**The “Best Practice”: to have no “Best Practices”**

Presentation to the NGO Committee on Migration

New York, October 10, 2019

I am grateful and honored by this invitation to speak with you about a very important dimension of my life.  My parents came to Puerto Rico, by separate routes, to escape the civil war in Spain. I am a member of a religious congregation who make a public vow to give ourselves to God and our sisters and brothers through the service of education.  I have lived in Africa for many years, where I worked in the front lines of several projects for refugees and migrants with Jesuit Refugee Service.  I was also sent by JRS to work with teams of several projects in Asia. These are threads that bind me to migrants and refugees, even if I at the moment I am not directly involved their service.

I am very conscious that I am not here alone today. I don ́t say this because Sheila is present, and because I responded to her invitation. I bring all these persons with me (DOSSIER), women who have shared their experiences of the ways in which they are present to peoples on the move through the service of education. I have gathered many of their reflections and first person accounts in order to prepare a presentation, “*With* the heart of an educator*:* The Society of the Sacred Heart present among migrants and refugees” that I was asked to give in Kylemore, Ireland, last year.. Sheila has asked me to share with you the fruits of this research, mentioning specifically, our “best practices”. I told her that we had no best practices….but on reflection, I have found that indeed we do have many, which come from reflection on our experiences in many fields and in many countries. I will let some of these sisters speak to you in their own words, so I will be reading some of their contributions, lest their value be lost in retelling.

A bit of background: our Congregation was born in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the wake of turmoil of political revolution, fiery anticlericalism, and painful loss of values. At its origin was a small group of women who joined forced to make their dream a reality: to restore the fabric of society in through education, particularly the education of women who at that time had very limited access to schooling, not to mention education. Early in our community history a small group of sisters crossed the Atlantic and established, among other educational endeavors, the first free school west of the Mississippi. And the movement spread to all five continents. Currently we are present in 40 countries and continue this tradition of education in a wide spectrum of activities, but always with the heart of an educator, the education that is integral to our DNA.

What has changed since the beginning, what changes today, is the mode of being educators. “To be”, for us, is “to be with”: to look, to talk, to decide, to discern, to seek what is best in *this* situation, for *this* group, for *this* person. And we try to do this in consultation, in relationship, in networks. Ours is a multifaceted response, taking concrete shape according to persons and to the circumstances where we find ourselves.  I say that our “best practice” is *not* to have “best practices”, because we want to look, to talk with, to decide and discern together what is a “best practice” for here and for now.

Perhaps it may seem that as a result, our presence would be amorphous, or fragmented, isolated. Our response comes from our identity as religious women: women of the heart, of compassion, of communion, who are committed by public vow to the service of education. I say all of this because I cannot speak of what we do apart from who we are.  We are a group of women who call each other “sister”. So, we capitalize on the resources we have and that we can share:

Our long educational tradition, and lessons learned

A network on which we can draw on, the strength of being family

A variety of gifs on which we can draw, both persons and resources.

The result is a multifaceted presence and service in the education of migrants and refugees. (I speak of “peoples on the move”, be they migrants or refugees, regardless of the motivation for their displacement, and “education” in its broadest sense-, since this is the way we serve.)

I have said that we do not have a list of “best practices” as starting point, but we do find “best practices” that result not from ideas, but from concrete experiences.

So, let us take a look at some of the facets of our response, and see what we have learned from them. I will mention just a few, I regret no to do justice to the wealth that is contained in these pages!

**Formal Education**

Education has been the traditional hallmark of our ministry as a congregation. It is what we continue to do most visibly, both in the classroom and beyond.

In the context of peoples on the move, education speaks of hope. It points to the future and offers possibilities to have a future. To provide education for children is not just a pragmatic wish of migrant parents, coming from a desire to offer their sons and daughters an opportunity for a better life than they themselves had. Education is an act of faith in the future. The establishment of a “normal” environment, where there are attainable goals and the prospect of a school-leaving certificate in sight, all speak of future.

For instance, some sisters have been involved in formal education programs in refugee camps, working hand in hand, in most cases, with Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) UNHCR, other NGOs and local education authorities. . The priority in the camps is to provide a learning environment, be it a tree or a tent, in situations where a school with walls and a roof is not even a remote possibility. Education is a sign of hope, not only for children and their teachers. It reaches out to parents, communities, and engages all in a process that - hopefully - will contribute to the return to and the rebuilding of the countries of origin.

How do our sisters engage in this process? In most instances we do not teach the children ourselves. The on-going formation of refugee educators is an essential component of each project. Our aim is to empower the teachers, by organizing workshops and training sessions that would enable them to become competent teachers and gain skills that they could take back to their countries on repatriation. Teachers often came from situations where war had disrupted the educational system, where there had been no teacher formation for the duration of civil strife. “We remember how we were taught, and we do the same”, are words that we heard very often in our programs. Once I asked a teacher what materials he used for lesson preparations. “Sister”, he said pointing to his head, “I use all that I brought with me. It is all that I could carry.” Most of the teachers were young men, very few women, so it was crucial to give them skills that could assure a future, for themselves, for their children, for their country.

Thus, those of us involved in formal education programs were very mindful of our responsibility for teacher formation. This entailed a twofold approach: visits, many visits, daily visits to the classrooms – relationships - and the provision of workshops on both methodology and content of teaching.

The importance of the **multiplying factor**has always been a trademark of our mission*,* and thusat the forefront of our planning. In Africa many of our young sisters had their own baptism of fire teaching 100 children in one small, poorly lit room with a few tables and no books. They were able to empathize with refugee teachers who worked in difficult circumstances. Several responded to the invitation to “give what they had received” when invited to the camps to conduct workshops. One of them writes: “I was well prepared to go with materials I had made in order to share with refugees, exposing them to them methods of teaching. They were educated, but needed to know the methodology of teaching used in the Ugandan schools … I am sure I gave them tools so that when they went back to their own country they could continue teaching others. This is a way passing on our educational heritage to those whom we serve, in a concrete way….”

So, teacher formation *is* a **Best Practice**! It means to set aside the personal gratification of teaching children, but enabling others to do so.

In this context, it is very important to think outside the box: indeed a **Best Practice**!

For instance, during the time of the Mozambican exodus in Malawi there were no secondary schools in the refugee camps. The camps were scattered in a long line along the border. Secondary education in Mozambique was practically nonexistent. So it was necessary to create a programs that would have a twofold aim: to reach the students in the camps and those in the home country. The MOLU program (Mozambican Open Learning Unit) came into being. During the first year a combination of classroom and distance learning was offered to the students in one camp, a pilot project. MOLU was a creative, but ambitious program. Alas, there was not enough time to develop the project fully. *Thankfully,* this was so because the peace agreement was signed and Mozambican refugees quickly returned home. **Best practice**: include steps towards repatriation early on into the project. A lesson learned by teams in Northern Uganda for repatriation to Southern Sudan, and by those in Tanzania in order to prepare Burundian teachers and students to return home with knowledge, skills – an materials generated!

Yes, primary education is a human right. Sometimes it is possible to find ways to offer secondary education, but making post-secondary education accessible to youth on the move is a major challenge. If education indeed opens a window to the future, the question is *how* to open it. A ground-breaking effort took place In Kakuma camp in Northern Kenya. A JRS team, including some of our sisters, embarked in the challenging yet rewarding program of providing tertiary education through the distance program of the University of South Africa (UNISA). One of them remembers: “There was a steep learning curve for all of us beginning the program”. In the late ‘90s it was almost a miracle that innumerable hurdles were cleared: a camp located in a remote location in the desert, precarious internet, uncertain logistics to transport the materials, deadlines be met in spite of the odds... “The men gathered mostly in the evenings as we had electricity to power the two computers and lights for the classroom, and it was generally considered unsafe for women and girls to be out at night”. But all was faced with tremendous creativity, and a window to the future was opened in a place which seemed to be the last corner in the world. News in the refugee world travels fast, and soon it became necessary to find ways of opening windows in other places. After this first step towards making tertiary education available, those of us who remember the “pioneer days” rejoice with the new on-line program that JRS is able to offer nowadays, and in the many more refugee students who can look forward to a future.

**Best practice**: think not just outside the box, but outside borders as well (and not just the geographical ones).

**Using our resources –** a **best practice** indeed**!**

We live our call as educators **in our own schools,** of course! But are they at the service of migrants and refugees, and not just of a chosen constituency? As a Congregation directly involved in the direction – both spiritual and academic – of schools throughout the globe, we welcome migrant and refugee students into the schools and offer opportunities to the larger school community to be educated about and involved in positive actions on behalf of students who come from situations of displacement.

For instance, one of the sisters from Australia writes: “The school’s work with migrants happens largely through the community engagement programs organized for our students. Since the arrival of large numbers of refugees to Australia in recent years, the main focus is on settling and integrating them into the community. We have been able to offer temporary housing on the school property to a refugee family and provide a permanent job for the mother, a single parent. We have also given a scholarship to a Muslim student to complete her education here at our school when she was no longer eligible to attend a State School. Staff and students have been able to attend demonstrations in support of refugees whose residency in Australia is threatened by our Government Policies. Signing petitions and raising funds for programs that help migrants is another aspect of the school’s outreach.”

Describing her experience, a sister from England writes: “I was the Head Teacher in our Primary School in Newcastle from 1980 – 2000. I was not there to experience the present day influx of refugees but during my time was able to admit to the school child refugees fleeing from other conflict areas. In the early 1980s we took in Lin, and a year later her brother when he was old enough. They were part of the contingent of Vietnamese ‘boat people’ who arrived unannounced on the North East Coast. It was difficult to determine Lin’s age accurately as neither she nor her parents had a word of English, or to discover whether she had ever been to school before. She was welcomed by the teacher and the children in the spirit of our school’s mission statement (and the Society’s charism), that each child is unique and loved by God and deserving of our love, care and effort to ensure that each would be able to achieve his/ her full potential. Such was the dedication of the teacher and help of the other children that by the end of her first term she was able to read and write in simple English. She was fluent by the end of the year and within a few years it became obvious that she was a bright, happy and intelligent girl with real leadership potential. She became a real asset to the school, as did her brother.

In Uganda, some students and faculty members from Kyamusansala Primary School travelled to Sango Bay Camp in order to learn first-hand about the situation of thousands of Ugandans who have been deported from Tanzania for residing there illegally and who face a harsh and uncertain future. The living conditions were an eye opener for the visitors, who returned home with questions which hopefully they will take time to reflect on and to share with their fellow students, teachers and parents. .

**Caring for the whole person**: the best **best practice**!

In Spain sisters are present in five centers, *for welcome and attention to migrants* spread across the peninsula. Some were started by us. In others, we collaborate with other congregations or organizations. mmar and adequate vocabulary. “ Rebecca Loukae) ards foregner.It is perhaps This response is perhaps our visible face among peoples on the move.

*“My friend Muhtar says that in his country, Gambia, there is a place near the border with Senegal where birds can rest during their migration. This place is called Bantabá.*

*Bantabá is also a square, an open space which,* *in every town and in every city,* serves *as a meeting point for their inhabitants.*

*After lunch, men and women, children and elders, Muslims and Christians, get together to talk about their problems, their joys, their dreams, in different languages.”*

One center has taken the name “Bantabá”. But all five centers are Bantabás, places of rest on the journey and of encounter.

There are threads common to all the centers: they seek to be

* places of welcome, a space where persons find a listening heart
* places where orientation to a new country and skills to live in it are made accessible.
* places of dialogue, where cultures meet and religions can speak with each other in a climate of respect and tolerance.
* places of practical learning, of acquiring a language, skills in tailoring, in technology, in other occupations and disciplines.

Concretely, and with the words of persons who serve in these centers, we can underline some aspects of this care of the whole person:

* Language learning and language teaching are activities carried out in all centers. For language is much more than the acquisition of correct grammar and adequate vocabulary. “Language is the key to integration, to living with others, to moving with relative ease in a new culture.
* “The needs which we meet and which we seek to address are the basic ones of housing, clothes, food. But also as important, the need for legal orientation and juridical counsel, the need to learn the language, the need for work, the need to be recognized as persons, the need to be integrated into unknown surroundings, the need to keep one’s human and religious roots…”
* Classes provide an opportunity to go out of the home and relate to others. Some women come with their babies, this adds a touch of tenderness and loving care. We rejoice to see that, women especially, become self-sufficient and can go by themselves to the doctor, to the children’s school etc.
* Migrants have recourse to a variety of offerings, other than language and math classes at the Center. This is a space where locals and migrants can get to know each other, tear down prejudices, coexist in a positive manner. The Center also provides opportunities for men and women to relate to each other in a manner that is culturally sensitive and open to the way of life of the host country.
* Without papers, very little is possible for migrants, other than the issue of a health card in some locations. So the staff provide sessions that prepare immigrants to sit for the Certificate of Citizenship, and assist them in obtaining the proof of employment and of residence which are necessary in order to regularize their situation.
* “At first, the project was aimed at immigrant women but it was expanded to include men. We offered variety of workshops: Spanish cooking, care of elderly persons, computer, domestic sciences, and, as a base, Spanish language. Currently there are workshops to assist in obtaining citizenship papers, handcrafts, social kills, English. From the beginning, we have collaborated with other organizations, especially those concerned about the feminine aspect of migration, in order to provide legal counseling to immigrants in order to get their papers and obtain health benefits.”
* What characterizes our project is its educative character and what we call pastoral accompaniment, the personal relationship that we establish with each person, the integration of all those who come as part of a large family, being at their side when they are hospitalized or need to go to a doctor … to be overtly persons of faith who are open to accompanying them in their search for faith… the follow up of each person. This accompaniment begins with the first welcome: make someone feel at home, show genuine interest for their situation, warm relationships, offer resources, invitations to be formed in workshops offered. Later on, during the course of the year, to have an intercultural and interreligious “family gathering”, or a cultural outing. We make the most of national feasts, theirs or ours, in order to exchange information, to celebrate, to dance, to pray together….”
* Our objectives: “To WELCOME, not discriminating among countries, languages, beliefs, cultures

To INTEGRATE, doing and valuing what others offer from different cultures us in order to enrich one another, simply and with humility

To GIVE ROOTS, without losing one’s own.

The association has members from 26 countries. We meet twice a month for different activities of formation (for job searching), recreations, and a small cooperative for services. Doctors, lawyers, teachers and other persons come and give talks and workshops”.

**Concern for women:** how could this not be a **best practice for us,** a committed group of women, born out of concern for the inequalities which women were suffered in the nineteenth century?

Today, the precarious and often dangerous situation of women, as well as her marginalization and exclusion, is intensified in situations of migration. Our concern for women in camps, centers or cities, calls for an understanding and compassionate woman-to-woman response. As one of our documents states, “In a world which has need of peace, love and hope, women have the capacity to give life and to protect and foster it. With tenderness, courage, inwardness and creativity, they can contribute to the building of a more human world. An indication of this lies in the inter-connectedness between initiatives for the promotion of women, and those which promote peace and the protection of the environment.” “And so, we are called to work with other women so that together we may become aware of our dignity, of our potential and our responsibility”, the document continues.

In camps for migrants and refugees, this situation of vulnerability is woven into the very structure of a space which should offer protection and shelter. Poor lighting, distance to latrines, the temptation to offer sex for food or favors, and so many other negative factors reduce women to easy prey or chattel.

This situation bears directly on the education of girls of all ages, and makes it a concern of foremost importance. In situations of displacement the girl child is most vulnerable. She bears most of the burdens of household chores and care of siblings. A special concern is how to enable girls to attend secondary school – but first, how to motivate them while in primary grades so that they will do well enough to go on. Then, once they are in secondary school, it is essential to find the right way support them so that they will complete their studies. It is difficult to find women teachers who can serve as role models! This is one of the most important challenges in refugee settings: how to accompany young women so that they acquire both skills and self-assurance, so that when they return home they may take their rightful place in society and carry their weight in the rebuilding of their countries.

In migrant and refugee settings the number of women who are trafficked today is distressing. In Spain, one sister who worked with Nigerian prostitutes who were able to break away from their slavery writes about her “small” effort, effort which we would like to multiply many times: “I welcomed the young women with all my love and transmitted to them enormous respect for their dignity as persons. I would establish with them a relationship of unconditional friendship and serious demands”,

**Best practice**: lavish care and concern on one hand, on the other, make concrete opportunities for education available.

**Nor too old: in mission for life**: A member of a community of retired sisters in Madrid writes: “We are all concerned about immigrants, at international, civil and church levels: we see this in articles, apostolic projects, various discernments…. We could never have imagined what came our way, all of us elderly, with limited mobility: what could *we* do?  Yes, we pray that the different agencies involved find and manage to do something positive and effective, and we are convinced that this prayer is a very real contribution to the efforts of so many who work with immigrants.

We were surprised when we had a visit one morning from a woman who works with the NGO “People Together” to ask these limited, elderly people to teach Spanish to a recently arrived African man. It is practically impossible to find work if you cannot make yourself understood….

Four of us were able to respond to this invitation/request, every one of us already in the decade starting with 8! Three months have passed since Gislain, from Cameroon, began to show up at 11 am, with his homework done – he is a very committed student. We take turns teaching him. The four of us really love seeing how he is progressing, and occasionally when he attempts to express what he carries in his heart we can see how lonely he feels, how much he misses his family, how he suffers because he cannot see light for the future… There are some things he does not want to talk about, for example, how he reached Melilla; he just says it is difficult.”

Some sisters who have returned to their country of origin after many years in a mission find a new engagement: teaching language to immigrants. Sisters who have returned from Egypt and speak Arabic see that theirs is a privileged position from which to serve as bridges between two cultures. One sister from Chile who had to learn Chinese now is on the other side of the desk teaching Spanish to Chinese immigrants.

“Everyone has to give back what she has received, I can’t sit back and hang on to my oil.” So, this sister volunteers in a Food Pantry, where most of those who come are women who can hardly speak English. She can help by explaining the foods offered: what they are, how to use them, how to make choices. For her, this is an opportunity to accompany these people who don’t know if they will be sent back, who live in fear of ICE….”

A **best practice** indeed, to be convinced that “I am not too old to do something concrete for migrants and refugees!

On another page **Advocacy and legal assistance** may not seem, at first glance, to be educational endeavors. Sisters across provinces have combined their gift as educators with service to refugees and immigrants through work in the legal field. Some have done this through their formal training as lawyers. This service has been carried out mostly through organizations related to the Church, which advocate for the rights of migrants and refugees and offer tools and advice in order for immigrants to secure their rights and regularize their situations. Although the work of advocacy has taken on the shape of formal legal work, in offices and courtrooms, there were instances when advocacy “happened” on the ground, as was the case when two of us lobbied, argued and pleaded with local governments and camp authorities for the right of Congolese refugees in Rwanda to education. And they got it!

In Germany, a sister who is also a lawyer served as Delegate of the Archbishop of Berlin for Refugee and Migrant Issues. She says, “For me, educational work with migrants is less a matter of physical presence than of presence of the heart; the mission entrusted to me takes place in the world of politics. Joining in public discussions on the subject of foreigners, especially refugees, is a way of contributing to the education of the press and of forming public opinion. Exerting pressure against bills that make scapegoats of migrants increases the capacity of politicians to discern a situation. By speaking to Christians, especially those call themselves Catholic but whose conversation is full of political prejudice, this is an attempt to help them grow in faith.”

In the mid-80s our congregation opened the SOFIA (Services Offered For Immigration Advocacy) Immigration Services in San Diego, California. Sofia was founded to assist Central American migrants, who were the first asylum seekers in the area. The organization offered low-cost and *pro bono* services to the immigrant community. The organization, small and flexible, could take the cases that fell between the cracks. The goals of SOFIA included combatting immigration fraud, informing the immigrant community of their rights, and providing quality representation before the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Board of Immigration Appeals.

An RSCJ who spent many years in SOFIA recalls: “Initially all the work was done by home visiting, as having someone undocumented in one’s car could mean confiscation and a fine.  Slowly I began a long process of documenting people with work authorizations.  Then these people could come to office.   Registration for ABC, A protective status for Central Americans helped to keep all safe.  Many of them obtained Legal Residency and the center gradually phased out.”

A lesson learned: do not label this or that activity as “education”….or not. **Best practice**: do what you are trained for, always with the heart of an educator! Be with, and be for!

At times, our commitment to migrants and refugees has led us to live **in their midst.**

For instance, In the United States, the plight of migrants from Central America working in the fields of Florida did not go unheeded: “Our foundation in Indiantown really began in 1973 when, struck by the phrase, “building communities in the heart of the world,” I felt a strong call to leave our institutions of formal education and to insert myself in “the world.”… By the spring of 1978 we decided we would like to go to Florida to work with the migrant farmworkers. Our reasoning: 1) they and the Native American peoples were the most disadvantaged people in the US and 2) the province wanted to have a ministry in Florida that would “complement” our school in Miami whose population was mostly children from wealthy families, some of them from the same countries as the farmworkers.”

Another community of RSCJ lived among migrants in LaBelle, Fla, from 1979 to 2004. The sisters worked closely with the Parish, visiting camps and hospitals. The scope of activities expanded. Students from Creighton University came to work with the migrants and expand their education of rural life. One sister ”quickly involved herself in the Hispanic community by visiting the jail, migrant parish families, hospitals, the Nursing Home, as wells as offering a Lenten Scripture Study”. The mission eventually closed, not because there was not a viable ministry, but because sisters were aging and no longer able to carry on the work

Also in the ‘70s, a community was established in Cologne, Germany, formed by sisters from Spain and Germany. They opened a residence for young immigrant women who were being trained for diverse employments. The sisters also welcomed children, both immigrant and German, to an after school program where they could have a meal, study and play, recounts one of the members of the community.

The RSCJ in Canada have a long tradition of welcoming refugees. One RSCJ lived for a number of years in Romero House, Toronto, where she was “house mother” to a truly international family.

A sister from Spain describes her life in a neighborhood of Barcelona: “My service to immigrants is my life of each day. I have lived in this *barrio* for more than 30 years, but it seems that I am the foreigner. It is part of the Old Town, where poverty and marginalization have accumulated. All cultures are mixed here, those with papers and the undocumented, those with work and the unemployed. They come from all corners of the world, thus the task is to form a community that is cohesive. The starting point is respect for each other, welcoming each other in who we are as persons called to a life that is full and with dignity.

I live with persons from 65 nationalities. Many of them have come here because of need or having to flee war or persecution. May have been here for years; it is the second generation that now lives in the neighborhood. Others have arrived recently. Each person comes with a heritage and a dream. What matters is to listen to each person in his/her totality in order to accompany him or her in the search. “

To be is to be for, to be among. **Best practice**!

**Collaboration and networking** are ways of being with. And another **best practice**!

Our service of education is carried outin collaboration with others**.** “Of its nature, the service of education means creating community among ourselves and with others”, states one of our documents, for we cannot dream of asking of others what we are not doing ourselves. “Collaboration is recognition of the dignity of persons and of peoples; it implies welcoming and sharing what each one is and offers. It requires attitudes of trust and mutual support, vulnerability and openness. It recognizes the need to learn from others and requires flexibility and imagination I n discovering new possibilities together.”

A recent instance of collaboration has been the l project of the International Union of Sisters in Sicily. Ten sisters of eight different congregations were sent together to find ways of serving the migrants who arrived in the island. Some years ago this would have been unheard of. Each group defended its own territory, its own project.

Perhaps the most visible instance of collaboration with other has been though the Society’s office at the UN. We have been working with you, through Sheila, since “whatever we do, we do together”, as we say.

One instance of working together towards resolution of a crisis called for input from the RSCJ in Uganda to the then Representative at the U.N.” in 2006 (I think), when the Security Council was discussing a new Resolution on the crisis in the Great Lakes Region.

The conflict in Northern Uganda with Joseph Kony and the plight of the child soldiers had in the past never been part of the Security Council's Resolution on the Great Lakes Region, and several NGOs were committed to have that change because the crisis desperately needed more international attention.  The moment for us came when Archbishop Odama from Gulu was in New York for a week to advocate with the UN Member States.  We, NGO reps, supported him throughout the week whenever we could, and on the day of the vote in the Security Council all of us sat around Odama as we awaited what the council would do.  You can imagine our happiness and gratitude when the Security Council adopted a new resolution that included northern Uganda - finally the crisis in northern Uganda had moved to a higher level of attention by the international community.  It may sound like a baby step, and in fact it is no more than a baby step, but that's how international politics work.  One step at a time, no matter how small.  It still is progress.  For me it was an experience of deep and committed presence.  I knew very well that I couldn't effect by myself what the people in Uganda needed, but I could join other NGOs in supporting the one person who, highly credible and with high visibility, came all the way from Uganda to advocate on his own people's behalf.  That was my ministry at that moment, and in doing so I was actively advocating in a totally new way for justice and peace in northern Uganda “

On another tack, a sister writes, “When we came to this *barrio* as a community we decided not to have “our” own program, but instead to be a discreet presence and to collaborate with different social and pastoral initiatives already in place. So it has been, and I can say that this knowledge of an engagement with this human and humanizing network of committed groups is a gift for which I try to be grateful and which I want to encourage”.

A sister from Spain who lived in Sweden for many years took to heart the call that we heard to “work together in order to change racist attitudes, structures and unjust laws” with regards to migrants. One of the strategies suggested is “putting the institutional power which is ours at the service of migrant peoples, especially of refugees, in order to influence public opinion, government policies and legislation

She illustrates putting these strategies into practice though the campaign of “Amnesty 2000”. The purpose of this movement, made up of churches, individuals, associations, and small parties was to seek amnesty for immigrants who were in hiding due to the gradual hardening of national policy towards foreigners. Two peaceful demonstrations took place. As a result, amnesty was granted to families with children who were minors, albeit with restrictions.

No fences: excellent **best practice**!

“The Stuart Center in Washington D.C. is a project of the Society of the Sacred Heart which aims to foster a more just society through educational initiatives, technology and leadership development in collaboration with social justice, religious and nonprofits groups whose mission is aligned with that of the Society of the Sacred Heart”, explains the present Director of the Center. ”Many of the educational initiatives of the Center have been around issues of immigration.

Our work with the immigrant community and around immigrant issues takes various forms, but regardless of the group, focus or context certain elements are consistently present in virtually all we do:

* taking an educative approach (all people are capable of learning and all people bring knowledge and expertise of some kind to the educative process).
* building bridges among individuals as well as organizations or institutions;
* fostering the multiplier effect where learners become trainers because the educative experience is not for the benefit of self alone; and
* empowerment as agents of change in the community and wider society.”

One initiative of the Stuart Center is The Border Witness Program, “another place where we have brought collaboration and education to bear on work with immigration. In this program participants –have the opportunity to explore the challenges and invitations tied to immigration issues, hear personal stories, learn about life itself on the border; and explore avenues for further action and/or collaboration.

The reflection component is absolutely critical for participants to integrate what they are seeing and hearing as well as begin to strategize how they will bring this experience to their work and contact with immigrants at home.“

“Sueños Sin Fronteras/Dreams Without Borders” is a project spearheaded by two sister, one from Mexico and one from the Unites States. They did not know one another before the Immigration Forum sponsored by our congregation in Washington D.C. in 2010. They discovered their shared interest in natural and homeopathic remedies. “We conducted workshops for three years in order to empower the personnel of the Centers, and the women are multiplying the knowledge gained, mindful of not doing what the people can do themselves.”

They implemented this project on the US-Mexico border in McAllen, Texas together with ARISE (A Resource in Serving Equity), a non-profit begun by the Mercy sisters to serve the border immigrant community through the empowerment specifically of women.

Looking at our world today **– indispensable best practice!**

Some frontiers are tangible, for they are made of razor wire. One of these is the fence that separates the Spanish towns of Ceuta and Melilla from the rest of Morocco. Last year, an sister from Spain together with sisters from two other congregations, moved by the plight of the hundreds who attempt in vain to scale the fence, began to reflect on the situation of these migrants “in these African lands where life and death, repression and freedom, dreams and failures coexist with force”.

She shares her experience in an article in our international website: “What goes on in Nador? What happens on Mount Gurugú? What is it that they are calling hell?

We approached the fence, walking along its entire length with our eyes wide open, unable to believe what we were seeing.”

The sisters took distance and reflected together on what would be their response to this situation. This community in the north of Africa has become a reality. After discernment, the three sisters live in the town of Matril, near “the fence” in the Diocese of Tangiers.

In a public statement “the United States – Canada Province of the Society of the Sacred Heart adds its voice to that of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and many other people of faith who have described the decision on the part of the United States government to rescind Temporary Protective Status for more than 200,000 Salvadorans as “heartbreaking,” “cruel” and “deeply disappointing.”

In a practical hands-on way, a workshop, “Crossing Frontiers – Connecting Humanity” has been organized by the Continental Network of Popular Education of our congregation in collaboration with other organizations, in April 2019 and another such experience will take place next year.

One sister from the United States participated in “Catholic Day of Action with Dreamers”, a prayer service and non-violent demonstration at the U.S. Senate, and was subsequently arrested.

**Letting experience teach us**

“On a personal level, how would I describe my experience living and working with the migrant community? First of all, I call it ‘my university of life’ I say this primarily in terms of a deeper understanding of social problems. Issues of injustice take on unforgettable human faces and the complexities constantly unfold. But, not only does one see the suffering or meanness embedded in particular situations, one also discovers that somewhere there is always radiant beauty. This beauty could be in the hope, communal love, courage, determination, spirit of familial sacrifices or sense of joy found in the human spirit”, writes a sister from the United States.

Not book learning: A young sister from Uganda writes after an experience in a Center in Lille, France: “And so now, with the migrants, it was no longer a matter of reading about them or watching them on the television struggling to reach their destinations. This time I entered into their reality in the kind of life they were living”.

“For us as a community, contact with the harshness of the lives of immigrants and their capacity to overcome confronts us. It makes us more human, more near, and is a ‘sacred space’ to give and receive the love of God, present in all persons.”

A Moroccan woman told the three sisters in the staff of Bantabá: “When I am with you, I feel like a person and not like an immigrant.”

A Spanish sister hastily sent a follow-up e mail to the previous one which contained her article. In it she said, “I want it to make it very clear that I have received more than I have given”.

I want to end with this very best **best practice.**

Lolín Menéndez RSCJ