

The World Mobilised: The Jesuit Response to Refugees*

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Introduction

Three core insights came together for Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ when he launched Jesuit Refugee Service 30 years ago this week. The first compelling factor was his compassion for the refugees in their suffering. He wrote to the Society on 14 November 1980 ‘...last year, struck and shocked by the plight of thousands of boat people and refugees, I felt it my duty...’. For Arrupe the refugees were ‘signs of the times’, a feature of his historic time that compelled a compassionate response. Second, having been Superior General already for 18 years, he had a strategic sense of how the Society worked and what it was capable of: its mission, structure and strengths. Third, Pedro Arrupe had confidence in the goodwill and resourcefulness of the many partners willing to share in the same mission – ‘the active collaboration of many lay people who work with us’.

Those same elements have helped to build the world wide project that is JRS today. If any of these elements is missing now, JRS would fall apart. First, JRS is inspired and instructed by the lives and experiences of the refugees – their lives inform our prayer, our discernment and planning, our way of proceeding. Second the Society, as a global body present in over 120 countries, adapting and trying to learn from each local culture, has a mission that is universal, to go by preference to frontier places, to serve a faith that does justice. Third, many friends and partners join this mission and make it possible. Many would never come to know us, and we them, if it were not for our shared solidarity on behalf of people in distress.

Part I: The Refugees

All associated with JRS will tell you: ‘the refugees are our teachers’. From them we learn much. As an organisation, the Jesuit Refugee Service was built from the bottom up. Experiences in the field and reflection on those experiences gave JRS its shape. Its vision came from its founder Pedro Arrupe, certainly, its horizons are shaped by our reading

of the Gospel, but each new program is worked out on the ground with the people we serve, fitting their needs and mobilising their resourcefulness. Structure is not the end itself but rather a means to service. JRS had to be structured so that it could be true to its mission to ‘accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees’. Yet we can own that mission because it is verified in our lived experience on the ground.

For example the experience of *acompañamiento* for JRS workers in Central America gave new resonance to the meaning of ‘being with’. When North Americans volunteered to live with communities of refugees in El Salvador, local military knew that if and when they used US supplied M16s against those communities and if any American citizens were harmed, then military aid and external political support for the dictatorship would dry up. Just by being there, by accompaniment, one could protect human rights.

Looking through the eyes of the people we serve we are given a fresh view, a quite new perspective, sometimes of joy, sometimes of shock. Forever after the world is a different place.

I met a Rwandan woman, whose husband was taken by the civil war, whose oldest son was also caught and killed by neighbours, yet she will still cook and bring food for her neighbours, whatever they have done. She goes on dreaming of a world without war. Now I can know that peace is really possible.

I met a Sudanese woman whose neighbour was dying of cholera. She took the neighbour’s child despite risks to herself, and nursed the child to life. From her I now know what compassion really is.

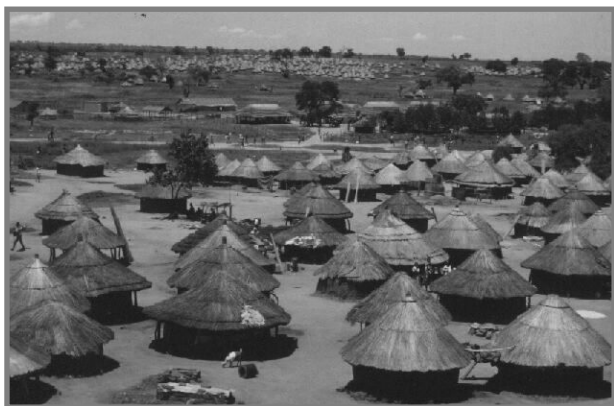
I met a Vietnamese woman who forgave, face to face, and in front of many people, the man responsible for the death of her sister and two of her children. Later she found her husband who had fled by a different route, and they started their lives together again.

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In a Thai camp I met a woman who looked after her two surviving children plus 20 orphans. Eight other children and her husband had died in Cambodia. She wanted to forgive her husband's killer and she prayed for the peace of her country.

These women give reconciliation fresh sense. Every day in every camp, every detention centre, and in urban refugee settings, JRS people hear stories like this. Our primary service is to listen to the people, and by listening, to help them find courage to go on with life. What we have seen and heard changed our lives.

Refugees showed me what human resilience can mean. Visiting newly arrived refugees, whether in the Krajina district across from the Bihac pocket in Bosnia, or at the Burma border close to Mae Hong Song in Thailand, or in the squatter settlements of Nairobi, Kampala or Pretoria, I would regularly find them most pre-occupied for their children, which means for the future.



Refugee camp, Ogujebe, Uganda

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Time and again I have met young men and women teachers, who travelled months on foot with their people through the dense African scrub or Asian jungle, yet as soon as they reached a safe place, they would construct a shelter, gather children together to learn, and inspire them with plans and hope for their future. The first task in these resilient communities was to get the school going.

Arriving once in a clearing in northern Uganda, where thousands of Sudanese were setting up camp after weeks of walking. I chanced upon a man hungry, exhausted and surrounded by children, and asked what we could bring that would help him most. 'A blackboard and some chalk', he replied. He was a teacher, concerned only that the children's education should continue.

Of course each refugee situation is different. We were with the Khmer in interminable, intractable camps, and witnessed how they somatised their grief. We accompanied the Vietnamese on the way to somewhere better, creative, eager, learning quickly. Some of us were with the Huong people, the hill-tribe Lao, still arranged in the tight discipline of their mountain, tribal loyalties and obligations. Others of us meet and accompany Sudanese: tall, quiet, dignified, valuing education like gold. Others of us gave our hearts to Rwandan people whose gentleness contrasted so painfully with the horror they had endured. Others worked with Bosnian Muslims who were shocked to discover that the JRS volunteers, even though they were Christians, could love them, and that they prayed to a God remarkably similar to their Allah.

Gabriel: A refugee story

I will tell you one refugee's story. The story has no happy outcome, indeed far from it. But it may help to communicate some of the feelings that inspire many who accompany the refugees.

Gabriel, a six-foot-six Dinka, had arrived in Thailand after a journey that for his people rivalled Marco Polo's. Travelling by foot to escape the fighting which had begun in 1983 in his home in Southern Sudan, he had crossed to Egypt and on to Iraq to study, but instead was drafted to be a porter in the Iran-Iraq war of the eighties. Escaping, he failed to get passage westwards to Europe and so, heading east towards Australia, was stopped in Singapore and diverted to Thailand.

There I found him, culturally disoriented, lonely and desperate. He visited me frequently, and with an officer from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), we searched everywhere for a country to take him. Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada, Sweden, none would even interview him. Finally he was offered three choices, a trip home to Sudan, Kenya, or Liberia. In desperation he accepted Liberia and departed in 1988.

Several times he wrote to me, his words dictated to a Scottish Salesian priest. A few years later I was in my new position in Rome. Disturbed by the suffering of the Liberian people, I went in 1991 to war-ravaged Monrovia to see what could be done. While there I also hunted for Gabriel. Visiting the Salesians, I asked if they had known him. Sure enough, they pointed me to a Scot, the one who had written Gabriel's letters. He told me how Gabriel

had died, mistaken for a Mandingo, waving his long arms and showing his refugee card, trying to explain to a drugged, over-armed Krahn follower of Charles Taylor, that he was ‘under the protection’ of the United Nations. I wept for Gabriel and the many victims of that senseless never ending war.

Perhaps there is no moral to draw from the story of Gabriel who had traversed, mostly on foot, the geography of our world of conflict and refugees: escaping the war in Sudan, caught in a Middle East one, blocked when trying asylum routes west, east, south and north, floating in the eddy of the Indochinese refugee tide, finally a target in someone else’s war. But try to imagine this. Almost all of the 145 or more countries which have signed the Refugee Convention, including my own homeland, Australia, have policies of tightening their borders. As a result some 80% of the displaced persons in the world now live in the Global South. Many, blocked forcibly on their journeys, are held in detention for years.

My Sudanese friend Gabriel was one of the ‘unheard’. Refugees’ voices are often unheard, unheeded, effectively silenced. Yet they are the gentle breeze, the still small voice of the presence of God of which we read in the story of Elijah. The one who accompanies refugees must know how to listen to the unheard, to the softly spoken. Martin Luther King said: ‘a riot is the language of the unheard.’ The unheard are everywhere.

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Listening to the refugees, learning like Elijah to know the presence of God in the whispers from the edges of society, we hear the message that another kind of world is possible. This helps us overcome the normal temptation to consider refugees as helpless, and to respond instead with solidarity.

Refugees are people whose choices have been taken. For those who do choose to take their side, there is only one way forward, which is to listen and to learn from them, and to make tools, such as education, available to them, and to empower them to seek their rights. It is not enough to accept the imposed solutions of the powerful.

Part II: Don Pedro Arrupe: how the Society works and what is its mission today

As Superior General, Pedro Arrupe guided the Society through the renewal initiated by Vatican II. He called a General Congregation (GC32) in 1975, whose most influential document was Decree 4, ‘Our Mission Today: the Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice’. The core of the text runs:

The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. This is so because the reconciliation of men (and women) among themselves, which their reconciliation with God demands, must be based on justice. In one form or another, this has always been the mission of the Society: but it gains new meaning and urgency in the light of the needs and aspirations of the men (and women) of our time, and it is in that light that we must embrace it anew. [GC32, Decree 4]

The challenge to understand this text and put it into practice is still with us. The Society renewed its commitment to this expression of its mission recently in the 35th General Congregation (GC35) with a fresh statement of ‘reconciliation with God, with one another and with all creation’. We meditate it, renew our understanding, and try to make practical decisions in the light of it. The truth of the text is proved by its martyrs ... murdered by people antagonized by those who live out a faith that does justice. JRS has many brothers and sisters who have given their lives in the course of their service. We honour them too in this anniversary.

A key to understanding Pedro Arrupe is Hiroshima: where he was in 1945 when the bomb fell. He likened the refugee crisis to the way the atomic bomb not only affected its victims, but also impacted then and now on the consciousness of the world. Rowan Williams, in his speech to America Magazine accepting the Champion prize for his efforts in ecumenism, spoke of how he prepared for a visit to Japan by reading Fr Arrupe’s writings on his experiences in 1945:

And as I read, I began to understand more and more deeply how someone formed in the Jesuit tradition that was Champion’s could see into the heart, into the depths of evil, and yet see beyond. In the face of unspeakable inhumanities, Pedro Arrupe was able to witness to the humanism, the depth of hope, which is the proper contribution of Christians to culture and politics and ecumenism.

Although Pedro Arrupe set the vision of JRS in place, it was Peter-Hans Kolvenbach who, as Superior General for over 24 years gave JRS its real place in the Society. From his experience in Lebanon, where his own office had been bombed a number of times, he understood this service. It was Fr Kovenbach who extended the call of concern for refugees to every Jesuit.

The Society's universality, our mobility, and above all our apostolic availability are the qualities rooted in our tradition which should help us to meet the challenges offered by the refugee crisis of our time.



Anxiety at UN head count, Thailand

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The third Jesuit General under whose guidance JRS is now going forward is Fr Adolfo Nicolás, who constantly returns to three themes: the universal mission of the Society, that is its call to go to the 'frontiers'; depth of the Spirit; and creativity. Each of these themes reflects the mission given to JRS already thirty years ago.

Part III: The world wide network of Collaborators who make up the JRS

In the third part I want to speak of the wide network that has been animated by Fr Pedro Arrupe's vision and initiative. Arrupe saw JRS as a 'switchboard' connecting identified needs with offers of assistance. He was sure that the Society could rely not only on the cooperation of its own members and communities, and not only on the parishes, schools and other institutions under its care, but also on the generosity of our many friends, especially religious congregations and lay movements.

Let me quote a remarkable, yet typical woman who has been working with JRS for over 20 years. Sr Denise Coghlan a Mercy Sister in Cambodia:

Pedro Arrupe called for a response of love and service to the needs of people forced to flee their homes after the cluster bombs, guns, rockets, and chemical weapons ravaged Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Much earlier he had tended the injuries of innocent sufferers from the atomic bombs dropped in Japan. From this call grew JRS.

Thirty years later, and I have been part of it for twenty three of those years, JRS is a network of friends, or indeed many networks of friends which include refugees, people who serve among refugees, academics, human rights advocates, the public who support the work from afar, and in some places government and UN officials. The hope of all is that those who flee may live in freedom and dignity.

For many of us it has been an experience of meeting God in the most unlikely places and being blessed by some of the poorest people in the world. It has been listening to incredible stories, most of them true! It has been a place where involvement at the grass roots and advocacy at the highest level has worked together unto good. It has enabled the voice of survivors to be heard and international treaties to be negotiated. To JRS I owe many wonderful friends, experiences I could not have imagined, and an admiration for the power of the human spirit to rise.

With only a tiny contribution by Jesuits, JRS makes possible the courageous, collaborative efforts of hundreds of co-workers, lay and religious, and thousands of refugee co-workers.

In addition, JRS has magnificent partners in the global federation of Caritas agencies and other non government organisations, especially the Catholic and other faith based bodies that give immense financial support, advice and encouragement to its work. The local Churches are partners on the ground. The world wide networks of Jesuit educational institutions provide a ready social base to JRS.

JRS has many friends in governments and in the international organisations, who respect the mobility, the credibility and the wisdom of a body that is on the ground among the refugees. An organisation that can reflect, analyse and propose policy that can lead to breakthroughs, or can oppose destructive policies intelligently and in an informed way.

Conclusion

I have hardly spoken about the historical development of JRS from almost random undertakings into a coherent international body with a robust yet flexible structure, a hub in Rome, ten regional centres with the autonomy to take initiatives, and a presence in over 50 countries. Its impact derives from the credibility of its presence in the field.

I have not spoken of the dramatic changes in the world of forced displacement, of the time before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, or when 'communism' was replaced with 'terrorism' as the enemy in the mind of the West. In these thirty years the population of the world has risen from 4.4 billion in 1980 to almost 7 billion in 2010. Today there are fewer places for refugees to go.

Returning now to a new assignment in Asia Pacific where I accompanied refugees in the 1980s I find new categories of forcibly displaced persons. Displacement in Asia Pacific today is caused by conflicts, poverty, inequality, poor governance, and by disasters for which often the preparations have been totally inadequate. Refugees and other migrants often use the same routes, use the same 'agents' or smugglers, leave behind the same oppressive human rights situations.

The term IDP – internally displaced persons – was only invented in the 1980s and came into use in the 1990s as more and more victims of conflict were unable to leave their countries. Undocumented workers, stranded migrants, trafficked persons, especially women and children, have all increased. Thailand alone holds over 3 million stateless persons.

Victims of natural disasters are many, such as the 7 million still homeless following the recent Pakistan floods. Those affected by earthquakes, cyclones and tsunamis grow in number, often because development is uncontrolled, especially in the coastal estuarial cities of Asia.

These are new challenges for the mission of JRS, since it is not necessarily restricted to a tight mandate like a UN agency, but rather its mandate arises out of its compassion for the victims of disaster. JRS, since its beginning designed as an integral part of the life of the Society, derives its identity from the inspiration of lived experience with refugees and the priorities set out in its

Constitutions:

- Who are the most forgotten, unheard, not accompanied?
- Who are not served by others?
- Who can we serve best with the means available to us?

JRS integrates a spiritual calling with the vocation to serve the human family. As religious we live poorly so that all who meet us will know that God is our treasure, and those who are in destitution or who fear for their lives will find a friend in us.

Our Church today is in crisis wherever it fails to hear and understand the hunger of people for meaning. Pope Benedict XVI called the Society of Jesus to reach out to this hunger, to go to those 'frontier' places where the Church finds it difficult to go or cannot go. By definition, refugees are there at the 'frontiers'. This mission offers many opportunities.

When offering this challenge and invitation, Benedict spoke about JRS in his message to General Congregation 35:

Taking up one of the latest intuitions of Father Arrupe, your Society continues to engage in a meritorious way in the service of the refugees, who are often the poorest among the poor and need not only material help but also the deeper spiritual, human and psychological proximity especially proper to your service.

The JRS story is about the lives and hopes of people whom we know personally. JRS opens a door of insight, beyond transitory and shocking images, into the inspiring efforts of people to defend their rights, protect their families and give their children a future. Fr. Arrupe was a prophet. His vision for JRS has not only given great service to people in need, it continues to bring wisdom and blessing to the Society and to all those who, through it, meet the displaced, dispossessed and 'unheard' people of our world.

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