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Suzie Perry

JHE Resources Editor, Regis University / Argosy University, sperry@regis.edu

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Who Stands for the Refugees?

Suzanne M. Perry
JHE Resources Editor
Regis University
sperry@regis.edu

In a world of increasing conflict, senseless barbarism, and crimes against humanity, who stands for the refugees? Among the many providing aid, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is a stand-out for its longevity, variety of services and reach to over 35 countries globally.

JRS was first introduced in 1980 by Father Pedro Arrupe, then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, who was appalled by the circumstances of the Vietnamese boat people. He called on the Jesuits “to bring at least some relief to such a tragic situation.” The mission and functions of JRS are chronicled on their remarkable website, en.jrs.net/accompaniment, which is available in English, French, Spanish, and Italian.

The mission of the Jesuit Refugee Service is to: “accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. As a Catholic organization and a work of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), JRS is inspired by the compassion and love of Jesus for the poor and excluded.”

Springing from this theme is a comprehensive network of related links, each extensive and detailed. For example, under the heading of MultiMedia, refugee students and their parents tell their stories. The Voices tab opens a vast treasury of film clips from refugees who hail from Jordan, Lebanon, Panama, Kenya, Italy, Columbia, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Thailand, Indonesia, Uganda, Malawi, France, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Phillipines, Cambodia, Rwanda, Burundi, Ukraine, Timor Leste, Malta, South Africa, and Venezuela. The length and geographical diversity of this list demonstrates the reach of the Jesuit Refugee Service.

JRS recognizes the human dignity in refugees through its accompaniment:


"Our close and direct contact with people, our presence with them... lets us understand their real needs", said Fr Bernard Arputhasamy SJ, former JRS Asia Pacific Director.

He states, “To accompany means to be a companion. We are companions of Jesus, so we wish to be companions of those with whom he preferred to be associated, the poor and the outcast. It is practical and effective action. Not infrequently, accompaniment is a way of offering protection, and 'internationalising' a situation. The presence of an international team can sometimes prevent attacks on refugees. Moreover, presence can be a sign, that a free person chooses willingly and faithfully to accompany those who are not free, who have no choice about being there. This is itself a sign, a way of eliciting hope.”

The International Campaign to Stop Rape and Gender Violence in Conflict section of the JRS website establishes that accompaniment is of particular urgency for the women in refugee camps who often continue to find themselves marginalized, sexually abused, and without adequate healthcare. The Jesuits and volunteers serving in the camps provide hope and service to these women.

The JRS is increasingly attending to the higher education needs of refugees. A report from Rome on September 22, 2014 indicates that “For the second consecutive year, refugee students in camps in Kenya and Malawi will graduate from an online Liberal Arts Diploma program managed by Jesuit Refugee Service and Jesuit Commons: Higher Education on the Margins (JC:HEM). The Diploma in Liberal Arts – a three-year full time programme – is awarded by Regis, a Jesuit University in the US state of Colorado. The curriculum includes on-line undergraduate courses contributed by nearly 50 Jesuit Universities.” [Resource Editor’s note: the Executive Editor of this Journal, Dr. Marie Friedemann, was in on the ground floor of JC:HEM and continues to

coordinate the course offerings from Jesuit Commons. Thank you, Marie, for this significant contribution].

The Jesuit Refugee Service's website is expansive, well organized, and very current. It not only tells the stories of refugees from all over the world, but perhaps even more significantly, it reveals how the JRS touches and improves lives traumatized by war, hunger and brutality, one refugee at a time. 

Note

International Jesuit Refugee Service, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://en.jrs.net/accompaniment>.