

ACCOMPANIMENT AND WELCOME:

The Jesuit Refugee Service and its Pastoral Role

Precis: Ignatian spirituality shapes the work with refugees into a pastoral work, the author explains. The spirituality, first of all, forms companions: being with rather than doing for. It keeps members available and ready for change. It asks the team to discern. Its first act with refugees is listening. It expects the Spirit to be moving in each and in all. More: ignatian spirituality demands that Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) help all, not only Christians, and even those who are illegal. These paragraphs were written by the author for publication in a JRS bulletin. They are reprinted here as demonstrating ignatian spirituality doing justice, to the hurt and the oppressed, in extreme circumstances. Some more technical paragraphs were omitted, as indicated in the text.

Being a Refugee Once you come to know the suffering of refugees, a pastoral approach makes sense. Many refugees are in shock. Many carry a deep sense of loss and grief. Many are humiliated, afraid, anxious, depressed or disoriented. Many feel wronged. They have suffered atrocities—or committed them. Their tension is great. They are people on the alert, sceptical, often suspicious. Family structure is often destroyed. Fathers may still be at war or were killed somewhere. Refugee settlements are health traps. In them there is often over-dependency, corruption, injustice, and deceit. Among those suffering loneliness, abandonment, and

life in cramped living conditions, promiscuity is likely. Morale and morality are easily lost or abandoned.

Yet one still finds great determination to keep families together. Always the longing for integrity. There is heroic courage and readiness to forgive. One act of forgiveness can redeem and save a settlement of twenty thousand people. We have found many reasons to accompany such people— and to delight in doing so. Knowing their suffering, a pastoral approach makes sense.

Announcing a JRS Vision

Pastoral service is at the heart of the JRS mission. So it is surprising that during its eighteen-year life little has been written about its pastoral methodology. A 'Pastoral Vision' statement written by a small JRS group in Nairobi early in 1998 is a valuable starting point. So too are the reports and reflections of JRS field workers, for understanding JRS' own style of pastoral service. True, many aspects will seem obvious to those with field experience, but it is important to articulate our shared vision.

In a letter written on 14 November 1980, his birthday, Father Pedro Arrupe announced the formation of JRS, explaining that "the help needed is not only material: in a special way the Society is being called to render a service that is human, pedagogical and spiritual."

In his "Review of the Jesuit Refugee Service" ten years later, his successor as Jesuit Superior General, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, provided JRS with its theological rationale and at the same time issued a caution:

Because Christ chose to express his love for us by walking the road into exile and, later in his life, making the journey to Jerusalem to suffer torture and death (Luke 9:51-19:28), our service and presence in the midst of refugees, if rooted in fellowship with Christ, can be a prophetic witness to God's love for us and make that love visible and tangible to those refugees who have not heard the Good News. This witness is the pastoral dimension of our work with refugees. Direct evangelisation is often difficult because the many tensions and conflicts surrounding life in a refugee camp can easily inhibit a free response to the Gospel.

In the field our JRS pastoral role is exercised in three ways: in services that are specifically pastoral, by our presence, and by the witness that gives a pastoral dimension to all that we do. The conditions of flight (which may have been precipitous, exhausting, and either provoked by sudden violence, or carefully planned) and the place of asylum (whether in camps, cities or detention centres) influence the way we choose to witness to the Good News among the refugees. But our accompaniment and service are always pastoral. In JRS we are guided by the mission given to us, "to accompany, serve and plead the cause of the refugees and forcibly displaced people" (General Congregation 34), by our accumulated experience.

Accompaniment

Accompaniment is an essential element of our mission and our methodology. As Father Kolvenbach remarks in his *Review of Jesuit Refugee Service, 1990*.

The Jesuit Refugee Service is a modest venture, but it does claim to bring a specific dimension to its work which is sometimes lacking elsewhere. While always ready to help refugees in their material and spiritual wants, and also in designing projects leading to a fuller and more independent life, we try to place special emphasis on *being with* and *doing with*, rather than *doing for*. We want our presence among refugees to be one of sharing with them, of *accompaniment*, of walking together along the same path. In so far as possible, we want to feel what they have felt, suffer as they have, share the same hopes and aspirations, see the world through their eyes. We ourselves would like to become one with the refugees and displaced people so that, all together, we can begin the search for a new life.

To accompany means to be a companion. We are companions of Jesus, so we seek for our own companions those with whom he prefers to be associated, the poor and the outcast. Etymologically speaking, 'companion' means 'one who shares bread'. In reality it expresses the commitment made in the Eucharist. The quality of companionship is well illustrated in Luke's account of two dejected disciples dragging their feet from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and finding a companion in the risen Jesus, though they could

not at first recognise him. He walks with those who are searching. He listens to them. He challenges their interpretation of the discouraging events. He waits, respects their freedom, and makes as if to walk on. But he is ready to accept their invitation to a meal. Finally he breaks the bread—the climax of the story—and their hearts are filled with joy and hope.

To accompany others is itself a practical and effective action. Frequently now this is the way protection is provided. Accompanying refugees is a way to 'internationalise' a situation. The presence of an international team has been known to prevent attacks on refugees. Moreover, our presence with them can be a sign. When a free person chooses to accompany faithfully those who are not free—who have no choice but to be there—this is itself a sign, a way of eliciting hope.

Our accompaniment affirms that God is present in human history, even in its most tragic episodes. We have experienced a presence. God does not abandon us. As pastoral workers we focus on our vision and are not side-tracked by political manoeuvrings and ethnic divisions, whether among the refugees or among agencies and governments who decide their fate.

I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me (Mt 2:35)

Within JRS, the welcome given to a guest is the model for our encounters with refugees. It is also the methodology that inspires our pastoral dimension and is the criterion of its authenticity. A welcome is what the refugees need; it is also the way we must treat one another; and it is a recurring theme of the Bible. The visitors for whom Abraham, as a good *bedouin*, rushed to prepare restful shade and a refreshing meal at the oaks of Mamre were revealed as the messengers of God's promise. Whether the guest arrives at the expected time or not—and the latter is more common—we must keep our lamps burning and watch faithfully and patiently (Mt 25:1-13; Lk 12:35). Normally our visitor arrives in the middle of the night and we must go 'importunately' to seek food from our neighbour (Mt 15:23; Lk 11:5). Always the quality of our welcome to the stranger—as a messenger from

God—is the key criterion for authentic JRS pastoral accompaniment and service.

What about us?

Many of us live lives that are (in most respects!) regular. We are used to planning what we will do during the day or during the week. This is not the case working with refugees, who constantly bring up urgent new problems. We are called to live ready for the unexpected event and the unexpected guest. Often we live simultaneously in more than one culture, that of the host country and that of the refugees, for a start. We may be exposed to shocking events without warning. We are pulled in many directions, experiencing new surprises every day. This introduces a new kind of turbulence into our imaginative life. Our spiritual life and our prayer are disturbed and need to adapt. To persevere in refugee work with integrity, a JRS worker needs a strong life of the Spirit. Then we find that the Good News takes on new meanings and may lose old ones. We may need to create time regularly to speak with God about the reality around us. Discovering a 'God of Surprises' may be for us a new experience. But many scriptural sources help us to appreciate our experience of finding God in the unexpected visitor. Hospitality is a key feature in developing a JRS team. It helps to define our way of living and working together, accompanying one another and serving.

And certainly we need one another. There is a high risk of loneliness and isolation in refugee work. A centrifugal force pulls at anyone who works with marginalised people, creating a sense of being at the outer edge of the circle, marginalised ourselves. Accompanying refugees together should work to strengthen our companionship.

A Discerning Team

In the long term, even a strong but individualistic spiritual life is not enough. JRS workers rarely act alone. They need to share what is happening to the refugees and to themselves. Within our JRS structure there is a constant reference to regional, country and project directors, who are all meant to exercise pastoral care among their team members—and in turn receive care. We aim for solidarity and frequent communication among members of project teams and within country programs. JRS work requires a cycle of discernment that leads to

planning, evaluating and reporting, in the light of our common mission. By reflecting together on our experiences, we have the chance to discern again and add fresh input to our decisions. Reflection and self-criticism help to prevent us being overwhelmed by the great needs we face. It may also save us from favouritism or 'taking sides'. By serving all, we become agents of reconciliation. But living such ideals requires the co-operation and fidelity of all.

Discernment is a key element in Ignatian spirituality and also in JRS methodology. This means sifting the reality around us using all of our methods of learning and understanding—our social and political analysis, what we have heard from the people, what we judge after prayer, what we realise is rugging at our hearts. All of this—shared, discussed and reviewed after prayer—can help us know •what the Spirit is asking of us. JRS workers are all invited to share the search for faith. If we value one another, we will listen to each other. And valuing one another means caring for one another. This does not always happen spontaneously in teams drawn from diverse cultures, ages and formation patterns. Yet if we want it we will work for it.

Free from Dependency

How can we accompany the refugees in a way that helps them to stand on their own two feet? 'Refugees are kneeling people', Gildo Dominici used to say when he was chaplain at the Vietnamese refugee camp of Galang Island in Indonesia. In the camp they are brought to experience many needs because of their dependent circumstances. They have lost their former role—whatever it was—of housewife, farmer, teacher, bank manager. They have no new role except to wait on others' decisions.

The challenge for the pastoral worker is to establish a relationship of mutuality with those we serve. We aim for a relationship that helps displaced people stand free of dependency, especially when an individual has urgent needs. Certainly we can feel effective if we are 'loved' by the people. But let us not be deceived. We must not be loved only for the money or goods we bring.

Finding Hope or Bringing Hope Do we bring hope, or do we find it there? The richness of human spirit that we discover among refugees, including a vibrant hope, is always a surprise. Obviously there is sadness in the exile's song. "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept, remembering Sion." (Ps. 136). The longing is tangible, a longing to see the 'Holy City'. While there may be no rational grounds for believing that what a refugee longs for will actually come about, we may also find hope in the other's hope. For hope is not optimism. Optimism expects that things will get better. Hope is a virtue grounded in suffering. It is a grace that gives strength. Hope is a promise that takes root in the heart and is a guide to an unknown future. "Those who sow in tears will sing when they reap" (Ps. 125) The challenge for the pastoral worker is to search for and find the seeds of hope, to allow them to grow, to fan the feeble spark into a flame. Hope is what enables us to live fully in the present moment. Our role is to help change a refugee camp from something to survive, to a time and place for growth.

Refugees have a message that our world needs to hear. JRS has a mission to help the world learn from the experience of forcibly displaced people. Teilhard de Chardin said: "I think that the world will not be converted to the heavenly hope of Christianity if first Christianity does not convert itself to the hope of the world." We members of a world-wide community are privileged to make that first step of conversion, through listening to the stories and hopes of the survivors of human conflict.

Conversion

Francois Ponchaud of the Missions Etrangeres de Paris, author of *Cambodge l'annee zero*, used to tell us that the Khmer Rouge lived out their corrupted or 'popular' animist conviction that fate rules human lives, and that conversion or change of heart is impossible. They destroyed people in order to bring about social change, believing that people could not change or be changed. The genocide in Rwanda shows us that this mistake is not confined to a single instance, nor to poor formation in one religious tradition. If we do not permit conversion, or allow for forgiveness, reconciliation is avoided and suffering

prolonged. By contrast, the Gospel highlights a victim who is innocent but wrongly accused—and who has overcome violence. We are invited to identify with that Victim, and to invite others to do so.

A Time for Every Season

For the one waiting in exile or in a refugee camp there is always time. For many it appears to be lost time, wasted time. Our presence can help a person to give time its meaning. Growth comes through taking the time needed for each part of our life, for mourning, for crying, for feeling anger, as well as for joy. "There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven'. (Eccl. 3:1-8)

Horizons for Hope

In order to survive a difficult situation, a refugee needs to see light at the end of the tunnel. One must have a contact with the outside, someone who cares, some sense that our confined situation is not the whole world, or some project to complete, an identification with a greater purpose. The risk in a refugee camp is that armed struggle will provide that sense of purpose. Refugee camps are classic recruiting grounds for rebel movements. Some movements deliberately maintain an environment of despair so that anger is sustained, to create a desperate will to fight and take risks.

For Christians, the mystery of Christ offers a larger picture, a meaningful story of suffering, sacrifice and hope within which to situate one's life, and a Person with whom to identify. This, be absolutely sure, is not to help us escape reality, but rather to enable us to engage in it more profoundly, in service of others.

Listen, Listen, Listen

Surely the only way to learn about the hope of a refugee is to listen to her. Our biggest temptation on seeing the distress of the refugees in Karagwe or Fungnido Camp, or in a city like Johannesburg or Nairobi, is to begin projects, to give material things, to decide *en masse* what the refugees need. They often arrive in exile without shoes, with only one torn shirt, hungry, without a clear plan. But they did not undergo this experience in order to get a shirt or shoes. Their human experience calls for respect. They are traumatised by violence, lonely,

rejected, exhausted in body certainly, but also exhausted by losing their place in a stable society—and sometimes feeling guilty about what they did in order to survive. They want to be understood, to be heard. Their frequent question is, 'Why is God doing this to me?' They have a right to ask this question. But it cannot be asked unless someone listens. This is our primary role, to listen to the questions, to the longing and to the fundamental human need of the refugees.

Information and Communication

Often we and other voluntary workers are the first and only people whom a refugee can trust after the trauma of flight. They left in fear and live in shock. We have a responsibility not only to listen but also to speak, and to facilitate communication. Refugees need to be informed and to learn the truth. Refugees are so often excluded from decisions concerning their lives. Wherever possible, JRS includes the refugees in our own planning and decision making. Our communication must be transparent.

One of the greatest sufferings of displaced people is losing contact with their dear ones. Great ingenuity is employed in passing messages and in finding out what is happening at home and among loved ones. We do everything possible to open lines of communication and enable refugees to be well informed. Many times this service is reciprocated. They, in return, keep us much better informed.

Across Borders

JRS is one of the few agencies that will place itself on both sides of a refugee border. This was the case regarding Vietnam, Cambodia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Rwanda—and now Burundi, Sudan and Angola. When a conflict continues, it is immensely difficult, even for us in JRS, to maintain open communication across borders. Imagine how difficult it is for the refugees. The border in question may be mined or patrolled. And there may be political obstacles. But there are also sure to be obstacles of the mind: ideological differences, racist prejudices or sheer mis-information. Cross-border communication is one of the most important services we can offer, but it requires a high level of self-awareness, self-criticism and capacity for analysis. We are often too little aware of our own ideological interpretations and prejudices. It is

natural for us, after listening all day to the refugees' stories, to take on their interpretation of events. *[In the following paragraph, the author addresses issues about listening to refugees' political opinions, and being careful and tactful in responding to them.]*

Forgiveness and Healing Today many people talk about reconciliation—which is not a developed art or ministry but a pioneer field. Possibly the most effective reconciling actions are the unselfconscious ones. Formation for peace can be integrated into our normal services. An agent of reconciliation must be close to the people, but may not take sides. With a Christian group, we can offer opportunities and conditions for a change of heart within a liturgical context. But even outside occasions of worship, depending on the culture, the community may be helped through theatre and dance, songs and choirs, counselling, and formation of the teachers and other leaders. Reconciliation with one's own past involves remembering what happened, healing the memory and preparing for the future. *[In the following paragraphs, the author makes some points on the importance and difficulty of retaining the refugees' cultures and of making serious efforts to continue their education.]*

Accompanying our Colleagues Since JRS began, we have attended to the pastoral needs of our colleagues from other agencies. Generally JRS teams include people who are more senior and more experienced than typical members of voluntary agencies. Care for our fellow refugee workers, a valued service, is mostly offered through simple friendship, and also by joining as equals in the forums for exchange and solidarity. But at times we also offer counselling, and participation in regular liturgies. Many workers, through their privileged encounters with the refugees, or faced with extreme situations of suffering, are touched and start to question their own lives. They, too, deserve to be accompanied.

Pastoral Welcome' Policies and Practices In providing pastoral support for refugees, certain classic principles apply. Basic to these is the refugees' fundamental right to freedom of worship. Second, the right to worship in their own language and according to their own culture. Another principle

involves respecting the duty of the local Christian community to welcome strangers who take refuge among them.

The responsibility of offering welcome, solidarity and assistance to refugees is incumbent, first of all, on the local Church. It is called to en flesh the Gospel demands by reaching out to them without distinction, when they are in need and where they are alone. This response will take different forms: personal contacts, defense of individuals and groups, denouncing injustices which are the root of the evil, lobbying for the passage of laws to guarantee effective protection, education against xenophobia, setting up volunteer groups and emergency funds, spiritual aid. (*Refugees: a Challenge to Soli-reconciliation is not charity*, Pontifical Commission for Pastoral Care of JRS has a pastoral and human obligation to basic human right to freedom of worship, whether the refugees are Muslim, Buddhist or Christian. Conversely, no religious practice may be imposed on refugees by force, nor by 'blackmail' (subtle or not) such as offering assistance exclusively to those who attend religious services.

Welcome Illegal Immigrants

Pope John Paul II emphasises the Church's responsibility to welcome refugees and migrants, even those who may be regarded as illegals: "The Church, as sacrament of unity ... of the whole human race, is the locus where immigrants whose situation is illegal are also welcomed and recognised as brothers and sisters. The various dioceses have the duty to mobilise themselves so that these persons ... may be welcomed as brothers and sisters in the Christian community" (*Migrants and their Irregular Situation*, July 1995).

Since responsibility towards the refugees falls first to the local Church, JRS offers its services in support of the local Church. Of course a local diocese may be overwhelmed by the arrival of foreigners in its territory, or may be unaware of the appropriate procedures. JRS generally works well with the local Churches.

Though a Catholic organisation, JRS is called to serve a whole refugee population, not simply the Christians nor only members of the Catholic Church. We, in turn, encourage the Catholic community within the refugee body to serve all of their fellow refugees. Some pastors who accompany their flock into exile adapt appropriately. Others need help to appreciate the totally new context and new 'rules of the game'. It is not correct, especially in settlements where all are needy, to limit material assistance to one's own worshipping community. *[The author notes that, as a registered Non-Governmental Organization, JRS coordinates efforts with United Nations, Bishops' Conferences, Cantos Internationalis, Pontifical Councils, the International Catholic Migration Commission, and other Christian Churches.]*

Shaping JRS Priorities The pastoral dimension of JRS helps shape our criteria for selecting where, among whom, and how we shall work. Pastoral reasons, for example, cause us to go beyond the Geneva Convention definition of a refugee, which might otherwise limit the range of persons JRS serves. When we speak of 'great human need', we are speaking pastorally—pointing to the needs of the whole person, spiritual and material.

Advocacy and Accompaniment If we listen to the refugees and discern what they say to us, their message can be better heard. 'Accompaniment' is itself an aspect of the kind of advocacy that JRS undertakes. We are not so much a 'voice for the voiceless', but assist those without voice to express themselves. They have a primary right to speak on their own behalf. Finding ways to facilitate their communication is a challenge to our creativity. Meanwhile, simply by being with them we give witness to their situation. We call attention to what is happening.

Conclusion Christianity embodies a striking message: that no person should be excluded, and that all are neighbours deserving a respectful welcome. Moreover, showing respect to the other person is a privileged way of showing respect to God. As St John

Chrysostom said: "It is only right that honour given to anyone should take the form most acceptable to the recipient, not to the giver.... Remember that he who said 'This is my body' and made good his words, also said 'You saw me hungry and gave me no food' and 'in so far as you did it not to one of these, you did it not to me'.... So give God the honour he asks for."

In JRS we offer our energies to confront all sources of division and to respect and care for those excluded—of whatever religion, ethnic group or social class. We work to prevent division, to care for those who journey, and to welcome those who arrive in our communities. The practical welcome we offer refugees is the test of the authenticity of our pastoral service, and indeed of our faith.