



*From the Office of the President*

**John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J.**

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**Thirst for Education  
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*Fr. Fitzgibbons reflects on the collaborative efforts of Regis University, Jesuit Refugee Service and Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins to bring education to refugees.*

The trip to Kakuma Refugee Camp in northwest Kenya took nearly 48 hours. We stayed overnight in the Methodist Guest House in Nairobi and made the final 2 ½ hour flight from Nairobi to the U.N. airstrip in Kakuma the next day after visiting the Jesuit Refugee Service office, Hekima College (Jesuit theological school and center) and the Jesuit Historical Institute of Africa. After the cool, Denver-like weather of Nairobi, the heat and desert conditions of Kakuma were intense.

All of that melted away, however, upon entering the Arrupe Center for JC:HEM and the JRS compound in the middle of the Kakuma Camp. The population of the camp approaches 200,000 persons, nearly all of whom are refugees from Uganda, Somalia, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Congo, Eritrea, Rwanda and Burundi. Waiting for us were graduates from two cohorts of the diploma program. They could not have been more warm or gracious. Women and men, Muslims and Christians, married and single - all were moved that these were their days, that their graduation day was here.

In many private conversations with the students over the next three days, it became clear how profoundly grateful they are for their education. The better life that higher education brings in terms of reflection, empowerment, and honed intellectual skills; the experience of growing into leadership for the local refugee community in all of its diversity and multiple needs; the drive to make the world a more humane and just place, especially their own home countries - these are the outcomes of the Regis education we saw over and over in Kakuma Camp and in Malawi's Dzaleka Camp, where JC:HEM also has an Arrupe Center.

It is important to understand that admission to the diploma program is very competitive. In each camp there are hundreds of refugees who possess the primary and secondary school credentials to apply. Only 25 are accepted into the three-year diploma program each year. For those who do not gain admittance, four- and eight-month certificate programs are available in areas such as primary education, education for special needs and developmentally delayed persons, family counseling, and conflict resolution. Many of the certificate graduates go on to apply to the diploma program, which offers a robust core of philosophy, religious studies, English language and writing, African and world history, etc. In addition, the diploma course aims at an education or business/commerce track, so the remainder of courses during the program concentrate in one of those areas.



It is clear that the students in Kakuma and Dzaleka are thirsting for more education – certainly to improve their own lives, but with just as clear a goal to serve their local communities. Countless times I heard Father Arrupe’s mantra that has become the DNA of Jesuit education; namely, that our education is not primarily for ourselves, but for the community. There is a clarity about this purpose of education and a passion for service that is palpable in the students. They are asked to arbitrate disputes in the camps because their education has freed them from many of the biases to which human beings are often subject. They fill the gaps for education and care for the most marginalized (abused women and children, persons with developmental delays) of those relegated to refugee camps. They are wise beyond their years and are the most grateful persons I have ever encountered. Yet they are hungry for more and ask in a myriad of ways, “Is there more you can do for us? Can we earn a bachelor’s degree in order to be more effective?”

In response to this patient impatience, we all respond that it is important to stay in their region and get the cooperation of the local Catholic and public universities to help them realize their dreams of being of service to their people.