

Parish Reflection on Our Christian Duty to Welcome the Refugee Claimant (Asylum Seeker)

Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach SJ, Father General to the Jesuits, provided this challenge to us when working with, and living alongside, refugees. This challenge in working alongside the refugee is equally important to our meeting with the refugee claimant or asylum seeker, as is the common term used:

"You accompany the refugees. You seek to be present, to listen, to help both the refugees and the world to find meaning in their suffering. You seek to become the companions of the refugees, friends in the Lord. You serve those who are forcibly displaced. You advocate their cause in an uncaring world. This is the most difficult part of your apostolate. A work of faith is a work of justice. (Speech given to the Jesuit Refugee Service Regional Directors, Rome, 23 June 1997)"

Offering hope to a hopeless situation

Refugee claimants are those groups of people that have fled their own country of persecution but have entered a country like Australia and are not yet recognized as a refugee. Therefore, they are neither migrant nor refugee. They are a group of persons that live in "limbo", fleeing their own country but not yet recognized in their country of refuge. They have had taken from them their identity because they know they cannot return to their country but must struggle to obtain a new identity in their country of refuge.

They leave their relatives and friends behind as well as all their possessions and property. However, when they come to a country like Australia to seek refuge they are given limited legal rights and have access to limited government services. They will face the prospect of suspicion and, at times, ridicule that their story does not seem believable. They have, in some instances, not been able to bring over family members and as such suffer in agony in not knowing what will happen to loved ones left behind.

For refugee claimants, offering them understanding and to accompany them through their ordeal is as great a gift as any can offer. To be there for them when, seemingly, the whole world has shut them out, provides hope to a hopeless situation:



"While there may be no rational grounds for believing that what a refugee longs for will actually come about, we also find hope ... The challenge for the pastoral worker is to search for and find the seeds of hope and to allow them to grow, to fan the feeble spark into flame. Hope is what enables us to live fully in the present moment. Our role is to help change [a situation] from something just to survive into a time and place for growth. (Everybody's Challenge: Essential Documents of Jesuit Refugee Service 1980-2000, Jesuit Refugee Service, Italy, October 2000, p.86) **In Scripture, solace and refuge is given to those seeking it, even among enemies. Scripture passage also reminds us that we are called to uphold the dignity of those who have had it taken away from them**

"'One of these days', David thought, 'I shall perish at the hand of Saul. The best thing that I can do is to get away into the country of the Philistines; then Saul will give up tracking me through the length and breadth of Israel ... So David set off and went over ... to Achish son of Maach, king of Gath.'" (1 Samuel 27:1-2)

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...’

“When you give, you should give generously from the heart; ...Let love be without any pretence...In brotherly (and sisterly) love let your feelings of deep affection for one another come to expression and regard others as more important than yourself; ...look for opportunities to be hospitable (Romans 12: 8-13)”.

The Church reflects on what it means to uphold the dignity of the refugee and refugee claimant through welcoming and accompaniment

Pope John Paul’s 1998 Lenten Statement: “An atmosphere of welcoming is increasingly necessary to confront today’s diverse forms of distancing ourselves from others. This is profoundly evidenced in the problem of millions of refugees and exiles, ... Welcoming such people remains a challenge for the Christian community which cannot ignore its obligations to respond so that everyone is enabled to find living conditions suitable to the dignity of a child of God. I exhort every Christian ... [to recognise] in this person the face of Christ and repeating, as if almost face to face: ‘I was poor, I was marginalised and you welcomed me’.

Reflection

- What is our understanding of a refugee claimant? What is our understanding of an asylum seeker? How does our perception of either differ in the usage of these words?
- How is our understanding of refugee claimant of asylum seeker influenced by media and public perception? How good are we in critiquing fact from opinion?
- Do we actively listen to the story of the refugee claimant?
- Do we foster a community of welcome to refugee claimants, no matter where they come from? Are we able to come to terms with our cultural differences to foster a community of solidarity?

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