

MISSION AND COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE

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IN THE JESUIT TRADITION COMMUNITY LIFE is less important than the apostolate. The presence among the people of God of a community which is caring and at the same time apostolically effective can contribute to the mission of the Church. In the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) circumstances forge communities of women and men, old and young, lay and religious. They share as much as possible of their time with the refugees and where it is feasible live in the camps. Community life in the camps or on the fringe of refugee settlements is demanding and such community life can be frequently disturbed by movements of refugees or armed conflict. JRS communities are made up of committed Christians with a mission and familiar with Ignatian spirituality. Communities are formed to make the work possible, but beyond that they contribute to the mission of the Church.

Jesuits, Ignatius and community life

For many Jesuits, both old and young, community life is not high on their list of priorities. When explicitly asked about it most will tell you that yes, community life is important, and that it is at times a real support. When you ask further how often this Jesuit prays with his brethren or takes meals with them, whether he makes an effort to get together with other Jesuits and engages in an ongoing shared group dialogue, the answer may be different from the theory. Once studies are over the apostolate is often far more important than community life.

In the writings of Saint Ignatius we find few guidelines for community life. The *Constitutions* offer surprisingly little: they talk about admission, formation, mission and administration and how God is working in the Society and the Church through the grace of entrusting men with a mission. The few words about our houses are found in Chapter 4 of Part VII of the *Constitutions*: 'Ways in which the houses and colleges can help their fellowmen'. The house is a means to an end, the community exists to facilitate the apostolate.

This position is still the same in the Society of Jesus in 1975 at the 32nd General Congregation: 'The local Jesuit community is thus an

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apostolic community, not inward but outward looking, the focus of its concern being the service it is called upon to give men'.¹ Some authors take this for granted,² others argue that Jesuits ought to make more of their community life.³

The Spiritual Exercises have often been called individualistic, not aimed at creating community. There are a few strong elements that point to a mission in community: especially in the Second Week and the Rules for Thinking with the Church. These are exceptions rather than the rule: community life is not a preoccupation of the composer of the Exercises.

Among the 228 letters of the English edition of St Ignatius' *Letters*⁴ there are only two that deal expressly with community life, and which use the word 'community'. Of course there are plenty of others which relate in a further sense to the community aspect by touching on mission, obedience and the foundation of new works.

A majority of Jesuits would not only reject the idea that community life is more important than the apostolate but furthermore, they would not agree that community life is part of apostolic work or mission. That is not our charism, they say, but rather the vocation of those who live under the rules of St Benedict or St Augustine.

Communities in the Jesuit Refugee Service

The Jesuit Refugee Service has men and women working in six continents. They often form communities of workers in places where they are close to the refugees. In some communities the majority of its members is made up of religious: Malaysia and Uganda. In other places lay people outnumber the religious: Cambodia and Thailand. I have lived myself in JRS communities in Hong Kong and Bangkok, and in refugee camps in the Philippines and Malaysia.

Off the East coast of peninsular Malaysia lies a small island of less than five square miles, Pulau Bidong. It once was home to a dozen families of fishermen. From 1978 till 1991 it was a refugee camp for Vietnamese boatpeople. Mercy Sisters from Australia were among the first overseas religious to come and live on Bidong with the Vietnamese, soon followed by Jesuits and others. JRS workers were always engaged in education, social work and pastoral ministry. The number of refugees was usually between ten and twenty thousand, but there have been months where there were more than sixty thousand boatpeople crowding the camp. The JRS team was between three and seven, of whom one was always a priest (though not necessarily a Jesuit). When I was on Bidong in 1990-91 we used to have mass and dinner together three

times a week. Mass would be in my room with people sitting on the bed and on the floor. Frequently we would be joined by other Christians (usually Catholics) who worked for the International Red Cross, the United Nations or the Malaysian Red Crescent Society. On other days we would join the refugee community for our spiritual and material needs.

JRS refugee workers in *Hong Kong* live dispersed over different apartments a considerable distance from each other. Once a week they get together for eucharist and a meal. They work in five different camps and do not often have an opportunity to meet. It demands an effort to be faithful to take part in these weekly gatherings. Working in the camps is emotionally and physically exhausting. Still they make time to pray and reflect together. A joyful community celebration was recently the baptism of the youngest child of two of our JRS members. There was even permission for two refugees to leave the detention centre and join the JRS community that day.

Not only is the main meal of the day shared in the regional office of JRS Asia Pacific in *Bangkok*, but also the eucharist. Catholic JRS workers take part every day and several of the Buddhist staff attend when there are special occasions like an anniversary, pronouncement of vows, or a farewell to refugee friends. Guests to the office, be they refugees, colleagues from other agencies or JRS workers on the move, are always invited to join.

The *National Jesuit News* published in 1993 a White Paper about the Jesuit Refugee Service Asia/Pacific. Don Doll SJ visited the JRS community in Pnom Penh, *Cambodia* and reported:

A JRS worker does not act alone. He or she joins a group of Jesuits, religious women of different orders, and committed Christian lay people forming a community, pulled together by the overwhelming need of the Khmer people, to live, work and pray together in a true spirit of collaboration. The director of the JRS ministry in Cambodia is a Mercy nun, Sister Denise Cogan. I tried to imagine the small community I live in at Creighton University composed of Jesuits, nuns, committed lay men and women working, living and praying together. I wondered: are we in the US ready for such a radical form of collaboration? I was profoundly moved by the JRS example of the option for the poor and of collaboration, and asked myself: is this what the Society of Jesus is coming to? I hope so.⁵

On my desk in Zagreb I keep a picture of a JRS team on Palawan in the *Philippines*. Lawyers and interpreters from Australia, USA and the

Philippines provided legal advice to thousands of Vietnamese asylum seekers. The team lived in two houses just outside the fence of the camp. In the picture I see more than ten smiling faces and behind them a big shield with the IHS logo and the words 'JRS Lawyers Project'. Only one of those young faces belongs to a Jesuit: he is a Vietnamese Jesuit brother who worked for several months as interpreter. This group had daily meals together and with refugees, and gathered once a week for shared prayer. The picture is for me very inspiring, but it also makes me feel uneasy. This group lives fully an Ignatian spirituality of action and prayer, some of its members did directed retreats under the direction of a Vietnamese Jesuit in the camp and their community life with its elements of poverty and shared prayer once a week is an inspiring example. Nevertheless I find myself asking: hey, where are we, the Jesuits, in all this; they use our name, our logo, should we not have more say in what they are doing in our name? This reaction raises several other questions: do we ever own a project, am I really willing to share, are we willing to receive as well as to give?

Life shared with refugees

The mission of the Jesuit Refugee Service is to be with the refugees and bring belief where possible. JRS is not an organization that offers emergency assistance in the form of tents, mobile toilets or a field hospital on the move. Our presence is rather with refugee populations that have found a settlement for a foreseeable extended time. Usually JRS offers social, educational or pastoral assistance, but we are not limited to these fields. In South East Asia JRS employs midwives, an architect, lawyers and a veterinarian. They are all part of a JRS team and live in communities.

Some JRS workers live in camps, others in houses near camps and refugee settlements. At times there are very few workers in the camps, and the only non-refugees left within the fence are military guards and JRS staff. This can be on a Sunday or a holiday in peace time, or at times of shelling as has happened on the Thai–Cambodian border. It often occurs that we are the only ones who are in the camp seven days a week: six working days under our contract with a local agency as social workers or teachers, plus the Sunday for religious services.

Whatever our job description, most JRS people make it a point to *be with* the refugees, and not only *work for* them. An apt description was given in an issue of the review published by the Centre for Ignatian Spirituality devoted to the apostolate among refugees: 'the walking ministry'.

One of the daily jobs [of the Jesuits in the refugee camp for Cambodians] was the 'walking ministry'. They walk around the camp area and are continually approached by the refugees who want them to listen to their problems, need help in filling up forms, confide their secrets etc. etc. Pierre Ceyrac says he spent two to three hours daily just walking and meeting people, and thus came to know many refugees in the camp. The two Jesuits, Pierre Ceyrac and John Bingham, were not merely teaching languages, but they were creating an atmosphere conducive to human dignity.⁶

A similar testimony comes from a Zimbabwean refugee camp in Zambia:

It is clear that the most valuable thing I do is to live at the camp in a tent and share the life of the camp. This is quite different from the normal thing of the people visiting the camp, organizing things very efficiently, providing food, medicines, various services, taking photographs which no one ever sees again, and then going away until they turn up another day.⁷

Oftentimes we cannot offer any help, and we are powerless:

The best possible service we can give the refugees is to be with them, to stick it out with them, to hope against hope for them. This road leads into a whole new dimension where material aid, teaching and so on, are justly relativised and where lived spiritual values find their true place. What do you do for the refugees? You share pain and sorrow, you hope joyfully, you believe in them, even the thieves, thugs and liars. You love them. The rest is incidental.⁸

One of my most miserable days in a Malaysian camp also turned out to be a very happy one. I brought in about \$1,000 worth of clothing that was intended to be distributed among volunteers from the Vietnamese camp population. This obviously was not very beneficial for the shopkeepers in the camp and for other people who in one way or another profited from the strictly controlled trade in food and clothing. The military authorities confiscated my donations, and left me in the dark for weeks as to what would happen to them. After the first anger and disappointment I felt a quiet and deep joy coming over me. It dawned on me that this incident brought me closer to the refugees who are frequently harassed and subject to incomprehensible bureaucratic procedures. It made me understand better the story of St Francis of Assisi who said after hours of walking through cold and snow, that it

would be his greatest joy to be refused entrance at the gates of the city where he was heading. It brought me closer to the ones I came to serve.

We shared with them the problems of the rationing of food and water in days of bad weather and typhoons. We collected rain water from the roof for drinking, cooking and washing. Children and adults came to my house in the camp and asked for water. I could literally do what the gospel asks in Matthew 25, and give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty. It left a deep impression on me.

When shells were fired at the camps on the Cambodian–Thai border all foreigners were ordered to leave the camps. The leader of the Catholic relief organization explained to the authorities that this was the time when the refugees needed them most and that the priests had made the choice to stay in the camp during the attacks whatever the consequences would be.

Community life, work and mission

Community life of workers in the Jesuit Refugee Service contributes a great deal to our mission. It does so because it makes our work more efficient. I outlined about how in the tradition of the Jesuits the community is subordinate to the work, and how the community is there to make the work possible. To a great extent the same goes for JRS communities, and we realize that our long-term effectiveness as an apostolic community depends upon the quality of our life together. Our choices to live together closely, to have meals together, to share prayer, to make decisions as a group, are all beneficial for the work. These choices are sometimes made after extensive consultation and as part of a deliberate strategy. It also happens that a newly established team does not even discuss these topics because every member of the group wants to share life and prayer, and wants to get down to business as soon as possible. Once established the community changes often – communities seem to be in transition all the time. The members have to continue to invest in community life.

JRS communities are far from perfect and have their share of misunderstandings, pain and need for reconciliation: not every community turns out to be a success. Feelings of competition and misgivings are a reality in many a religious community, and they exist also in JRS. I do not claim that we come anywhere near an answer to the challenge of the Gospel of John (13:35): ‘This is how all will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another’. But there is something that shines through the broken shell of our community lives: we remain faithful to reading the scriptures and the breaking of the bread, and we tend really

to look after one another.⁹ This is noticed by others. Forming exemplary communities of faith is not a goal of the Jesuit Refugee Service; there are other pressing needs, which are very basic, practical and most urgent. We abstain strictly from proselytizing because the refugees are in a much too vulnerable position. Sometimes however we are fortunate to get some feedback from colleagues of other agencies or from refugees themselves. They tell us that they appreciate our presence not only as individuals, but also as a group.

Why does it work?

The first reason we get together is for the benefit of our mission; but it works beyond that. More than once a JRS community turns out to be a good place to live: a homely atmosphere where we can share our rice, our life, our prayers. What are the reasons that JRS communities are in general more successful than Jesuit communities in satisfying the spiritual and affective needs of its members? Both have made the choice for a community in service of an apostolic need. There are several factors that contribute.

1. Mutual respect for differences. In our communities are women and men; lay and religious; sisters from congregations with a capitular tradition and Jesuits with their tradition of missioning by the superior;¹⁰ Jesuits in formation and at the age of retirement; Asians and westerners; young volunteers who were once refugees themselves and others with a long career behind them; in a community of six the number of nationalities is at least three, usually more. I rarely observed a sense of competition, but usually an acceptance of the other as being different without an inclination to change that. I venture that there is much respect precisely because we come from such different backgrounds: the other is not so soon a threat or a competitor.

2. There is a wide range of possible work. We have no time or energy to squabble over details or different approaches because the needs are so urgent. The demands and the range of needs leave room enough for everyone, even if we do not always agree with every detail of the work of our colleagues.

3. The presence among refugees offers great satisfaction for the worker. The major obstacles are usually not in the refugee population, but in the refugee situation. I wrote more than once to friends in Holland that this is the most gratifying job I ever had. It is international politics, national security regulations and administrative requirements that make life difficult. From the refugees we receive a lot. Another positive factor is the sense of belonging to a small but effective

international network where people know each other, a feeling that is enhanced by international regional meetings.

4. JRS workers have to be flexible. Flexibility is a hallmark of refugee work. Frequent changes in politics, movements of refugee populations and new needs in other regions of the world mean that refugee workers of all agencies, not only JRS, move around the world a lot. Assignments of two years are considered long, although we have had the same people in one place for more than eight years.

5. Those who are ready to live with the refugees are not annoyed when the unexpected comes close to home. Living in a community where life is really shared with one another and with guests involves surprises. Not everyone is willing to be surprised, and I know many a Jesuit who does not appreciate the unexpected in his own community. He may be able to face the unpredictable very well in his work, he may even enjoy the challenge and handle emergencies well, but at home he wants quiet. In a JRS community that is not always possible, and every community member accepts it. There can be an emergency in the camp (an air raid, a typhoon, a weapon search), and there can be surprises at home: guests of community members, refugees in need, community members in need. Often there is nowhere else to go. As JRS workers we are often ourselves foreigners in a strange land, and hospitality to the stranger and the unexpected is part of our life.

The volunteer workers as beneficiaries

Living in a heterogenous community and being close to refugees bring a lot of gifts, some of which are unexpected. Our greatest benefactors are the refugees themselves. There is nothing sentimental about that. Not all refugees are saints, and at times we have to put up with a lot of disappointments. The critical situation in the camps and settlements brings out the best in people, and the worst. What stands out is that they are not easily fooled, they know whom to trust, and who is there for his own benefit only. Volunteer workers are challenged to be present with their whole being: no reservations made. It brings out what we deep down desire and publicly professed when we took religious vows: to be poor, humble and generous.

It is a great grace to feel that one is part of the mission of Christ. As he was sent by the Father he sends us. In all humanity and modesty I have to acknowledge that in this apostolate of being close to the refugees I feel part of this mission. That is perhaps the greatest gift of all: to be aware that I share in Christ's mission.

Another great gift is my colleagues in the JRS communities. In my time as legal consultant in Hong Kong I was the only Jesuit among a

dozen volunteers, most of them younger than myself. They work very hard for a low salary and interrupt their career or their studies in order to be with the refugees. Of course it is a wonderful opportunity to do this kind of work and there is a touch of romance in the adventure of being exposed to refugee life. But when you pick up contagious diseases and have to counsel survivors of violence, rape and torture, romance withers quickly.

When I reread the decrees of General Congregations 31 and 32 I usually feel at home with the options and the challenges. I feel disappointed when I look at the parts about community life: they are all so utilitarian: 'union of mind and hearts will be a powerful aid to Christ's mission', 'a communion strengthened and made apostolically efficacious', 'for the building up of communities dedicated to the apostolate of reconciliation', 'community life . . . helps us to be faithful to our vows'.¹¹ One would not gather from these lines that it can be a pleasure to live in a community. Community life is described as another job instead of as a way of life. I see before my eyes the generous Jesuits who are very willing to give, but not humble enough to receive.

Co-operation with lay people was a topic in General Congregation 31. It is treated specifically in Decree 33 on the relationship with the laity and their apostolate, and in Decree 31 on education. Both decrees stress that Jesuits can help the laity, but that the Society can also learn from them. Not only do they help us in the apostolate, 'they understand more fully the world and Christian truth itself, and give us a more vivid sense of our mission. They are a stimulus to our own continual conversion.' Jesuits are invited to share with lay collaborators sincere friendship, and actively to show fraternal hospitality.¹² In the Jesuit Refugee Service we see this happening on a scale that was not foreseen. The JRS started as a network of Jesuits and their public, and it became more and more also a network of Jesuits in relationship with others working with refugees.¹³ Among those who benefit from the collaboration between Jesuits, other religious and lay people are certainly the Jesuits themselves.¹⁴

Community life as a mission

In recent years Jesuits have separated community finances and living facilities from the apostolic work. This was recommended by General Congregations. It was among other things a sign that we recognized that we cannot single-handedly manage our institutions, that we have to co-operate with others and as a consequence also have to protect our community life. In the service to the refugees we seem to be going the opposite way.

By coming to the camps we show that there are people who care and want to be with those who are suffering. We share the life of uprooted and poor people. By being a community we add a dimension to the presence of Christians in the camps. The Church is not only present through numerous individual volunteers with national and international agencies. The Christian faith is by definition aimed at building a community. By living as a community the JRS members make that part of the mission of the Church visible, and what is more: they enjoy it.

NOTES

¹ General Congregation 32, Decree 2, no 17.

² Simon Decloux SJ, *La voie Ignatienne, à la plus grande gloire de Dieu* (Desclee de Brouwer/Bellarmin 1983), p 124.

³ Charles M. Shelton SJ, 'Toward healthy Jesuit community living – some psychological reflections' in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 24, no 4 (September 1992).

⁴ William J. Young SJ (ed), *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), pp 155 and 440: letters to Daniel Paeybroeck and to the Community at Alcalá.

⁵ Don Doll SJ, 'Working with the poorest of the poor' in *National Jesuit News, White Paper*, vol 22, no 3 (March 1993), pp 6–7.

⁶ M. Antony Amalanthan SJ, 'A Jesuit Kampuchean camp experience' in *Refugee Service and Mission Today, Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis* XIV 1983:1, no 42, pp 81–2.

⁷ Dieter Scholz, 'The Jesuit refugee service' in *CIS* no 42 (previous note), pp 62–3.

⁸ William Yeomans, 'The refugee experience' in Adrian Lyons (ed), *Voices stories hopes – Cambodia and Vietnam: refugees and volunteers* (North Blackburn VIC: Collins Dove, 1993), p 108.

⁹ On care for each other in refugee work see Rosslyn von der Borch, 'At the heart of all is the life we share – the charisma of Catherine McAuley and work with refugees' in *The life we share* (Lewisham NSW: Mercy Refugee Service, 1992), pp 15–42.

¹⁰ On these and other fruitful tensions see Andrew Hamilton SJ, *A history of the Jesuit Refugee Service Asia Pacific (1979–1989)* (Bangkok: JRS A/P, 1991), pp 59–63.

¹¹ General Congregation 32, Decree 11, nos 5, 17 and 25.

¹² General Congregation 31, Decree 31, nos 27 and 28; Decree 33, nos 2 and 7.

¹³ Cf Andrew Hamilton SJ, *op.cit.*, pp 12 and 59.

¹⁴ At this point I would like to thank Barbara Gross in Muenchen and David Townsend SJ in Kuala Lumpur for their comments on a draft of this article.