**Ministry to refugees and displaced persons with Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)**

A few years after my arrival in Karamoja, Uganda, in 1977, I was avidly reading every inch of The Tablet, our main source of information both religious and otherwise, as in the time of Idi Amin news of any kind was a rare commodity. This time my eyes- and my heart- were caught by an article describing the newly founded JRS by the then Father General, Pedro Arrupe S.J., as a response to one of the signs of the times: the suffering of the “boat people” from Vietnam. My immediate reaction after reading was: “Too bad that I am not a Jesuit. I will not be able to join JRS!” This was 1980.

It had not taken long for the transplant from Carrollton to take root on African soil when I was called to Rome, to the communications team in the Mother House in 1987. Helen McLaughlin, who was then Superior General, understood the abrupt change from rural Africa to the fast-paced Roman scene, from a life of daily interactions with people of the village to solitude in a room with a typewriter and a desk for company. Helen suggested that I take a day each week and go out to minister to one of the many persons in need in the Holy City.

I did not need much encouragement, but it was indeed difficult to make a choice. Suffice to say that via friends and friends of friends, and three days sitting in a translation booth with an Ethiopian SJ who “happened” to be the director of JRS’ Centro Astalli in Rome, the connection was finally made with JRS and my wish of years ago became a reality.

Looking back into my ministry with JRS, spanning 35 years, it is easy for me to find the connecting thread. My parents, both of them, came to Puerto Rico by separate ways, refugees from the Civil War in Spain. They met, they married, and I was born in the island where they had settled.

In 1990, I had been back in Kenya a short time when the voice of refugees rang loud and clear. Those were the years when the continent was gripped by civil wars: Angola, Sudan, Mozambique…. Both Kenya and Uganda welcomed refugees. JRS had a regional Office in Nairobi, where I went with Mollie Ahearn, my Provincial, and with her blessing, in search of ministry. The Director made me an offer which I could not refuse, which I *did not want* to refuse: to work in Malawi in a distance learning project for secondary students from Mozambique living in camps in Malawi. With Spanish as my mother tongue, the need to function in Portuguese did not seem a terrible hurdle. Thus began my formal involvement in the work of JRS until 1993, when I left Malawi to take part in the Sabbatical program of the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, MA.

In January 1994, exactly on my birthday and during the week of the program dedicated to the exploration of transitions in ministry (I was at a loss for this), I received a call from the JRS office in Nairobi, offering me the post of Project Director in Rhino Camp. Uganda. This was more than coincidence and a true answer to my prayers in my search for a new ministry on my return to Africa. I accepted with a very joyful heart - joy that increased on learning that my companion in the project would be a newly-professed RSCJ from France!

Thus began a period of ministering to refugees and displaced persons in many places and in different capacities: Education Resource Person for Africa, spanning 17 countries, Education Consultant to the JRS Asia-Pacific region, “point person” for UNHCR, UNESCO, UNICEF et al. education meetings, to name a few. When I was called – again- to Rome in 2003 to launch the rscjinternational.org website I remained close to JRS, and was sent to Chad for needs assessments and evaluations. Collaboration in the publication of a book on 25 years of JRS education was yet another facet of my involvement during the five years of my “second Roman exile”.

When I thought that the end of my days of physical presence in the ministry of JRS had finally arrived, two unexpected gifts came my way. In 2016 I was living in Puerto Rico and was quite surprised to receive an invitation to come to Rome to meet with a group of JRS educators and university professors in order to draw up a basic curriculum for teacher training that could be adapted to refugee situations worldwide. Last year I was recommended by JRS as a panelist in the Symposium on “A Pedagogy of Peace: the theory and practice of Catholic religious women in migrant education”, which took place in Kylemore Abbey, Ireland. Research for this paper enabled me to contact RSCJ who had, or are currently ministering to migrants and refugees, to gather their reflections and experiences, research Society publications on the topic, and to conduct some interviews. The resulting paper is a source of great joy, as it enabled me to “touch”, to tap into and to celebrate the ministry of RSCJ worldwide to migrants and refugees. The presentation answers the request of the organizers to illustrate how “our charism has been embodied in our educational theory and/or practice, and how this has informed educating migrants”. The presentation, together the Dossier that contains the supporting documents bear witness to a well-kept secret: the multifaceted, well thought out, and creative ways in which RSCJ are, or have been present to “peoples on the move”, always with the heart of an educator.

*What did I learn from this experience? How did it* *form me?* First of all it placed me right where the pierced Heart of Jesus is: in persons who have had to flee and leave behind what they knew and loved. Persons who needed courage to face a future that was not only uncertain but full of fear. Persons who were always at the mercy of others, be it governments, citizens or relief workers. Persons who could live in the hope that they could pass on to their children the possibility of not repeating their mistakes, of a future that could be different.

I wrote many poems during my years of service, because what I lived touched me at the center of my heart. Sometimes I asked questions with the refugees. At times we wept together. Or caught a glimmer of hope. My prayer, my contemplation was deeply rooted in what I saw and heard and touched, especially as they touched my heart. All the comings and goings, all the travels and sessions were the background for a dep spiritual journey.

I contemplate daily the “*Word that indeed pitched His tent among us, in a landscape dotted with plastic, the UNHCR-blue of the newly arrived.”*

I witnesses deep faith, as during a joyful Eucharist with songs and harps: *“Yes, we can sing. We sing our songs in an alien land…. Because one day God will bring the exiles home. Just as He called His son out of Egypt so too will He bring us, His children, home”.*

I cry in aguish with the people of Rwanda after the genocide: *“How long, O Lord, how long Will the thousand hills ring again shouting life, joy, peace?*

I walk with the refugees of Rhino Camp on the way to the census: *“This year there was a census in Northern Uganda. Mary and Joseph walked once more to the assigned place to be counted, registered, given a ration card.”*

*“My country is paradise”, wrote Aisha, as she drew amid flowers, soldiers, helicopters and guns”.* How can any heart remain unmoved in front of such an innocent perspective?

A Red Cross bulletin board brings home the fact that people had to flee Rwanda in such a hurry that many children were left behind in the confusion: “*What do you tell them, Mary? That you too lost a child? Do you tell them of the anguish of a small hand letting go? Do you tell them of the searching, of the hope, from face to face”...*

Or, *“God weeps for her children, her refugee children, and will be not be comforted, because they are no more”*, on reading the news that refugees from Rwanda were pushed back into their country, to face uncertainty and death.

*“The day of her exile, the skill of her hands, the pot that she fashions are all that she has. No longer at home in Burundi, her land”* – on watching a woman, sitting near her tent, making clay pots.

A woman sits in a deserted warehouse near Kinshasa, DRC: *“Alone. Unexpected gift of a fleeting moment - Or eternal icon that is etched by war?”*

In every refugee camp, I ask: *“How many times have I watched a man, or a woman just sit, and weave golden dreams of peace and plenty, of family and home, and scan the horizon, or sit there, just sit…”*

These years drew out the best in me. I had to draw on all the skills I had, and others that I discovered as I walked the journeys of refugees so that together we could clear a path for education in the different circumstances of exile. This called for careful planning and, simultaneously, for the capacity to let go when circumstances – be it a

hostile government, rebel incursions, a fire or a flood - necessitated a not so welcome change of plans.

Being with and for refugees made me see very clearly that the gifts I had were to be put at the service of those who ached for theirs to be developed. It made me want to work with others so that these “disadvantaged persons’ could come into their own and stand tall. Involvement with JRS was a “natural” for me as an RSCJ. Not just because JRS is a faith-based organization, but because it offered me a way and a place for to minister as who I am: a religious and an educator. The mission statement of JRS tells us that that we “*accompany* people during their time of exile, *serve* the forcibly displaced, and *advocate* their cause in a world that does not heed their cry.” As members of JRS, we come to the refugees as companions, ready to give and to receive, as we work together for the education of the children, sometimes using advocacy and lobbying as tools. Forming teachers so that they could teach their own children, taking the multiplying factor most seriously in every education project. Oh the joy of installing the first Sudanese Education Officer for the Rhino Camp schools! Or the sense of achievement at withdrawal of JRS expatriate educators in favor of their African counterparts! It was a time of living in the tent of Emmanuel, made flesh in each refugee, and with John the Baptist, in preparing the way.

*Yes, this ministry* *caused tension with the community*. It was definitely “outside the box”! Members of the province asked, “Why must you go ‘outside’ to find a ministry?” …. “We have so many young sisters in formation, we need you in our works”…. “Why do you do a job that any lay person can do?” Fortunately I was asked to give a talk during one of our provincial assemblies on ´”Ministry to Refugees and the Charism of the Society”. This entailed a prayerful preparation. I took the time to find, line by line, texts of the Constitutions and of recent Chapters that framed and gave impulse to my day to day ministry. This task gave me great joy, because I was able to share with my sisters in the province not only details of what I was doing in different refuge milieux, but the reason and the strength behind my ministry and the daily living out of the words of Profession: “*I commit myself anew to our mission of manifesting the love of Christ by the service of education*."

While I served as Education Resource Person for Africa, my community and my office were located in Nairobi, Kenya. I had to make many journeys to the camps scattered throughout Africa, as well as occasional journeys to Thailand, Myanmar and Nepal. I was absent for perhaps 15-20 days each month. My community was very supportive, not only giving me enough breathing space for departure and re-entry, but

truly Interested in what was going on in the camps and with different refugee populations. Several of the younger RSCJ came to the camps in Uganda, Kenya and even Tanzania to give workshops, these young African religious sharing in turn what they had received. The tension was a healthy one. I never felt that my time away from “normal” community life was resented. It stretched all of us as we sought to make the most of the richness that this ministry brought to our community.

JRS continues to make education a priority in its presence among refugees and migrants. “Education opens a window to the future”, reads a JRS poster, words which sums up in few words the reason why so much effort, so many resources and such care are part and parcel of all JRS education projects. When we met in Rome in 2016 to draw up the teacher training project the new Education Resource Person for Africa (ERPA) was among those present. Two of us, former ERPAs were immediately named by the younger members as ‘”Ancestors”. In the midst of all the banter it was clear that the education project knew its roots and honored them.

On World Refugee Day 2003 I concluded my formal ministry as Education Resource Person for JRS in Osire Refugee Camp, Namibia.

My heart sang, and sings:

# I praise you and I thank you,

# Lord,

# God and Father

# of Jesus,

# the Christ,

# the Christ-refugee.

# for the gift of dwelling

# in the tent of Emmanuel,

# for the far roads traveled,

# and the people met,

# for the sharing, the caring

# and the wisdom gained,

# for the time of service,

# for sunflowers and rain

# and indelible faces,

# for a touch of the mystery

# of a God,

# one of ours,

# today,

# refugee.

# Lolín Menéndez RSCJ

# Santurce, Puerto Rico

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