda posters for them so he was useful to them. He was useful to the Khmer Rouge. That's just one example, and I could give many examples of these people, their gentleness, and their ability to forgive.

GV: Hmm. That's interesting. The ability to forgive.

JA: Yeah, and they're just amazing people.

GV: Is Cambodia an independent country? How would you define their system of government?

JA: It's a parliamentary monarchy, but their prime minister is a former member of the Khmer Rouge so it's still a disaster over there. There's not a genocide, but it's an absolute mess, anarchy. It's crazy, which is why there's so much trafficking. You can do whatever you want to whomever you want and you pay off the police to look the other way. They're benefitting from it. So law enforcement is practically non-existent.

GV: I see. Are there areas in Cambodia where trafficking is clearly noticeable? Does Cambodia have a red light district?

JA: Oh yeah. Big time. I was in Phnom Penh which is the capital city of Cambodia. At night places that during the day looked like normal businesses became places where you could go and buy people. They're called KTVs. They're like karaoke bars that turn into basically brothels at night. People go there and sing karaoke and/or buy sex... sometimes with little kids. So it can be establishments like that, but then there's also every scenario you can imagine and then some. Sometimes parents will sell their own children. A friend of mine said he was walking in a very touristy area, and this little girl came up to him. She didn't speak English, and he didn't speak much Pali. She was tugging on his hand and asking him basically if he wanted to buy water. She took him over to the mom, and the mom was asking him, 'Do you want her for the night?' She was just a little girl... a little girl, and this is a normal occurrence.

GV: Why would parents do that?

JA: They're destitute. Sometimes loan sharks will get to them. If they need a loan to start their small business, they'll give them a loan but of course it's with interest. Then they can't pay it back and the loan sharks will say, 'Well you can give us your daughter. We'll call it even, or your daughter can come work for us for a year and pay off the debt.'

GV: What are some of the ways you would help the women and children in Cambodia? What kinds of relief did the ministry you worked for provide for them?

JA: I volunteered for organizations that were already doing this work so just volunteering for anti-trafficking organizations was one of the ways I helped. But then I was also doing some teaching and teacher training. They need people to do teacher training because of their education system situation. Then also, I just went and said, 'Lord, here I am. Show me where you want me. Show me what you want me to do.'

I got to know the street children, the kids there who are in high-risk situations. Some of them were already being trafficked. Downtown Phnom Penh is a very touristy area. Children will oftentimes sell things on the street to tourists and that's how I first met one of them. She was selling bracelets to me. I would just go to that area and these kids can't afford to go to school. If you can't afford to send your kid to school, there's no way they're going to get a halfway decent education. These kids help their families by selling items to foreigners day and night.

Anyway, I went into that area and I would just put down blankets in the park or even on the street or on the sidewalk and start doing crafts, and they would just come. The kids would come like magnets, like the lady in Calcutta who did this sort of thing. It was the same sort of thing. It was amazing to me. I just put down a blanket and toys and crafts and here they all came. So I got to know them, and I would just do fun stuff with them. Some of them are not given a chance to be kids. I would take them rollerskating and do fun things like that. I got to know them through that.

I think the best way to do missionary work is to do it within the context of a friendship. Not the context of, 'Here I am and I'm here to help you poor people.' They call it, you know, the white savior complex. I think that can be kind of demoralizing depending on the circumstances and how it's done. So I tried to develop friendships with these kids and it worked. They would sometimes give me information about things that were going on that was useful to people who were doing undercover work there. These individuals did work like raiding brothels and things like that. They would give me useful information that I would pass on to those people.

I met this girl the first summer I went to Cambodia. Her smile remained etched on my heart and it's still there and it will always be there. I spent one summer over in Cambodia and went back to the states. Then I spent another summer over there and that's when I decided to move there for a whole year. The second summer I returned to Cambodia I prayed, 'Lord, I hope I can come across her again,' and the second day I was there, there she was. She was like, 'I know you.' and I'm like, 'I know you too!'

It ended up all being very providential because she's one of the girls this guy from Germany tried to take out of the country. He had all the red flags: He's someone who looks clean cut, who looks nice, but he was promising the girl's mother that he would marry her and get her a house and everything. She was only fourteen or fifteen, but he got her a big passport saying she was twenty-one. One of the other girls I had been working with called me up through WhatsApp. I was back in the states. She said the girl, her name is Savannah, was in a lot of trouble. This guy was trying to lure her out of the country.

That is an example of how she was giving me information, even pictures of the guy, that I forwarded to an organization that does undercover work. They were able to track the guy and he knew he was being tracked so he left but then came back, but then he was still being tracked because this girl told me he was back now and doing this again. Long story short he would have taken her out of the country if it wasn't for this intervention.

GV: That is an amazing story. Thank goodness you guys were able to prevent a bad situation from happening. Do you know the language there?

JA: No, I don't. It's a very hard language to learn, but I was in a big city and the schools or the universities mostly teach in English. In these touristy areas, all of the people know at least

some English, like the girls there. Their English is pretty good. They're interacting mostly with Western tourists all the time.

GV: Do you think that some tourists know what's going on?

JA: Yeah. People go there because they know it's a place where they can buy kids. Agape International Missions does work in a little village called Svay Pak. It's just north of Phnom Penh. Practically all of the children in the little village were being sold for sex on a regular basis, but they [Individuals at Agape International Missions] were able to move in and shut down a lot of the brothels and build schools and vocational training centers. They really transformed the little village, but it's not like that's going to stop trafficking because it just goes somewhere else.

GV: Do you think there's a way to stop trafficking from happening at all?

JA: I always say it's a multifaceted problem so there has to be a multifaceted solution. What's mostly on my heart is the prevention part of it. If you can prevent it from happening, so much the better. Because once a person is trafficked, I think it's a scar even if they're rescued. It's a scar that they're going to have for the rest of their lives. So we need people doing prevention work and education is part of that. We need people doing rescue work. We need people doing rehabilitation work. We need people on every front. Can we ever conquer it? I don't know. Not without grace. Our Lord says some demons can only be cast out through prayer and fasting, and I'm convinced that trafficking is one of those demons.

GV: I was listening to a podcast with Grace Williams on Pints with Aquinas, and she said in the podcast that the devil hates women and children. I had never heard that about women before. I was thinking about that for a long time afterwards. People forget to protect a woman's innocence, especially. I think part of the reason the devil hates women is because of their innocence. I find that really true in the work she's doing as well. Sometimes it must seem like such a dark reality to work against, and a lot of the time prayer or fasting must make a huge difference.

JA: Yeah they do. It's interesting you say that because I know a priest in Dallas. He's an exorcist for the diocese. I was talking to him about some of this and he said, 'Joan, anytime children are being abused, you know right off the bat it's demonic.' Child abuse is demonic. Not in the sense that you can blame the devil for it, but there's some demonic influence. I thought, 'Wow. That makes a lot of sense.'

GV: How did witnessing that evil so prevalent in human trafficking affect you? Were you able to somewhat hold your own and realize love conquers all? Was it difficult at times?

JA: It was really hard to live in Cambodia because the corruption is just everywhere. It's *everywhere*. You step outside your door, and it's there. It's even in the most simple business interaction because there's no law. So every business interaction is like an attempt to exploit someone. There's a real darkness there, and it's a profoundly chaotic place. The traffic is chaotic. Even the Cambodians hate the traffic there. Everybody has a little motorcycle, and

everyone's super aggressive with how they drive and always honking at each other. That was just...that was a lot.

It was like being in a dark pit, and it was very surreal because I passed by that genocide museum almost on a daily basis on my way to go teach. It's just surreal to ride past that. It's like, 'On the other side of this wall people were tortured and killed by the thousands, like Auschwitz.'

So, yeah. It does kind of start to seep into your soul, and it is easy to lose hope. But I had to keep telling myself that even if I only make a difference in one person's life, it's still worth it because that's an entire lifetime. I had to keep that in mind. Mother Theresa says, 'God calls me to be faithful, not successful.' Then there's another quote where she basically says, 'I never saw the masses as my responsibility but just the one person right in front of me. Just begin one, one, one...'

GV: That's a very powerful perspective.

JA: Oh, have you heard of The Starfish Story?

GV: No, I haven't.

JA: A friend of mine gave me a starfish. In fact, I have it right here I'll show you. (Joan walks back to the bookshelf to grab it.) A friend of mine gave me this starfish right before I moved over there and told me The Starfish Story. There was this little boy, and there were all these living starfish that washed on the shore, it's a metaphor, and the boy was throwing them back into the sea so they wouldn't die. Someone came along and said, 'There are thousands of them here. What makes you think you're going to make a difference here? You can't save them.' So the boy picks one up and he throws it into the ocean. He says, 'It matters to that one. It makes a difference for that one.' I kept that in mind too: to do what I could with the one person in front of me.

The main reason why I went over there was to help fight against trafficking, but I also encouraged young women, that happened a lot when I was teaching. I just tried to build up young women and then people in general, but especially the young women. I saw a lot of Cambodians really doing a lot to help their own country. This one girl just finished her master's, I think in environmental science or management, and she's really just an amazing human being. She's now going to villages and installing pumps for clean water so people can have clean water. There are a lot of other stories like that.

Another thing that ended up happening too is the parish I belonged to had a lot of Pakistani refugees. They didn't technically have refugee status, but a lot of them fled to Cambodia because of religious persecution in Pakistan. Then they got there, and they had no way to get back. This one guy, his own brother was trying to kill him because he's Catholic. I told Father Sarfraz. I was talking to him about this recently because he's from Pakistan. He went, 'Yes, it's honor killing.' He was very matter of fact like, 'Oh, sure. Yeah, people try to kill each other for being another religion. It's called honor killing.' So, I ended up with the Saint

Vincent DePaul Society working with some of them when I was over there too. But kind of like I said before I went with the attitude of, 'Here I am Lord. Do what you want with me.'

GV: You ended up helping a lot of different individuals over there. It must be really nice to hear those success stories. Do you keep in contact with anybody back in Cambodia?

JA: A little bit. I have stayed in touch with some of them, but not as closely as I want to. Of course, COVID put a damper on things. I had some things planned. This is one example: There's this one group over there that makes handmade items. I wanted to bring back some of their fair trade items to sell here, but COVID put a big damper on that. Right now I don't have a lot of things going on, but I'm hoping to get things going again. Mostly I'm just trying to raise more awareness and recruit young people to do things like go volunteer for Grace Williams.

GV: Is Cambodia predominantly Catholic?

JA: No, it's over 95% Buddhist.

GV: What is the state of trafficking like in Cambodia today? Has it gotten better or worse compared to when you were there six years ago, in 2018?

JA: I have no idea about the statistics. It's very hard to get statistics because so much of it is underground, but I have no idea if it's getting better or worse. I think worldwide it's always getting worse and worse. There are more people enslaved today than there ever have been. Trafficking is slavery.

GV: Why do you think that is? Why do you think it's getting worse?

JA: Because people are greedy. There's nothing new under the sun. There's greed, there's lust, there's pride, there's desire to dominate other people.

GV: What would you or anyone, say in Southern California, do if you spot something that is really suspicious? Do you call law enforcement? Do you say something? What do you do in that situation?

JA: There's a hotline to call. I have powerpoint presentation slides I can send you with some of this information.

GV: I would love that. I would love to look through that.

*(*Note, all resources and other helpful links are attached at the end of the interview.)*

GV: Could you expand on what you said earlier about trafficking being a form of modern day slavery?

JA: Oh my gosh. There's so much I could do with that. There's so much to say. Whenever you use another person as a mere means to your own end, it's just such a violation. It's just so contrary to love. It's so contrary to what God has called us to. It's just evil. John Paul II says

and talks so much and so beautifully about how important it is never to use another person as a mere means for an end.

It's demonic, especially the trafficking of children. It's not just sex trafficking either. There are all kinds of trafficking. You'll see that in my slides. Labor trafficking, I mean, that's what we had many years ago. Well, in some ways we still have it. We think, 'Oh, slavery is over with and it's been defeated.' We think of slavery in our country and the history of slavery, but it's still going on. Domestic servitude, sex trafficking, labor trafficking, organ harvesting... A lot of the products in our home come from sweatshops.

GV: I think the last point you said is a major issue. Shopping online from stores that use sweatshops overseas is a big problem. I think a lot of Americans don't know about it. People order from sites where shirts are around five or ten dollars. You think it's a good deal and have faith that brands will be honest. In reality, we should be asking ourselves how they're able to make products for such a small profit?

JA: Yeah, and you look at the tag and it says it's made in places like China, Cambodia, Philippines, most of the time from these very poor countries. One of the documentaries that I think is really good because it shows different types of trafficking is called *Not My Life*.

GV: That sounds great. I'd love to watch it.

JA: Another one that is so good is called *Girl Rising*. It's about women's education and how educating a girl does so much good for society. It's one of the key things we can do to help developing countries. It's excellent. I highly recommend it.

GV: These are all amazing recommendations. Thank you. I'll give them a watch. I have one last question for you to wrap things up: What is one thing you would like people to take away from this interview or to know for awareness purposes?

JA: I always tell people that they should discern. I'm just convinced that people are called to take on these big issues whether it's prolife issues or poverty or human trafficking or whatever it may be. I always encourage, especially young people, to pray and to ask the Lord what difference you can make and what He's calling you to do. There's that very cliché saying: 'Nobody can do everything but everyone can do something.' Ask the Lord what you can do. It doesn't necessarily have to be something like moving to the other side of the planet, although it might be. But it could also be something in your local community. I just always encourage people to pray and to ask how they can use their own gifts to serve the Lord.

GV: I 100% agree. I think there are a lot of ways we can help in our local communities if we just ask questions or reach out to local charities. I guess watching documentaries can also be a good start.

JA: Yeah it is, it is. I mean, it was watching documentaries that got me into this. Documentaries can be very powerful.

GV: They really are. Thank you so much for your time. It really means a lot.

JA: Yeah, sure thing. Thank you for doing what you're doing. God bless you.

GV: Thank you.

I am grateful for Dr. Joan's time spent with me discussing the complexity of human trafficking. She is a phenomenal example of courage, bravery, and sympathy in a somewhat apathetic world. Not all of us may be called to complete missionary work in faraway countries, but at the very least, I believe we can all spread awareness on issues such as this one.

Various ways in which one could help victims of human trafficking include volunteering at local charities, donating money to trusted organizations, or informing oneself on the topic of modern-day slavery. How could you participate in the fight against human trafficking?

Resources and Relevant Information

- Documentaries –
 - *Born into Brothels*: Children of the Red Light District in Calcutta.
 - *Nefarious*: Modern human trafficking, specifically sex slavery.
 - *Girl Rising*: Women overcoming obstacles to receive an education.
 - *Not my Life*: Depicts the various types of modern human trafficking.
- Anti-Trafficking Organizations –
 - Destiny Rescue: rescuing children from trafficking and exploitation.
<https://www.destinyrescue.org/>
 - Agape International Missions: rescuing and empowering survivors of human trafficking. <https://aimfree.org/>
- Grace Williams Podcast –
 - <https://open.spotify.com/episode/54YXyHOLfFKUcuuZRwtFaZ?si=d31a546f2e54498c>
- Report Trafficking –



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