

## 40 years of JRS - almost 20 years of JRS Belgium

### Because refugees are important, also for our Region

Dear Ignatian family,

We are commemorating 40 years of JRS: the Jesuit Refugee Service was founded on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1980, by the charismatic and prophetic General Superior and Servant of God Pedro Arrupe. The fate of the Vietnamese, who at that time fled the violence in their country in perilous boat trips on the open sea, moved him to compassion and action. That anniversary attracted worldwide attention. Even the newly-elected American and Catholic President Joe Biden has sent a message to JRS.

In 2021 we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of JRS Belgium. Its very passionate and skilled founder Eddy Jadot SJ died on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015. The Board of Directors and JRS are already engaged in planning a number of activities.

A starting Regional, I am keen to draw attention to this double anniversary. First and foremost to thank all those who were or have been directly involved with JRS. I will do this expressly and emphatically at the end of this letter. But there is more. I am not waiting for the celebration of 20 years of JRS because I want to highlight **the great significance of this work for the whole of our Region**, and to sound one of the key tones of our Ignatian melody. Indeed, JRS explicitly embodies the importance of our second Universal Priority: *'To walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice'*. But let me first try to summarise what JRS is and what its characteristics are, based on what some of my fellow brothers who are closely involved with it have told me.

#### WHAT IS JRS?

I am going to let Jan Stuyt sj, former director of JRS Europe, speak. He will focus in particular on the international perspective.



"The Jesuit Refugee Service is a work of the Jesuits in **56 countries**, a Catholic NGO in which also many non-Catholics work. For example, the team members of JRS-Bosnia are almost all Muslims. Her mission is to **'Accompany, Serve and Advocate'** - the three verbs in the JRS logo - refugees and people who have been forcibly displaced. Its staff and volunteers support internally displaced persons, refugees in camps or asylum seekers and forced migrants in cities and detention centres. JRS is active in the fields of education, emergency aid, health care, subsistence and social services. In particular, JRS works for the 'forgotten' refugees. In doing so, the JRS adheres to the social doctrine of the Church, which applies the expression 'de facto refugees' to many categories of people."

The concrete functioning of the organisation may vary from country to country according to local needs. What does the JRS do in Belgium? I now give the floor to Pieter-Paul Lembrechts sj, who is a member of the JRS team and a voluntary visitor in detention centres for the past seven years. First of all, he clarifies terms which we often confuse: "**Migrants** are people who are going to live forever in

another country. Some of them are **refugees**: they migrate because of war, dictatorship, famine. An **asylum seeker** is someone who is seeking recognition as a refugee. Economic reasons are not accepted for refugee status in our country, although this is often unfair and they end up in detention centres".

"During a process of reorganisation over the past two years, JRS Belgium has decided that from now on **it will concentrate on migrants in detention and on alternatives to detention**. France also has detention centres, but the French JRS-Welcome focuses on refugees who are in an asylum procedure and who have not yet exhausted all legal remedies. They provide shelter in communities and families. JRS Belgium has chosen to go where others do not, the 'hopeless cases': those awaiting deportation. They are visited by JRS visitors in three of the six detention centres: Merksplas, Bruges, Steenokkerzeel. Some are called 'accredited visitors': they are allowed to move within the detention centre for a whole day at a time. The 'friendly visitors', like family members, only come to a room where the detainee is taken, for one hour. The detainees are thus treated as prisoners, but with the only crime being that they are staying illegally in our country".

"If you are opposed to such detention of migrants, you should also be able to propose alternatives: such a new alternative JRS project to prevent administrative detention is 'Plan Together', which a number of other team members are working on. It concerns refugees who have not yet been detained, but who are 'at risk of detention'."

"In addition to visits by both volunteers and paid workers, there are 'advocacy officers' who **defend the rights of migrants by engaging in dialogue with the government**. The stories and reports of the visitors provide material for these 'lawyers', e.g. on the respect of fundamental rights in detention. For example, in cooperation with other organisations such as Refugee Action and Caritas, they succeeded in stopping the imprisonment of children. In addition, JRS Belgium has a communication service to raise awareness, and the association can also count on volunteers for translation work, finances, testimonials, etc."

#### WHAT DISTINGUISHES JRS FROM OTHER AID ORGANISATIONS?

Of course, JRS is not the only aid organisation that attracts refugees. How does JRS distinguish itself from others? Thomas Smolich sj, the current head of the worldwide JRS, on the occasion of the



celebration of the 40 years' Jubilee, expressed it in this way: "Not **WHAT** we're doing but **HOW** we're doing it: 'in accompaniment'." That's the JRS niche. **Accompanying refugees** characterises JRS: being with them, in the first place. In Belgium, this is reflected in visiting refugees and forced migrants in closed

centres. On the by now well-known Greek Island of Lesbos the first thing the Flemish Jesuit Tonny Cornoedus (*Picture above*) 'does' is to be there; only then does he see to what extent he can be of service. That says something about the Christian character of JRS. So it's not just any NGO with just concrete goals. Such concern for the dignity of the human being, with whom you want to be and with whom you enter into conversation, is rooted in the Gospel, even though certainly not all staff members are committed to the Church or is a Christian".

Jan Stuyt specifies: "What further characterises JRS (internationally) is an eye for education as well as for pastoral and psychological help. The latter often comes down to helping people with their



traumatic experiences. This is labour-intensive and not amateur work. With education, on the other hand, you can achieve a lot with few resources. In a refugee camp with ten thousand people, there are always teachers present. We help them to get to work. The children - as

shown in *the photo taken in Syria* - can be equipped for life, and education makes them proud because they learn new things. **Education, education, education**, that is the best way to help a country or a population to get out of its misery. In refugee camps, education gives order to the day and structure to the week. It also prevents girls from being pushed into child prostitution. Or, in Africa, from boys joining gangs or becoming child soldiers".

"What distinguishes JRS from other aid organisations is its **close relationship with local churches**. JRS often arrives somewhere at the invitation of a church, so they never start from scratch. When you open a JRS office in Croatia, the church has been active there for fifteen centuries. In contemporary terms: *There is a network waiting to be used!* And even when the crisis is over and JRS leaves, there are local partners to hand the work over to: a parish, a bishop or a Catholic school. That is a great advantage. *Photo below: Belgian bishops at JRS in Bruges*

Pieter-Paul Lembrechts, for his part, specifies: "JRS is not, of course, an organisation for the proclamation of faith, but for guiding, serving and advocating refugees. That is what JRS staff should do well in the first place. Just as we expect teachers in our Ignatian schools to be good teachers in the first place. **The lay staff are quite open to Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuit heritage**, although some do not know much about it".

That is what the undersigned has experienced when last year he was allowed to animate two days of spirituality for these so valuable people. As Pieter-Paul puts it: "In any case, I think my life has been more spiritual since I joined this NGO than when I worked in reflection centres. And the team spirit is very good right now, despite the corona crisis".



## WHAT DOES JRS MEAN TO ALL JESUITS AND EMPLOYEES IN THE ELC?

At a closer look, JRS also means a lot to all Jesuits and the many employees. Pedro Arrupe, the founder, foresaw this: *'I see this as a new modern apostolate for the entire Society, very important for now and for the future, and from which the Society will also benefit spiritually.'* JRS has indeed become an important instrument and symbol of our social apostolate for the Society. Through contact with refugees and migrants, by listening to their stories and by sharing their concerns, many Jesuits and lay people are transformed internally. What meanings and challenges do I perceive for us here?

### Historical significance

At the time when Arrupe founded JRS, there were 16 million refugees worldwide; now there are ... **80 million**. The refugee problem is a historical problem! Arrupe probably did not suspect that JRS would grow in this way and be needed for so long. The scale of the problem already shows that this must be a concern we all share.



### Moral significance

The fact that JRS Belgium focuses on the detainees highlights the meaning of our new regional project **'IntelSoc'** or 'intellectual and social apostolate', housed in our new community 'Favre' in the Maria-Theresiastraat in Leuven. From the autumn of 2021, IntelSoc will focus on the two worlds of detention and migration, which seem separate but strangely merge into the refugee issue. A cooperation between JRS Belgium and IntelSoc is obvious and can undoubtedly generate fruitful synergies between the practice of visits, advocacy, academic study and university education.

Xavier Dijon sj, professor in nature and labour law and for many years a scientific collaborator of JRS, has this year, as it were, given an IntelSoc launch with his extensive scientific publication *Les frontières du droit. Quelle justice pour les migrants?* (Lessius).

Detention is the niche of JRS Belgium. That decision has calmed things down. Not a multitude of projects, but simplification, concentration on the core task. **No growth in width, but in depth**. The previous General Adolfo Nicolás always talked about depth. This work also needs depth, intellectually and spiritually. No empty phrases. *Non multa sed multum*, the ancients said. Not much but thorough. Visiting takes us to the bottom of the problem.



At that moment you see: In Europe we are going through a deep crisis. Not a mere refugee crisis, but a crisis of hospitality. It is a **moral crisis**: European migration policy means that we do not want those people. In our country, people without legal residence are treated as prisoners, as criminals. Fortress Europe. It is, at the same time, a spiritual crisis: we need conversion

to humanity and **hospitality**. And it is also an opportunity. Refugees challenge Europe to regain its identity and return to its roots. Aren't those roots also evangelical?

## Spiritual and evangelical meaning

In 1980, Arrupe wanted to fulfil Jesus' mission to welcome strangers. Pope Francis echoed this clear message 40 years later: **'In the refugees you recognise Jesus**, who himself was a refugee in Egypt. Those who receive refugees receive Jesus and take care of Jesus. He invites us to offer a home to refugees and migrants and to welcome them'.

The fact that the first JRS verb is 'accompany' refers directly to our identity: **to be a companion**, in being companion of refugees we also become more companion of Jesus. What strikes me about Jesus is that in the first half of the Gospel he constantly tries to relieve suffering, but in the second half of the Gospel himself joins in that suffering. That is what the JRS-travellers do, in my view: Join the powerlessness of the refugee, become companions of the outcast.

JRS workers perform heavy spiritual labour: they often find themselves in the mixed feelings of **powerlessness** and yet of permanent responsibility. It is a place where a lot of spirituality is needed and can be developed. There is also a great challenge of "reconciliation". Can he or she forgive our lack of hospitality? Can we reconcile ourselves with this disturbing presence?

And yet Pieter-Paul also testifies: 'It is often claimed that our work in detention is heavy. That it leads to burnout. And indeed, we do sometimes notice that. But is the cause the contact with the detainee? After all, visiting the migrants also gives us a feeling of 'eagerness'. It is not what you would call 'pleasant', nor is it easy, but it does motivate us. That is why we have joined JRS. It is a **'ministry of consolation'** (J.W. O'Malley). It brings consolation to the prisoner, and also to ourselves. At first sight it may seem surprising, but not if you have had experience with severely ill and incurable people'.

## The meaning of volunteering

There is a lot of similarity between work in palliative care and working with refugees, also because a professional team works together with professionally managed volunteers. They are so much more than a cheap working force. In a work paper we read: "Employing volunteers is an answer to the existential question of our sympathisers to change our society and to stand up for migrants. It also answers the question of active believers and sympathisers to share the Jesuit mission and to make the new Universal Apostolic Priorities of the Society operational. **The volunteers' insights in the JRS mission is unique and complementary to that of the team, and, together, they form a JRS community.** The unremunerated work is a witness in itself. Often it is easier for the detainee to make contact with a volunteer than with an accredited visitor: they are only there for him or her and for no other reason".

## The significance of professional work

At the same time, JRS is a call for professional work, and this does not contradict the above at all. First and foremost, I am thinking of the importance of **sound legal advocacy work** and the enormous amount of work that is being done in this respect. The reports and monitoring of visitors in fact inspire the advocacy work.

JRS work is hard work. And yes, in essence there is a blessing in meeting the poor, the refugee. Nevertheless, overburdening and burnout are never far away. It is precisely for this reason that, in my opinion,



professionalism is needed in the organisation of the structure as well as in the **HR support** of teams, team members and volunteers. Attitudes such as empathy but also 'containing' - being able to allow and channel strong emotions without being overwhelmed by them - and discovering sources of resilience seem essential in this regard.

But it is no coincidence that this need also exists in many other structures of our society: in so many companies, hospitals, schools we are confronted with a **phenomenon of fatigue**. The way in which an international organisation like JRS tries to tackle this can also inspire others (and vice versa).

### **Apostolic significance: social justice and a future for young people**



JRS strongly incarnates the second priority for the apostolic body of the Society of Jesus and its collaborators for the current ten years: **'To walk with the poor**, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice.' At the same time, the third priority: 'To accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future'. How can the young people in our schools really be happy without worrying about the happiness of their far

less fortunate peers around the world? That is why the **social projects in the schools**, unfortunately under pressure in corona times, remain so important. On the other hand, there are those younger migrants themselves who are already reaping the benefits of good hospitality, such as in the **Emmaus project** which is accommodated in our community in Mechelen.

### **Political significance**

JRS celebrates three "principles": Accompany, serve, advocate. 'Accompany' and 'serve' are words with which we are more familiar in our spiritual vocabulary than to **'defend/advocate'**, although Mary is called 'advocata nostra' in the Salve Regina. 'Advocate' is not easy to translate. It is more than defending, certainly more than defending rights, more than 'pleading in favour of'. It expresses solidarity, granting the capacity to speak. In the end, the one who advocates should no longer speak on behalf of the refugee, but let him or her speak for himself or herself so that these persons (80 million people!) no longer have to undergo history but co-determine it for themselves. We are not that far yet.

In any case, 'Advocate' takes us to the political meaning of JRS. Here, 'Politics' not only refers to the political problems and barriers encountered in the refugee issue. The refugees provoke **structural reflection and action**. And that is why they question our '*polis*', our Belgian and European society, 'Fortress Europe' itself. They therefore do not only challenge us to individual commitment to concrete people. How and where do refugees invite each and every one of us, as a society, to a common and political discernment at the service of the least?



### Liturgical significance and challenge

On the last Sunday of the liturgical year we were confronted with the radical question: which group do we want to belong to? Either to those about whom the Son of Man himself says '**I was a stranger and you welcomed me**' or '**I was a stranger and you did not welcome me**'?

This spiritual perspective is in line with this year's **Advent campaign** of *Welzijnszorg*, which focuses on living in dignity, having a decent home: **the House of God** is the home of righteousness, the home of mercy, a home for everyone, a home of hope. Perhaps the four Advent Sundays could also be an invitation for our whole Region to pay particular attention to those who no longer have a home, for example, by providing a weekly testimony, a story that brings us close to the commitment of JRS. **In this way, Christmas will be the feast of the home of peace.**

### PERSONAL THANKS

Our final word must be a huge thank you. And since this would not be an empty word, but a personal tribute, I will mention names - at the risk, indeed, with the certainty that I will not mention many.



Let me first remind you of **the Jesuits from our Region who used to be active in JRS**. We have already mentioned Jan Stuyt. In his JRS years, he met his fellow Jesuit Rik De Gendt in many places: Zagreb, Hong Kong and Aix-en-Provence. Rik travelled for many years and wrote a lot in foreign magazines (Italian, Spanish, French) and in the newspaper 'De Standaard'. Rik was associated with JRS-Europe for many years, with John Dardis as director at that time.

Further back in history, Vincent Diercx de Casterlé (RAN) was in the camps on the Thai Cambodian border from 1985 to 1993, and from 1993 to 2003 he worked for JRS in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In 2004 he came to Heverlee where he died in 2008. During eighteen years Vincent worked full time for JRS! Frans Chanterie sj left Xavier College in Borgerhout (Antwerp) to work from 1992 to 2000 in Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Angola. Brother Jan Caers worked eleven years (1982 - 1993) in the AWASA camp Ethiopia. Bart Bosteels gave the best of himself as a regent from 1988 to 1990 in the

Phanat Nikhom camp for Vietnamese in Thailand. Many years later, Wouter Blesgraaf worked hard as a regent for JRS UK and JRS Belgium, and more recently also Bastiaan van Rooijen.

We would like to thank the current **board of directors** of JRS Belgium for their efforts: Alain De Neef, Arnaud Hoc, Hamida Chikhi, Philippe Marbaix sj, Leo De Weerdts sj, chairman Xavier Ortegat who will soon finish his third and final term. We also thank Garcia José Ignacio sj and the employees of JRS-Europe in the Brussels office. Arnout Mertens is International Director of Programmes and Innovation at Jesuit Refugee Service in Rome. He has many contacts with vital donors in Flanders and the Netherlands.

I would like to 'personally' thank **all the people in the current core team**.

- Baudouin Van Overstraeten - director, former lawyer and in municipal politics
- Pieter-Paul Lembrechts sj - closed centres, currently in Merksplas
- Helga Corvers - lawyer, first visitor in return homes, now team support
- Maaïke Vanderbruggen - historian, first closed centres, then return homes, now Plan Together (= alternatives) and advocacy.
- Griet Demeestere - lawyer, first closed centres, now Plan Together
- Vera Tikhomirova - of Russian origin, bookkeeping, reception



- Dennis Van Vossel - lawyer, first closed centres, now communication and fundraising
- Ruben Bruynooghe - was a lawyer, now visitor closed centres and advocacy
- Kristien Vliegen - returnees worked in Congo, Eritrea, Vietnam, Abkhazia, Malawi and Guatemala.
- Yasmina Lansman - Moroccan-Belgian, lawyer, anthropologist, closed centres
- Emmanuel Berinyuy Ngaikpu - from Cameroon, return homes and Plan Together
- Paweł Bondaruk sj - from Poland, closed centres, volunteer work, anniversary



These are the names of the **friendly visitors**: André Degand, Marie-Rose Hoornaert, Bruno Standaert, Guy Lethé, Xavier Renders, Marie-Françoise Assoignon, Christof Grootaers, Hugo Jansen, Vincent Mutebi.

There are also Eddy Denckens, Julia Zomignani Barboza, Inès Nzeyimana, Marta Gionco, Jan Croes and a large number of other volunteers for long or short periods of time and the many who used to work for JRS.

To thank you is to say that your work is not self-evident, but an sign of God's presence: **'Whatever you did for one of the least brothers of Mine, you did for Me'**.

A very last word of thanks to those who read this letter and improved it both linguistically and in terms of content: Leo De Weerd, Pieter-Paul Lembrechts, Jan Stuyt, Jacques Haers, Rita Loyens, Xavier Ortegat, Baudouin Van Overstraeten, Bart van Emmerik, Walter Ceyskens.

Marc Desmet sj

Regional

First Sunday of Advent 2020



Deposition of the Cross on the tomb of Fr. Pedro Arrupe



PETRVS ARRVPPE S. J  
XIV NOV. MCMVII - V FEB. MCMXCI  
PRAEPOSITVS GENERALIS SOCIETATIS JESV  
MCMLXV - MCMLXXXIII