The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees recently estimated that the number of forcibly displaced persons around the world has reached nearly sixty million people, a figure that shows few signs of abating anytime soon. While the civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS is a significant contributing factor to this increase, conflicts across Africa (including the Congo and Sudan), in Europe (Ukraine), in Asia (Pakistan and Myanmar), and elsewhere have contributed to the rise in the number of displaced persons in recent years.2

While the scope of forced migration is daunting, the problem is nothing new. One could scan history and find any number of situations in which innocent people are forced from their homes in the wake of violence and a rising religious or political fanaticism. The past fifty years alone have witnessed incredible atrocities around the world that have led to the displacement of millions of people. During that same period, the U.S. government and the international community have made important advances in providing protections to displaced populations.

Three standard responses, or durable solutions, have helped to frame the international response to refugee crises: voluntary repatriation, integration into the country of first asylum, and resettlement to a third country. Voluntary repatriation is the preferred option since it signifies that the original cause for displacement has subsided to the point that it is safe for the refugee to return home. However, with the threat of continued persecution or ongoing conflict, it may be best for the refugee to remain in the country of first asylum and inte-
grate into the local community. If remaining in the country of first asylum is not viable because of local resistance, lack of economic capacity, or another reason, resettlement to a third country might be the only realistic solution.

One of the early, systematic efforts by the international community to respond to the post-World War II refugee crisis came with passage of The Convention on Refugees, which was approved at a United Nations conference on July 28, 1951. As a consequence of the political, religious, and ethnic persecution during that period, millions of men, women, and children living in Europe were displaced from their homes and forced to flee in search of safety elsewhere. In response, the international community provided protection to European refugees who had been displaced prior to January 1 of that year, and issued the first officially recognized definition of a refugee, which has become the standard mechanism used to determine who can qualify for such status. The Convention defines a refugee as:

ref·u·gee
/ˌrefyooˈje/ noun
a person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.³

The narrowly tailored temporal and geographic limitations of the Convention were eliminated with the 1967 Protocol Related to the Status of Refugees, but the definition of what constitutes a refugee has remained unchanged. In recent years the question as to whether or not this definition should be expanded to take into account new realities has arisen. For example, with climate change becoming an ever more present threat, the term “climate refugee” has become more salient, although according to present international agreements currently in place it remains a misnomer.

In the United States, while the resettlement of European refugees began in earnest in the post-war period, primarily as a consequence of the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, the federal government and voluntary organizations began to coordinate their refugee resettlement work as early as the late 1930s. These early efforts planted the seeds for the public-private partnership that blossomed in later decades as their activities became more closely intertwined. From 1948 to 1950, the US government admitted just over 200,000 displaced persons, primarily through this network of organizations. A similar number were admitted five years later following the passage of the Refugee Relief Act.

The onset of the Cold War shaped the way in which refugee admissions were handled. At times, political leadership resisted efforts to resettle refugees for fear that it would admit communist subversives that would plot to undermine national security. As often as not, the admission of refugees was viewed as a tool that could weaken Soviet domination in Eastern Europe and further the U.S. Cold War objectives. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 grounded this Cold War paradigm into law by explicitly providing a Cold War-oriented, ideologically based definition of a refugee as someone who fled from “any Communist or Communist dominated country or area.”⁴

Such a framework is evident in the Hungarian uprising of 1956. In reaction to national unrest for political reform in Hungary, Soviet troops launched a crackdown on protesters, killing thousands and forcing tens of thousands more to flee to Yugoslavia and Austria. To relieve some of the pressures of this influx on the Austrian government, President Eisenhower agreed to resettle some 38,000 Hungarian refugees into the United States. In a statement on January 1, 1957, he noted that the admission of these refugees into the U.S. “will permit the United States to continue, along with the other free nations of the world, to do its full share in providing a haven for these victims of oppression.”⁵ His appeal to liberty here and elsewhere is an obvious contrast to the authoritarian and oppressive communist regimes from which they were escaping.

Following a nearly six year campaign, in January 1959 Fidel Castro’s 26th of July Movement and its allies ousted then Cuban President Fulgencio Batista. Castro’s rise to power and subsequent rule precipitated a significant rupture in Cuban society that contributed to the flight of hundreds of thousands of Cubans to the United States over the next two decades. By 1962 nearly 200,000 Cubans had fled, many of whom were in some
way allied with the Batista regime. Emigration to the US slowed substantially for a time following the Cuban Missile Crisis but resumed with the establishment of the “Freedom Flights” (1965–1973) that brought in three to four thousand exiles every month.

Given the large influx of Cubans into the United States during this period, more financial and social support was required as local support systems were being overwhelmed by the growing demands for assistance. The Cuban government’s decision in 1960 to confiscate the personal property of Cubans who fled to the United States strained the resources of local agencies and led the U.S. government to establish the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center in Miami, Florida. The President subsequently commissioned the Director of Health, Education, and Welfare to establish a Cuban Refugee Program. Further funds were appropriated through passage of The Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962, which provided direct support for refugees, including education, employment, health, reception and registration services of Cuban nationals who arrived in Miami.

Running parallel to the ebb and flow of Cuban exiles who were arriving on American shores during the 1960s, the United States government launched the war in Vietnam, which set the stage for massive displacement in Southeast Asia. Following the withdrawal of the United States and the communist takeover of Hanoi in 1975, more than a million persons were forced to flee their homes and find safety elsewhere. Many of these refugees fled to surrounding countries, with hundreds of thousands of them eventually reaching the United States.

With the growing complexity of the resettlement program it became important to rationalize the entire process and, in 1979, Jimmy Carter took an important step forward by establishing of the Office of the Coordinator of Refugee Affairs. Following the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, the process for refugee resettlement was more carefully formalized, new institutions were established to help guide these processes, and relations between the federal government and voluntary agencies interested in resettlement became more integrated.

The Act also undercut the Cold War based paradigm that had framed refugee resettlement for over a decade and brought the definition of what constituted a refugee in U.S. law in line with the one provided in the Refugee Convention. Although the Cold War framework was eliminated with the passage of the refugee act, international politics still played an important role with respect to how the US approached refugee crises, as disparate treatment continued to be given to different groups during the 1980s. Nicaraguans, for example, who were seen as fleeing from communism, were provided a more receptive welcome than El Salvadorians who were also fleeing conflict and persecution, but were not recognized as an ally of the US.

Some [refugees] have managed to return home, but many millions continue to find themselves mired in refugee camps for a decade or longer.

From the end of the Cold War to the present, refugee crises have continued to flare up across the globe, from Rwanda in Africa to Kosovo in Eastern Europe. The Rwandan genocide, which began in early 1994 and took the lives of at least a half a million people, led to the flight of as many as two million more to surrounding countries. In 1999 up to a million ethnic Albanians fled the Kosovo region in Eastern Europe in the midst of a conflict involving NATO and Serbian forces. Elsewhere, countless people have been forcibly displaced over the past two decades, only a small fraction of which have been resettled in the U.S. or elsewhere. Some have managed to return home, but many millions continue to find themselves mired in refugee camps for a decade or longer.

Since 9/11 national security concerns have become paramount in the screening and admissions process, particularly as it pertains to the admittance of Muslim refugees. In important respects, contemporary debates over resettlement reflect a similar logic to those advanced during the Cold War. Rather than fearing an infiltration by communists, new concerns have arisen over the admission of terrorists via the refugee resettlement system. Concerns remain that Muslim refugees will use the refugee system to cultivate terror among local populations. This concern—however unfounded given the expansive security and background checks that are in place to vet refugees—signifies one of the central concerns that work against the US continuing a tradition of welcome to the downtrodden, displaced, and vulnerable.

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Year of Mercy: Welcoming Refugees

by Gary Smith, SJ

Experience
In the beginning and in the end, when talking about mercy and welcome extended to refugees, one probes his or her own experience with refugees; their grief and hope are touched as they emerge from the whole stinking mess of the refugee plight and flight. In the experience—or lack of it—one begins the dialogue with God on the mercy that Pope Francis invites us to embrace. What am I to do? How am I to welcome?

_Here’s my take on it._

I spent fourteen years in East and South Africa associated with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), accompanying, serving and advocating for refugees pouring into those parts of Africa. What follows is about my time with Zimbabwean refugees coming to the JRS project in Makhado, South Africa, 60 miles south of the Zimbabwean border. Having described part of my experience I offer a reflection on extending mercy to the refugee and why it is important for us.

Faces
Zimbabwe’s children fled, scattered like sparks before the wind, running from persecution and an economy that had gone into free fall. Many did not bother with the proper asylum papers, slipping across national boundaries that cut through the bush between South Africa and Zimbabwe. There are no refugee camps—by law in South Africa. It could mean crossing by foot or swimming across the crocodile-infested rivers. On the flight they were frequently victims of thugs who stole their possessions and money. Refugee women were raped. All left loved ones behind in the hope of securing a job in South Africa enabling them to assist families back home.

There they stood outside our office door early in the morning or as they struggled in during the day: tired, dirty, hungry, broke, disheartened, and apprehensive; most possessed only the clothes are their back, and a few precious contact phone numbers. Their faces carried the scars of months of never having it together, never knowing what’s next. They had the look of grief that comes from profound loss: family, friends, jobs and hope. Many had watched loved ones slaughtered before their eyes. There were faces of distress, of anger, of being demoralized, and of being double-crossed by their government. The hearts that were expressed on those faces were deeply troubled, having lost track of the origin of it all, stumbling through the jagged terrain of a broken heart.

_No one should have to live like this._

Mom and Daughter
I remember one woman, Scholastica, 35; frail and courageous. By her side, clinging to her hand, was her seven-year-old daughter, a delightful brown-eyed shining-smile girl by the name of Thandolwenkosi (a Zulu word meaning: God’s Love). They had left Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, several weeks before. She was robbed at the border. “Why did you come,” I asked. “To feed my children,” she replied. “To feed my children,” she replied. Her goal was to find a domestic job in Makhado in order to support herself and Thandolwenkosi, as well another child who lived with her mother back home. JRS helped to provide for accommodation.

As mom and daughter left the JRS Office, I watch them exit our compound, heading to an adjacent road. There they were: Mom carrying a piece of luggage on her head and a five kilogram bag of corn meal in one hand and, a few feet behind her was her daughter, double-stepping to keep up, barely managing a bag of vegetables that filled her arms, and cheerfully chatting with her momma all the way. That scene will remain an inner icon of endurance, of grief that comes from profound loss: family, friends, jobs and hope. Many had watched loved ones slaughtered before their eyes. There were faces of distress, of anger, of being demoralized, and of being double-crossed by their government. The hearts that were expressed on those faces were deeply troubled, having lost track of the origin of it all, stumbling through the jagged terrain of a broken heart.

_Mercy_
Mercy, born of love, steps forward in the meeting of refugees, in the encounters with the Scholasticas and Thandolwenkosi who walk among them. It could be there in South Africa, but, really, anywhere in our busted world where we witness long lines of refugees. Our concern and mercy born of love for the refugee calls us to internalize their suffering, a suffering, inflicted upon them wrongly and at fundamental levels of their existence. The mercy that Pope Francis invites us to nourish is rooted in the divine; the Incarnation and life and death of Jesus are a testimony to God’s mercy. The love that gives birth to mercy is such that at the sight of another’s unjustly inflicted suffering we want to eradicate it—simply because it exists. Mercy stands at the very origin of all that Jesus practiced; he incarnated that most profound message of the Old Testament: God hears the cry of the poor and the oppressed.

The Church finds Herself with the broken living this same principle of mercy. The Church must live mercifully, it must incarnate Mercy, and it must denounce the causes of the refugee crisis. It must instinctively challenge the suffering to its own body. The Church—you, me—must act because to not act is to deny myself and the best in myself. The place of the Church is with the Sister Samaritan or wounded Brother lying in the ditch along the roadside.

It is incumbent upon the merciful person to ask God to show the way to meet the crisis, to choose what Pope Francis be-novently hammers us with all the time: educate people about the refugee reality, assist organizations that serve refugees, and be open to embracing refugees in our own country. I do not do these things because a gun is put to my head or because it is the pious thing to do, but because the growth of mercy in my heart and my own existence depend on facing the plight—and therefore the heart—of the refugee.

▲ Gary Smith is a Jesuit priest of the Oregon Province. He spent fourteen years with the Jesuit Refugee service in East and South Africa. He is currently involved in street and jail ministry in Portland, Oregon.
As I write this, the United States is at a crossroads about how we will respond to men, women and children fleeing unspeakable violence and persecution in Syria. Decisions made now will characterize this nation as one of compassionate heroism or fear-laced indifference. Each and every one of us will look back and wonder what more we could have done in this humanitarian crisis.

Origins of the Syrian Displacement Crisis: Arab Spring, Assad Regime, Rebels, Civil War and ISIS

In December 2010, the world cheered demonstrators in Tunisia, protests that sparked a wave of public activism fueled by social media in what has become known as the “Arab Spring.” While these movements have seen the overthrow of governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, the responses of other countries show that entrenched powers can impede change for years and even decades. Such is the case in Syria, where the Ba’ath party has reigned since 1963 and current President Bashar al-Assad responded to protests with military might, waging war on his own people. In March 2011, peaceful protests and a military response sparked a civil war that drove millions from their homes and has resulted in more than 250,000 casualties.

Daesch, otherwise known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), has taken advantage of the instability brought on by the civil war in Syria to take control of multiple population centers and wage terrorism on the Syrian people, particularly women, children, moderate Muslims, LGBTI individuals, ethnic minorities and religious minorities including Yezidis and Christians. At the time of publication, more than eight million Syrians were internally displaced and four million Syrian refugees were seeking safety in nearby countries and in Europe.

Flight to Neighboring Countries and Europe

Close to Syria, refugee-hosting countries have reached their capacity. They have instituted enforcement actions, denied Syrians work authorization, prohibited refugee children from attending school, and forced many people into crowded, unsanitary and dangerous camp conditions. Thus, as more Syrians have fled, more than 680,000 have applied for asylum in Europe.
European Union has approved a proposal to welcome 120,000 Syrian refugees among member states, plans have only been made for 66,000 individuals.

Most countries in Europe are signatory to the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which holds them to ensure that refugees fleeing persecution are provided protection. However, as an increased number of Syrian refugees have sought safety in Europe, countries have increased border controls and screening protocols. Hungary in particular has begun the construction of a 13 mile high fence along its border with Serbia, closed its border with Croatia and arrested refugees for trespassing. In the past five years, more than 7,000 people have died or gone missing trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. When refugees and migrants cannot access protection by legal means, they will pursue the last resort of taking dangerous journeys. The United Nations Refugee Agency UNHCR is working with commercial ships to undertake rescue operations, but desperation leads thousands to risk their lives to find safety for their families.

The Role of the United States

Few people in the United States seemed to be aware of the Syrian refugee crisis until September 2015, when a photograph of Alan Kurdi, a three-year old boy who drowned in the Mediterranean as his family sought safety, captured the world’s attention. Policy makers in Europe, Canada, Australia, the United States and beyond began asking how their countries could accept more Syrian refugees. A sharp increase in public support, donations to charitable organizations assisting refugees, and public outcry at the lack of international coordination and leadership followed through September and October.

Then, with news of the terrorist attacks in Paris, Beirut and Baghdad, on Nov. 13, 2015 came information that one of the attackers was found with a Syrian passport. Evidence now shows that the Syrian passport was fake, and that all individuals involved in the attacks were French and Belgian nationals in no way connected to Syrian refugees. Many politicians, news anchors and anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim groups were quick to establish a narrative that terrorists were masquerading as refugees. While shortly after the attacks France set an international example by committing to accept 30,000 refugees, the U.S. House of Representatives approved legislation that would grind to a halt the resettlement of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, and 31 governors announced that they will not accept Syrian refugees in their states. While governors cannot legally restrict access to their states based on a person’s nationality, it remains to be seen how these actions will impact the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the U.S.

By the end of 2014, Syria had become the world’s largest source country of refugees. Today, on average, one out of every four refugees is Syrian. 95% are in surrounding countries.

At the time of publication, the U.S. has only resettled 2,219 Syrian refugees since 2011, paling in comparison to the commitments of other nations and in particular to the numbers of Syrian refugees hosted by countries in the region. The Obama administration has pledged to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees, as part of the 85,000 total refugees to be resettled this fiscal year. It is important to note that the U.S. refugee admissions program is the most secure in the world,
and that refugees are the most thoroughly vetted and screened individuals to travel to the United States, undergoing a two-to-three year process of interagency biometric checks, medical screenings, forensic document testing and in-person interviews with Department of Homeland Security officials. But some politicians are attempting to utilize fear to score political points and dismantle plans to resettle Syrian refugees.

One Girl’s Story

Recently I met a young woman, 17 years old, whose parents are refugees in Jordan. She is a U.S. citizen, but because she is not yet 21, she cannot petition for her parents to join her in the U.S. Even if she were 21, the family reunification visa process is so backlogged that the State Department is processing applications that were filed back in 2008. Her parents are attempting to navigate the U.S. refugee resettlement program, but since the process takes so long and less than one percent of the world’s refugees ever have the opportunity to be resettled, it is unlikely that their family will be reunited anytime soon. The brokenness of the U.S. immigration system, combined with the lack of U.S. leadership to resettle Syrian refugees, has left this young woman’s parents with little hope of safety and reunification with their daughter.

Recommendations

The United States should resettle at least 10,000 Syrian refugees this year, and plan to resettle thousands more refugees from Syria and around the world in the coming years. While resettlement is not the sole solution to the Syrian refugee crisis, it is a critical act of solidarity that can encourage other countries to keep their doors open to refugees. The United States should also contribute additional funds to the United Nations Refugee Agency and provide infrastructure support to refugee-hosting countries so they can continue to provide life-saving protection to Syrian refugees.

Each of Us Has a Role

Each voice in support of Syrian refugees that goes unheard is a forfeited opportunity to demonstrate that people of faith want to see this nation on the right side of history. With phone calls to Congress, meetings with national and local policy makers, letters to the editors of our local newspapers, and conversations with our neighbors and congregations, each of us can be the change we want to see, the change that will allow Syrian men, women and children to realize their bright and resilient future.

Jen Smyers serves as the Director of Policy and Advocacy for the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program, and has been with CWS for nearly ten years. She is a graduate of American University with a B.A. in Law and Society, B.A. in Public Communication, and Masters in Public Policy.
For seven years, I have lived in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi, a country in the southeastern part of Africa. I survive like any other refugee, struggling to meet the basic needs of my family. I receive a monthly food ration that we get from the World Food Program, a monthly stipend of 25,000 MK (something around 40 US dollars), and 20 kg of rice from my job. However, the psychological wounds from my experience in my home country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), far outweigh the financial difficulties my family and I face in the camp.

My story begins in June 2008, in North-Kivu where my wife and I worked as health professionals. I treated six soldiers, all of whom had severe gunshot wounds, before they were transferred to the main hospital in Goma city. A day later, another group of soldiers came to the clinic to ask me about the six soldiers I treated. They told me that the wounded soldiers were rebels fighting on the side of Laurent Nkunda, who they claim led a rebellion that fought against the governmental military force. Saying that the men I had treated were in violation of the peace agreement, the government soldiers accused me of being a traitor. They tortured me for 2 days in that camp until I woke up in Goma hospital after being found unconscious. I stayed for treatment, then my colleagues and friends who worked at the hospital helped me to escape. While I was in hiding, a group of soldiers came to look for me at my home in Birere. No one could identify them as government soldiers or rebels. When they found my wife and children, they physically abused them. When my wife cried and shouted for help, she was fatally shot in the back. My children fled in fear, and I have not seen two of them since.

After getting the tragic news that my wife had died, I was reunited with four of my children at the hospital in Goma, where they were trying to get a last chance to see their mother. Before we could see my wife in the mortuary, my friends who worked at the hospital told me that armed people were looking for me, and that I must flee from the city. Later, I found out that both the government and the rebels were hunting me. I feared being arrested and brutally killed, so my family and I fled from the DRC. Our long journey led us to Malawi, where we have lived as refugees ever since.

I can’t really compare my life here in the camp to my life back home in DRC. Back home, my family and I had the financial, social, and emotional resources we needed to live a full, happy life. Here, we find it difficult to meet our basic needs. My family is currently in the final stages of the process for resettlement in Finland, where we hope to have a better future.

Robert* works for Jesuit Refugee Service as a facilitator of the JC: HEM Community Health CSLT Program at the Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi. He graduated from the University of Kinshasa in Teaching and Administration of Medical Technics. *Name has been changed
By the end of 2014, there were 60.1 MILLION people of concern worldwide.

Conflict and persecution forced an average of 42,500 persons per day worldwide to leave their homes and seek protection elsewhere.

Last year, 51% of refugees were under 18 years old. (Source: UNHCR)

Somali 1.11 million
Afghan 2.59 million
Syrian 3.88 million
Palestinian 5.1 million
All Others 6.82 million

Refugees, 19.5 million
Internally Displaced Persons, 32.3 million
Asylum-Seekers, 1.8 million
Stateless, 3.5 million
Other, 1.1 million
People Returned to Place of Origin, 1.9 million

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Refugees—Persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution. Their situation is often so perilous and intolerable that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries. It is too dangerous for them to return home, and they need sanctuary elsewhere. Denial of asylum for these individuals may have deadly consequences.

Migrants—There is no agreed upon definition, but characteristics could include those who choose to move to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. If they choose to return home, they will continue to receive the protection of their government.

Undocumented Migrant—Someone who stays or works in a country without the necessary authorization or documents required under immigration laws.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)—People that have not crossed an international border to find sanctuary but have remained inside their home countries. Even if they have fled for similar reasons as refugees (armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations), IDPs legally remain under the protection of their own government—even though that government might be the cause of their flight. As citizens, they retain all of their rights and protection under both human rights and international humanitarian law. Civilians who have been made homeless by natural disasters are also considered as IDPs.

Resettlement—The relocation and integration of people (refugees, internally displaced persons, etc.) into another geographical area. For refugees, this means being transferred from the country in which they reside to another country which has agreed to admit them, or offer them refuge (usually by offering asylum with the opportunity to become citizens).

Statelessness—Lack of any nationality, or the absence of a recognized link between an individual and any state. A stateless person is someone who is “not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law.” One major cause of statelessness is the existence of gaps in a country’s legal regime relating to nationality. A second cause is the emergence of new states and changes in borders. In many cases, specific groups may be left without a nationality as a result of these changes.

Push-Pull Factors—The factors by which people decide to leave, or are pushed from, their home country (such as economic, social, or political problems) and the factors that are attracting, or pulling, to their country of destination.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—The refugee agency for the United Nations, UNHCR is mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country.

Sources: UNHCR, IOM
Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia: three countries with majority Muslim populations were the top three countries of origin for refugees in 2014.1 Russia, Germany, and the United States: three countries with majority Christian populations were the largest recipients of requests for asylum.2 The refugee crisis crosses not only continental divides, but religious lines as well. While the international community must always aim to resolve the problems of violence and insecurity at the source of the refugee crisis, we must find ways to fulfill our humanitarian responsibilities, and foster a climate of peace, understanding, and appreciation among diverse peoples of all religious professions in our world.

Reading reports and editorials in both mass media and social media in the wake of the Paris attacks, one can feel the suspicion, fear, and hostility when encountering the stranger. There is the old saying, “familiarity breeds contempt,” but in this case, unfamiliarity breeds contempt. We fear what we do not know. For many people in countries receiving requests for asylum, religion quickly becomes a sticking point. Many believe that religion itself is part of the problem, not the solution, to the refugee crisis today. Linking Islam to violence can lead one to misunderstand the core tenants of that religion. Looking more closely at the commonalities of faith traditions can lead to a response to refugees that drives out fear and leads to deeper communion among all peoples.

Looking more closely at the commonalities of faith traditions can lead to a response to refugees that drives out fear and leads to deeper communion among all peoples.

In the scriptures of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, three key themes pervade the narratives of God’s love for humanity and call for imitation of that love in our care and concern for others in situations of vulnerability and displacement. Focus on kinship as members of the human family can lead us to a recognition of our common roots and responsibility toward one another. In turn, this kinship can evoke compassion for the suffering of those who leave their homes out of fear and encourage us to open our doors and our hearts in courageous rejection of that fear. These three themes—kinship, compassion, and hospitality—can serve as common touchstones for a mutual understanding by those of diverse religious professions that religion is not the cause, but solution to a crisis that touches us all on a global and personal level.

The most personal bonds that tie human communities together are those of family and kinship. The saying, “charity begins at home,” encourages us to attend to the needs of those bound to us by blood and genealogy, but a closer examination of religion opens us to a broader understanding of home. The most recent encyclical of Pope Francis, Laudato Si’, subtitled “On Care for our Common Home,” invites “every person living on this planet” to think about the ways in which we share a common responsibility.3 Francis points out that we not only dwell in and rely on the same gifts of Earth, but he calls all people to deeper reflection on the ways in which we are family dwelling in a common home. In both Christianity and Judaism, we recognize a common ancestry in our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, and the covenant God...
made with them and all their descendants. Islam too recognizes and lauds this common root where the Quran states, “People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide; be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. Beware of severing the ties of kinship: God is always watching over you” (Quran, 4:1). It is not only the Bible that attests to the common bond and responsibility we have to one another, but Islam as well notes the accountability we have to one another and God to be as family.

If we recognize every other human person as a brother or sister in our common human family, it sensitizes us to the needs and sufferings of our kin. In the monotheistic religious traditions of the West, as well as Hinduism, Buddhism, and many other religions, compassion is the hallmark of devotion to divinity. In Islam, one of God’s key attributes, Rahman, or compassion, is invoked at the beginning of nearly every sura of the Quran: “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.” Imitation of God is at the very heart of submission to the will of God as a Muslim. So too in Christian-ity and Judaism, where God is praised for compassion more than a dozen times in the Psalms and the label of “neighbor” given to the Good Samaritan “who showed compassion.” The religions of the world recognize that identifying and responding to the sufferings of others as one’s own suffering is the sign of true religion and doing justice to God and others.

Surely many of us in countries that can offer secure asylum to refugees are suffering ourselves and fearful for our own lives and security. However, it is not in keeping with righteousness to close our doors to those in need. Moreover, the great mothers and fathers of our respective faiths, including Moses, the Holy Family, and Mohammed, all in their own lives sought asylum and the hospitality of strangers. The scriptures of our respective traditions call us to welcome the stranger. Not only does Islam have its own tradition of hijrah, or migration law, to care for and accommodate those seeking asylum, but Christianity and Judaism recall God’s concern for those on the margins—widows, orphans, and foreigners—with no standing before the law. Welcoming the stranger opens us up to the same vulner-

“Isn’t it beautiful to have an open door!”

ability experienced by the one seeking hospitality. In opening our door to the stranger, and doing so in concert with those in our own and other religious communities, we can be vehicles of God’s compassion to all those bound to us in the ties of common human kinship.

For a third year, my wife and I celebrated the very American holiday of Thanksgiving with students and staff at Georgetown University who were unable to head home for the long weekend. A quick census of origin found we hailed from China, Ecuador, the US, Pakistan, Mexico and many other far off places. Two of our guests from France, acknowledging the recent tragic events in their home country, raised a glass to toast the gathering: “Isn’t it beautiful to have an open door!” This may very well indicate a way forward for us all as we continue to grapple with the fear, uncertainty, and disorientation that the refugee crisis presents to us today. Refugees are not only our guests, but our family, and our houses, their homes. May we always open our doors to those unable to go home—driving out fear, not people. As the First Letter of John reminds us, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18).

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President Obama vowed a year ago to give Central American children fleeing violence, like the Honduran girl pictured, a new legal way into the U.S. by allowing them to apply for refugee status while in their own countries instead of accepting help from smugglers. More than 5,400 children have applied to join their parents, who are already in the U.S. legally, but not a single child has entered through the Central American Minors Program.

Somali Bantu Refugees living in Florida.
The term “climate refugee” has not been officially accepted by the United Nations, but has been characterized as “those environmental migrants forced to move due to sudden or gradual alterations in the natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity.” While the classification “climate refugee” is not recognized, the forced movement of people due to the impacts of climate change is not a new phenomenon.

A sea of empty shoes adorned the Place de Republique in Paris, France at the Global Climate March, a demonstration at the 21st annual Conference of Parties (COP 21) that took place on Nov. 30 to Dec. 11, 2015. This global conference of over 190 countries convened to review the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC). By taking to the streets of Paris, marchers hoped to urge global leaders to take significant steps to reduce our climate impact. However, “to avoid any extra risk” after the tragic attacks in Paris earlier that month, the streets were vacant of the thousands of marchers who traveled from every continent to represent those impacted by climate change. However, their shoes remained.

While initially standing in for those who could not march, the sheer vastness of the abandoned footwear from every corner of the Earth called attention to abandoned people, the voiceless, and displaced who wait as world leaders deliberated over their ultimate fate. Among the collection, were the shoes of Pope Francis who noted in his recent encyclical, Laudato Si’, “There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee...
from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever.2

Typhoon Haiyan, the strongest tropical storm to make landfall in recorded human history, reached the Philippines in November 2013. Shortly after the 195mph winds came crashing on his homeland, Yeb Sano, the climate negotiator for the Philippines during COP 19, urged global leaders to take action. Displacing an estimated 4 million people, Typhoon Haiyan occurred in the same year as Typhoon Trami, which displaced another 1.74 million. Before commencing a voluntary fast throughout the entirety of the conference, Sano said, “What my country is going through as a result of this extreme climate event is madness, the climate crisis is madness.” Two years after COP 19, the “madness” he described has barely subsided.

Lou Arsenio, a resident of the Philippines and Activist with the Global Catholic Climate Movement, noted that most climate refugees do not appear on the international radar because they stay within their country of origin as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). As a result of the 2013 weather events, Arsenio described a mass migration from the outlying island provinces to the capitol and largest city in the Philippines, Manila. The majority of the migrants are indigenous families whose livelihoods were directly connected to coastal life. Fishermen who once patterned their lives around a habitable shore are now displaced into tightly packed corners of the city.

What is most disturbing is that the refugees have yet to settle in their original location. These locations have either become permanently inhabitable or, worse still, the corrupt governments have sold off the previously private property to be mined for fossil fuels by companies based in more affluent countries. Because the global climate refugee crisis, which is projected by some to reach 200 million by 2050, cannot be separated from the greed for fossil fuels and the political wars over control of those fuels, no clear political solution is in sight.

Tea pickers in Kenya in Mt Kenya’s Region, for the Two Degrees Up project, experience the impact of climate change on agriculture.

The events in the Philippines are just one example of the displacement of people all over the world as a result of natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. But, amid such impasses, spiritual experiences emerge. In solidarity with those displaced in his home country, Yeb Sano embarked upon a People’s Pilgrimage that took him to the most impacted areas of Asia and culminated in a 1500 km pilgrimage from Rome to Paris where he placed his shoes adjacent to those of Pope Francis and UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. Pilgrimages reveal the sacred in the midst of the mundane and offer the experience of the weary traveler with no direction home.

No real solution to either the climate crisis or the refugee crisis will emerge until we have the capacity to see ourselves in a stranger’s shoes. That stranger may be an activist fighting for climate solutions, a climate refugee displaced from home indefinitely, a pope desperately trying to communicate the moral imperative to take our prayers to action in the midst of so much suffering, or our true self, struggling to walk in solidarity with no clear direction in sight.

Rhett Engelking resides in Washington, DC where he works as the Director of the Franciscan Earth Corps, a young adult initiative of the Franciscan Action Network grounded in the spirit of the economic, ecological and eccumenical messages of Laudato Si'.
Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment

Hyatt has been proactively addressing human trafficking since December 2010 when the Sisters of the Holy Names called on the Company to adopt a human rights policy that protects children and to conduct mandatory training for its employees in its 627 hotel properties in 52 countries. **Hyatt has now trained 54,000 employees** and made training mandatory.

Judy Byron, OP who leads the dialogue with Hyatt said, “In our meetings over the past five years it was evident that Hyatt took the issue of human trafficking seriously and welcomed our expertise and support. We applaud the Company for signing the Code, an important step in its continuing efforts to eradicate human trafficking.”

Human Trafficking Awareness Month is January 2016

New 2016 prayer at ipjc.org

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In memory of: Tim Sullivan, Michael Sullivan, Mary Sullivan, OP, Renee Krisko, Anne Heger, OP, Joan Trunk, Clare Roy, SNJM
This Issue: Refugees

Advocate

Call on your elected officials to welcome refugees of all nationalities and faith traditions.

► Visit IPJC’s Legislative Action Center at ipjc.org to send a letter directly to your Representative and Senators.

► For Interfaith Resources visit interfaithimmigration.org

Educate

The more we educate ourselves and others, the more we can create a culture of welcome in our communities.

► Share this issue of A Matter of Spirit with your family, friends, neighbors, and congregations.

► Visit ipjc.org to view a timeline of the Syrian Refugee Crisis, to learn more about key events that led to one of the most critical refugee crises of our time.

► Learn more about the refugee resettlement process in the United States by watching this video: bit.ly/SyrianRefugeesInUS.

Break Bread Together

Sitting down together to share a meal is a timeless tradition that cuts across all cultures and religions.

► The act of communities inviting recently arrived immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers holds immense meaning, and offers a welcoming space to build relationships and learn from one another.

► To learn how, go to bit.ly/RefugeesWelcomeDinner to download the Interfaith Immigration Coalition’s toolkit.