



Hospitality on the frontiers

34 years of service to refugees

Le frontiere dell'ospitalità

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Jesuit Refugee Service

In the Jesuit Refugee Service, we believe that opening one's door to the displaced is not only a Christian value, but a human one. Our understanding recognises the claim that all of us have to be welcomed, not because we are members of a specific family, race or faith community, but simply because we are human beings who deserve welcome and respect. Responding to these diverse needs, we often overlook our common need as individuals and communities to be loved and to love. Hospitality is essential to accompany refugees seeking asylum from persecution, war and natural disasters.

We see our service to refugees, as Gospel hospitality in action. By being with refugee communities, opening up ourselves to their lives, we give testimony to the approach we ask others to take. In this sense, the role of the personal encounter is crucial in overcoming stereotypes. This would prevent refugees from being seen as victims with nothing to offer their host societies, and create space where they could be seen as sharing the challenges with local populations, and offering solutions.

Even in a climate of increasing fear and discontent toward refugees, many communities throughout the world respond with understanding and compassion towards forced migrants living in their countries.

For instance, JRS France volunteers working in the Welcome project (families, religious communities, etc.) open up their homes for a limited time, giving refugees who would otherwise be homeless the opportunity to stand on their own two feet. Some Lebanese communities have agreed to use their mosques as education centres for refugee children from Syria who cannot find a place in already overcrowded public schools. This is the experience of JRS, and for this reason, it is important to foster and support the hospitality and solidarity initiatives at all levels.

Our society is more than a group of individuals or families, but is organised into national communities. We wish to create inclusive societies, where equality, justice and human dignity prevail. Therefore, we encourage governments to create conditions that promote these values, ensuring everyone has equal opportunity. National borders and governments are becoming less relevant. Events in one part of the world immediately affect others. We understand how other people live and we have opportunities to help. Many developing states bear the responsibility for disproportionate numbers of refugees, while some developed states close their borders to the suffering of the world. This is unjust and dangerous, potentially destabilising fragile states and leading to future suffering. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are forced to take dangerous journeys to Australia, Italy, the US, among others, many thousands die along the way. Thousands of migrants and refugees have lost their lives trying to reach safety.

The governments need to do their part. To this day, European leaders have still not collectively adopted measures that allow access to the continent in safe conditions. The message of the industrialised nations is clear: securing the borders takes precedence over the protection of people. And what is worse is that this policy is replicated throughout the world. Borders in themselves do not have an intrinsic value. Protecting human life is more important than protecting borders. Using violence to increase security is a contradiction in terms; real security can only be based on justice and reconciliation.

We must continue, however, asking ourselves how we can influence creatively, effectively and positively the closed and unwelcoming contexts in which we work. When host communities overcome unjust institutional boundaries through building authentic relationships, they promote positive interactions important to our common future.

This we call hospitality: a momentum that engenders mutual respect between host and stranger, pushing us to open the door to share food, space and knowledge, both in good times and in other situations that stretch us to the limit.

Education, rebuilding lives

War and conflict destroy so much: buildings, property, relationships, communities. Too many of the children forced to flee their homes are denied the right to an education, the only thing they can bring with them, that offers them hope for a new beginning.

Despite the existence of international conventions, many refugees face huge difficulties in gaining admission to their new schools due to cultural and linguistic barriers, discrimination and legal obstacles in individual states. In some of the wealthiest nations, asylum-seeking, refugee and undocumented children are denied the opportunity to attend school. Even when legislation guarantees this right, as in Italy, the reality is often very different from what is written in the laws.

Instead, education is a priority, an emergency, something that should not be suspended or postponed. One of the most tragic aspects of war in Syria is its impact on children, who constitute approximately 40 percent of the population and 50 percent of refugees in neighbouring countries. Emergencies – wars or even natural disasters – do not go away overnight; they affect people for years and whole generations miss out on an education. This is dangerous. Ignorance breeds violence, which in turn becomes a vicious circle.

Ensuring that children continue to go to school is the first step in rebuilding a sense of community. Education restores a sense of normalcy in their lives and, where there is ongoing conflict, assures them respite from the surrounding turmoil, a place they can just be kids. Another tragedy is the recruitment of child soldiers, spread throughout many parts of the world (Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Somalia, etc.). Even in these instances, education can be the answer.

Only through education can generations of refugee children have the opportunities offered to others; to build communities of peace and respect for difference. But not just that, it is an opportunity to build the leaders of tomorrow, leaders who understand the terrible effects of violence and conflict and who have found the strength to overcome them. Education and training are key ways out of true poverty, which is cultural and human, rather than economic.

Reconciliation, recreating right relationships

Reconciliation remains an urgent matter. Everyone has a part to play. Confronted by a divided and suffering world in which violence and hatred proliferate, we continue to believe in the need to build bridges and to work for reconciliation at all levels. The task may not appeal to either side in a given conflict. We may be considered naïve and idealistic. However, this is the only way that the communion we desire can become a reality.

JRS has always worked for reconciliation, usually without calling it such. The 35th General Congregation invites Jesuits to live out a mission to reconcile the divisions of borders – to do so on the edge of humanity, where the boundaries between human and inhuman, love and violence, touch. The word frontier comes from the Latin word *frons*, which means face. Reconciliation at the frontiers means restoring a human face to those who have been dehumanised by violent exclusions. Violence dehumanises both victims and perpetrators, questioning the fundamental goodness of human nature.

There is not reconciliation without justice, and we must always make sure we do not use the concept of reconciliation to legitimise bouts of injustice or violence. The advocacy work of JRS, for example, promotes the search for truth and accountability of reconciliation, or “recreating just relationships”. JRS often frequently witnesses conflict and violence. In order to break the vicious circle of hatred and pity, we need compassion, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation – the grace to forgive the unforgivable – a peace the ‘world’ cannot provide.

In industrialised nations, peaceful societies, there is much reconciliation work to be done, and it involves everyone. Host communities should address the needs of forced migrants and the issues arising from their presence. Government leaders need to take responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. JRS must accept its limitations, as individuals and as an organisation. And refugees who must reconcile themselves with their pasts and present situations if they are to build their futures.

The challenge for JRS is to incorporate reconciliation into all its work. It should begin with encountering and accompanying refugees, as well as those who have victimised them. But it doesn’t end there. We must develop in our educational curriculum and, in the classroom, an understanding of how conflicts are transformed and how reconciliation and forgiveness become part of all spheres of life – school, family, society—where our students are involved.

Reconciliation is a constant challenge, and we are fully aware of the demands it makes on our creativity and energies. It is important to keep our sights raised high and to maintain at all times an integral vision of the person and a global vision of society. It is a work that has no end.