Refugees

Travel under duress

Mark Raper

EACH NIGHT THIS YEAR OVER 250 KURDISH PEOPLE have come to eat a hot three-course supper at Centro Astalli in the centre of Rome. Many volunteers attend them at this Italian base of Jesuit Refugee Service under the historic Church of the Gesù. First come the women and children at 5.30 p.m.; the first sitting of men is at 6.30 p.m.; then the patient stragglers are usually all finished by 8.00 p.m. Children, grandmothers, adult men, toddlers and quite old refugees politely wait their turn, helping one another. One of Centro Astalli's long-term volunteers described the Kurds as the most poignant of the refugee groups that have come to this centre for homeless foreigners since it opened eighteen years ago, because among them are whole families who have turned their back on their homeland. After risking the difficult and illegal journey out of Iraq through Turkey or sometimes Greece, then across the Otranto Canal to the heel of Italy, it is clear that there is no return. They have left home for ever. All family members leave together, carrying all they own and all they now hope for. Theirs is a one-way journey.

In the USA each year, around 100,000 immigrants and refugees pass through the Immigration and Naturalization Services' (INS) detention facilities for foreigners. While their average stay may be less than a month, there are numerous clients who are imprisoned for years, sometimes shuffled from one facility to another, principally for the crime of being a foreigner in a strange land. Typically, around sixty nationalities are represented among the clients in either of the two pilot projects for pastoral and legal support recently opened by Jesuit Refugee Service in the INS centres in Los Angeles and in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The INS centres reflect similar measures in an increasing number of countries, especially the rich ones, and represent a breakdown in both immigration policy and the imagination of the host country. This is not only happening in the rich countries. In Thailand, for example, each year 40,000 persons are held for some time in five rooms of the Detained Foreigners Centre at Soi Suan Phlu in Bangkok. There, like the poor man at

the pool of Siloe, many wait for an angel to notice them, to work for their release and to help them find a way home.

In recent weeks in the Magdalena Medio region north of Bucarramanga in central Colombia, some 60,000 peasants have been made landless and driven into the towns by threats of violence reinforced by occasional killings. This happened when paramilitary security forces, sometimes working hand in hand with the army, forcibly gained control of large tracts of land for their employers. The guerrilla bands retaliated against the helpless population, in turn achieving compliance through violence. In this case too, workers of Jesuit Refugee Service accompany the displaced, helping them to know and insist on their rights as human beings and as citizens in law.

Cazombo is in the eastern part of Angola's Moxico Province, close to the border with Zambia. It is one of sixty-eight places recently re-taken by the rebel group UNITA, thus decisively breaking the peace agreement signed four years earlier in Lusaka. In recent months both sides have been preparing for war again. After twenty-five years it seems to be the only way they know. New skirmishes have sent over two hundred thousand Angolans scrambling for shelter in the bush or across the borders to Congo or Zambia. Enriched by the control and illegal sale of diamonds, rebel soldiers are re-armed, newly dressed and ready for war. Buoyed by its military success in Brazzaville, the government believes itself invincible. Lest all hope be totally dashed by this return to folly, members of JRS chose to remain with the people in Cazombo and Moxico as long as possible. Across the border in Zambia, another JRS team also helps long-term refugees to work towards the day when the peace they long for will be a reality.

Are these 'signs of our times'?

One could multiply such vignettes. They offer but a glimpse of the anguish experienced by millions of people forcibly displaced today by conflict. The purpose of this article is to describe experiences of people who travel unwillingly, driven by rejection and violence to abandon, often without warning or preparation, their lands, homes, families and future. In trying to understand their experiences, we may derive a message too, individually and collectively. And we may learn how better to read and respond to this pervasive contemporary phenomenon, this 'sign of the times'. What does it mean that

so many people are forcibly displaced today? In trying to understand and read these signs of our times, we may learn too how in truth and in faith we might respond.

On 6 August 1981 in Bangkok, Pedro Arrupe gave his last public talk to a small group of field workers of the newly established Jesuit Refugee Service. Setting up the JRS had been one of Don Pedro's last and most favoured initiatives. In Bangkok that day he described JRS as his 'swan song'. The same evening on the plane to Rome he suffered the stroke that rendered him unable to continue his duties as Superior General of the Society of Jesus. August 6, of course, is Hiroshima Day. Arrupe was in Hiroshima when the bomb fell. Shielded by a small hill from the full blast, he was close enough to begin immediately helping the victims. He spoke of that experience. The explosion at Hiroshima and the explosion of refugees can be compared, he said, not just because we accompany and serve their victims but because each experience, Arrupe claimed, has had an impact on both human history and the world's imagination.

Forced displacement today

What moved Pedro Arrupe in 1980 and 1981 is but a fraction of the size and intensity of forced displacement today. The number of refugees, that is, those persons forced to leave their countries because of war, famine, persecution and conflict, the traditional wellsprings of refugees, is today at least three times that of the early eighties. Over ninety per cent of the world's refugees come from the poorest countries and are hosted by them. But more impressive is the number of internally displaced persons, that is, those who are forced by conflict to leave their homes and fields, but who remain within the borders of their own country. Superpowers no longer intervene, as they frequently did before 1990, either to suppress conflicts in the name of 'global balance' or to internationalize them, as in Vietnam, Mozambique or Angola. In 1998 there are some twenty-five or more local conflicts raging. The new internally displaced people and refugees today principally result from these wars that are fought in the name of identity, whether religious, ethnic, territorial, linguistic or economic.

The refugee experience is bitter. It is important not to romanticize the refugees' experience, nor to idealize the experience of those who work with them. We who serve them often feel harassed, short of time and far from entertaining lofty thoughts. Ironically, however,

the most grace-filled encounters for both parties seem to occur at the most inconvenient moments. They are mediated via the most unlikely of messengers. Perhaps this point is simply a repetition of the classic message of the Bible that God somehow appears in the stranger who is welcomed, as Abraham welcomed the three guests at the Oaks of Mamre.

Not having been a refugee I do not pretend to understand the experience. Yet I may describe what I see. A refugee or forcibly displaced person has lost home, land, livelihood, possessions, the confidence in her government or, worse, the trust of her community. Often the displaced person has lost family members, her future and her security, her country. Her role and identity are in question or even unrecoverable. The overriding refugee experience is of loss. It is a painful mixture of guilt, longing, anguish and self-questioning. Guilt because she had to leave aged parents or children; or because young refugees leave the future dreamed for them by their parents or their community; or because of what was done in departing, or because there were simply no 'goodbyes'. Longing and anguish, because of all that might have been or could still be, if only events had been different.

Violence and rejection

Invariably an experience of violence marks the beginning of a refugee's journey. Violence is a relationship. Criminologists tell us that most violence occurs between people who know each other, and may have done even over a long time. We are told that the violence in Bosnia and Rwanda was often committed by neighbours, even by family members, on each other. An effort is sometimes made to retain anonymity in violence. Paramilitary attackers in Colombia often cover their faces to avoid recognition. They know their victims and their victims could know them.

While not always physically violent, the refugee experience is an experience of rejection. The refugees and displaced are often made the scapegoats for the ills of society. Though they are the victims, they are the most identifiable feature of a social disorder. It is common in Colombia for the displaced to be spoken of as a nuisance. Somehow they are blamed and held responsible for many social inconveniences.

Forced by rejection to leave their own country, refugees and immigrants are also frequently the scapegoats for problems of the

society which hosts them. Unemployment, breakdown in security, uncleanliness are all laid at their doors. There can be a truth in this, if the newcomers are many and their arrival is clandestine or unprepared for. But generally, the blame which immigrants are made to carry is out of all proportion, or is simply a ruse, a deception. The few thousand Kurds who reach Europe in a year have recently been described by the British presidency of the European Union as an 'invasion'. The comparison, when looked at closely, is simply bizarre. Since the early eighties the policies of European governments towards new arrivals have been policies of exclusion and deterrence. Governments often present an unfavourable image of immigrants. Seeing no choice but to leave their home country, increasing numbers become more desperate and seek clandestine ways to reach a safe haven. This is a problem for the host countries, but not a problem that will be resolved by distortion of the truth.

The scapegoat and the myth

Scapegoating and myth (as meaning a distorted interpretation of reality) are part of the one social system. For a myth to be perpetuated, a scapegoat is needed. Myth enables people to collaborate on the basis of a misunderstanding. When there was a problem in the ancient world they chose a victim, loaded their problems on it, and killed or drove out that victim. In this way the society could remain in peace and people be reconciled with one another. It sounds simplistic and, put like this, it is. Yet either unconsciously or very deliberately, certain differences, whether ethnic, religious or territorial, have been exploited time and again in creating conflict. The 'problem' is named and isolated or driven out, as if that will lead to lasting peace.

Seeing the many refugee-producing conflicts that have a religious character, some may be sceptical that religion can provide solid motivation for resolving conflict. But this doubt is based on a superficial reading of the real cause of the conflict. In-depth analysis reveals that the root cause of such conflicts is a struggle for power that exploits religious or ethnic identity in order to reinforce the reasons for fighting.

The miracle of peace

In Christian life and ritual, the priest or agent of the scapegoating and the victim are one and the same. Christianity unmasks the myth.

It puts us in a world where we cannot save ourselves from our real responsibilities by scapegoating. Reality must be faced. Hence Jesus does not come to bring peace (of avoiding reality through myth and scapegoat) but the sword. By identifying with the victim, the Christian appears to be disturbing peace. In reality the Christian takes a stand for a peace which acknowledges only the truth, which includes all, and indeed has a preference for standing by the weakest. Such a stand can be dangerous.

In *Centesimus annus*, Pope John Paul II gives his interpretation of the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe. He describes how he sees the role that Christians have and can take in standing for peace in a conflictual society.

> It seems that the European order resulting from the Second World War and sanctioned by the Yalta agreements could only be overturned by another war. Instead, it has been overcome by the nonviolent commitment of people who, while always refusing to yield to the force of power, succeeded time after time in finding effective ways of bearing witness to the truth. This disarmed the adversary, since violence always needs to justify itself through deceit and to appear, however falsely, to be defending a right or responding to a threat posed by others. Once again, I thank God for having sustained people's hearts amid difficult trials, and I pray that this example will prevail in other places and other circumstances. May people learn to fight for justice without violence, renouncing class struggle in their internal disputes and war in international ones.[1]

In subsequent paragraphs, he outlines further the spiritual basis for this public role of Christians.

> The events of 1989 are an example of the success of willingness to negotiate and of the Gospel spirit in the face of an adversary determined not to be bound by moral principles. These events are a warning to those who in the name of political realism wish to banish law and morality from the political arena. Undoubtedly the struggle which led to the changes of 1989 called for clarity, moderation, suffering and sacrifice. In a certain sense, it was a struggle born of prayer, and it would have been unthinkable without immense trust in God, the Lord of history, who carries the human heart in his hands. It is by uniting one's own sufferings for the sake of truth and freedom to the suffering of Christ on the cross that the human person is able to accomplish the miracle of peace and is in a position to discern the often narrow path between the cowardice

which gives in to evil and the violence which, under the illusion of fighting evil, only makes sense.[2]

Truth, memory and reconciliation

Truth is a force for peace. Rumours feed antagonisms; suspicions smoulder in the dry kindling of falsehoods. Knowledge of the facts can be a bucket of cold water on the heat of aggression; clarity creates a climate to overcome the desire for revenge. Desire for the truth must be at the heart of any quest for mutual understanding. Legal procedures are needed, but they alone do not restore justice and dignity. Here the example of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is worthy of note. This commission is not an alternative to the rule of law, but its supplement. It serves to educate the public conscience so that impunity may be banished. Similarly the 'Project to Recover the Historical Memory' in Guatemala, of which the murdered Bishop Juan Gerardi was the president, serves to help Guatemalans come to terms with thirty years of bloody conflict during which time over 50,000 people were killed or disappeared and more than a million were displaced. Coming to terms with the truth is the first step towards reconciliation.

The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano reflects eloquently on this process of recovering a society's memory, however bitter, and thus overcoming fear.

> Memory is bound by fear, and it's very difficult to break the ligatures of fear. Some have suggested the mistaken idea that to remember is dangerous, because by remembering history will repeat itself as a nightmare. Yet experience suggests that what happens is exactly the reverse. It is amnesia that makes history repeat itself, repeat itself as a nightmare. Amnesia implies impunity, and impunity encourages crime, both in personal and communal terms. One doesn't need to be a great jurist to know that if I kill my neighbour, and nothing happens, I will eventually end up killing off the whole neighbourhood, because impunity stimulates crime . . . The usurpation of memory is part of the usurpation of identity. Someone who doesn't know where they're coming from will not be able to know where they're going. Someone who doesn't know who they were will not be able to know who they are . . . Recuperating memory

> counts as an act of dignity, because a memory that has known how to survive so much crime is truly a manifestation of unceasing dignity.[3]

Looking beyond the horizon of exile

What enables a refugee to endure the fear of conflict and the loneliness of exile? Victor Frankl's book, *Man's search for meaning*, describes what he learned of human nature in a Nazi concentration camp.[4] He notes that the people most likely to survive the ordeal were those who had something to look forward to – a loved one with whom they hoped one day to be re-united or a project they hoped to accomplish.

Ray Ileto, in a book about nineteenth-century colonial Philippines, describes how the only public forum for discourse in the vernacular was the re-enactment of Christ's passion.[5] The Tagalog passion play became then a vehicle for popular expression of discontent towards the colonial rulers. The uniform and behaviour of the soldiers, the dialogue of the exchange between Jesus and Pilate, all carried references to their contemporary political experience. Moreover they were helped by identifying their own sufferings with a greater and more powerful story. Ileto compares this with the repetition in all art forms throughout south-east Asia, even to this day, of the Ramayana epic. In Suharto's Indonesia, and very likely still today, villagers stay up all night for a performance of scenes from this epic. What delights the audience is the capacity of skilled performers to mock, either by movements of the puppets, or by tone of voice, or a nuanced phrase, the political figures of the day. It is not only a recounting of the epic triumph of good over evil, but the people can also see their own lives painted on a broader canvas.

Similarly, refugees are helped to see that their life experience makes sense when they can put it in a broader context or can feel united with a greater story. They may see more clearly how their lives represent one act or one scene in the dramatic history of their people; or they may experience themselves united with other refugees, or they may receive the faith to see how their lives are a part of the history of salvation, how they are united with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Repatriation, reintegration, reconciliation

In recent years, some millions of refugees have returned home. Some went willingly as did many Mozambicans and Cambodians. Some went freely but with caution, as did the Guatemalans. Over a million Rwandans and a hundred thousand Bosnians had no choice about their rushed return to their country of origin. All, I am sure, made this journey home with trepidation if not outright fear. Reintegration into society after a time of conflict is a very human and messy process. It takes time. Burying the dead and mourning them takes time. The wounds of grief take time to heal. Discovering and coming to terms with the truth takes for ever and is sometimes never achieved. Establishing justice appears to be even more rare, especially when the economic and legal systems have been destroyed. But reconciliation cannot even be imagined before these other steps have been in great part planned and commenced, if not achieved. Unless it is imposed by force as in Bosnia, reintegration takes generations and reconciliation even longer. The steps on the path to reconciliation, specifically naming the truth and seeking justice, must be taken first.

A child expresses well the question which refugees have the right to ask: 'Why is God doing this to me?' Our best service to them is not large projects, but to listen to this question and to help them search for an answer.

> Sometimes I ask myself;
> why am I the one who can only dream to have peace,
> freedom, happiness and whose home is destroyed
> even if I didn't want it . . .
>
> Why am I the one who instead of Prince and Madonna
> must listen to the sounds of bombs and grenades
> and the one who on the street
> must take care not to be a sniper's target?
>
> Why am I the one who has to queue in the street
> for a tin and the one whose bed
> is a thin blanket on a cold floor?
>
> Why am I the one who gets always the same answer:
> 'You are not the only one, a day will come,
> when peace will reign and when people
> will be together just as they used to be'?
>
> (*Majana Burazovic, twelve years old, Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1995*)

Joy and hope

I would not be truthful to my experience if I did not mention the baffling fact that among refugees I have witnessed more joy than sorrow. Perhaps this experience gives a meaning to the monk's enigmatic saying: 'Darkness is God's light'. Shadow exists only because there is a light which casts it. Their suffering reveals a font of transparent goodness. Among those who have lost the most, one invariably finds more serenity than bitterness. In fact if I wished to frame a vision for the future of our world, I would search for it among the widows and the mothers who have lost sons and daughters in battle. These are the people who know and have the spirit, courage and imagination to dream of the world we need.

During Fr Arrupe's last talk, he stressed to his companions that 'being with' weighed much more than 'doing for'. In Central and Southern America during the conflicts of the 1980s, the practice of 'accompaniment' was consciously developed. It referred to the role of international personnel who went to live with refugee communities in exile and to assist them through training or with pastoral care. It also referred, then and now, to the role of protection which a foreign person can offer simply by being present, as for example during the civil war, and thus restraining the military from the attack which they might have made if there were no witnesses. Similarly international teams accompanied, and thus provided protection for, El Salvadorean and Guatemalan refugees, among others, during their repatriations.

To accompany means to be a companion. Someone has told me that etymologically this word means 'to share bread with' This quality of companionship is well developed in Luke's account of the dejected pair of disciples dragging their feet down from Jerusalem to Emmaus, who find a companion in the risen Jesus, although they could not at first recognize him. All the elements for companionship are found in this story: walking with those who are searching; listening with care to the story they tell; offering another interpretation of the discouraging events; waiting and respecting their freedom to walk on; accepting the invitation to share a meal; breaking the bread as the climax of the story; rushing home eager to share the discovery with others.

Welcoming the stranger: there are no borders

The biblical instructions on welcoming the stranger in exile are clear and consistently repeated. When refugees come to our countries and

communities, these instructions surely apply to us. Ironically, my own most vivid and warm experiences of being welcomed have been the reverse: refugee communities invariably offer a touching welcome. They well know the value of such a gesture.

Two stories about caring for the foreigner and welcoming the guest are put so closely together in Luke's Gospel that they must help to explain one another. They are the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of Jesus welcomed in different ways by his friends Martha and Mary. In the first story the action of the Samaritan traveller on seeing the wounded man is astounding in contrast to the previous passers-by. He is 'moved with compassion at the sight' and risks being suspected of the attack. He gives first aid and sees that the wounded man is properly cared for. The lawyer had sought a self-serving definition of 'neighbour' and Jesus gave a stunning narrative in reply. His response effectively is: 'You ask for an exclusive definition of "neighbour"; my reply is, be neighbour to anyone who is in need'. This response of Jesus is a challenge to go beyond our religious or ethnic group and to acknowledge and take seriously our responsibilities as part of the human family.

Luke's second story is about the two sisters who welcome Jesus to their house. Martha compares her activity with Mary's way of caring for the guest. Why is Mary said to have chosen the better part? Could it be that her role emphasizes the priority task of attending to and serving the guest?

Finally, Peter puts it succinctly. We are all, in fact, 'strangers in this world' (1 Peter 1:1). We are all citizens of another kingdom, and we are 'exiles in this world as in a foreign land' (1 Peter 1:17; 2:11). In this, our fundamental identity, we find a further reason to seek out, welcome and learn from those whose experience of exile is tangible.

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NOTES

1 John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, no. 23.
2 *Ibid.*, no. 25.
3 Eduardo Galeano, quoted in 'Guatemala: healing through remembering', *New Routes – a journal of peace and research and action* vol 2:3, 1997, p 6.
4 Victor E. Frankl, *Man's search for meaning* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1959).
5 Reynaldo Clemeña Ileto, *Pasyon and revolution: popular movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).