

Parish Reflection on Our Christian Duty to Welcome the Refugee

Refugees can expect one of four fates. They can return or be forcibly returned to their own countries. They can be resettled in another country. They can be assimilated into the society of the nation where they first arrive. Or they can arrive in camps, awaiting a better future. The choice of destiny is rarely their own (Andrew Hamilton SJ, A History of JRS Asia Pacific 1979-1989).

Victims of conflict: Who is a “refugee”? Who is an “internally displaced person”?

Scripture points to the fact that the Holy Family started out as victims of conflict

In Luke’s Gospel, Joseph, Mary and Jesus are forced to leave all they have behind in Israel and to flee into Egypt:

“An angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child and kill him. So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, left that night for Egypt...Herod was furious that he had been fooled by the wise men, and in Bethlehem and its surrounding district he had all the male children killed who were two years old or less (Luke 2:13-14, 16).”

After Herod had died, Joseph returned with his family to Israel. However, “when Joseph learnt that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as ruler of Judaea he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the region of Galilee. There he settled in a town called Nazareth (Luke 2:22).”

The Holy Family as “refugees”

The Holy Family experienced two situations that have tragically occurred over and over again throughout history. The first is the real event of a family escaping persecution (not criminal prosecution) by their own State which is targeting them, or a class of persons to which they belong to, for a specific reason. This family is forced to flee without warning to a foreign third country and in fear that they (or a member of their family unit) will suffer serious harm at the hands of that State, leaving everything behind and living in fear of what will happen to them in the future. The Holy Family would today meet the definition of a refugee under the 1951 United Nations Refugees Convention, which has been adopted as law by more than one hundred nations.



The Holy Family as “internally displaced persons”

The second event, which has also painfully occurred throughout history, is the return of a family from a country foreign to their own, only to find that returning to their own region within their country is dangerous or that they return to devastation and ruins. This forces the family to move to another region within their own country that is unfamiliar to them and which might be unwelcoming and suspicious to them or hostile to their moving to this region for various internal reasons. The Holy Family would today fall within the category of persons known as internally displaced persons. These persons however are not refugees by definition because they are displaced within their own country and have not left their country of origin.

Scripture reminds us that hospitality and love to the stranger, including the refugee, is our Christian duty.

Matthew 25: 35-36 '...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...'

Luke 4: 18-19 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and ... to let the oppressed go free...Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'

Luke 10: 29, 'But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" ... Jesus replied ..., "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Church documents also remind us of our responsibility in reaching out to the refugee in hospitality and love

'...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 (Pontifical Commission for Pastoral Care of Migrants, Refugees, a Challenge to Solidarity, Rome, 1992)'.

Reflection

- What is our understanding of a refugee? What is our understanding of an internally displaced person? What is our understanding of a victim of war and conflict?
- How is our understanding of a refugee, a displaced person or a victim of war and conflict influenced by media and public perception? How good are we in critiquing fact from opinion?
- Have we tried to approach a refugee and ask them if they would be willing to share their story with us? Do we actively listen to their story?
- Do we foster a community of "welcome" to refugees? Are we able to come to terms with our cultural differences to foster a community of solidarity?

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