



CURIA GENERALIZIA DELLA COMPAGNIA DI GESÙ

**Renewed commitment of the Jesuit Refugee Service**

**2019/15**

**TO THE WHOLE SOCIETY OF JESUS  
AND PARTNERS IN MISSION**

Dear friends in the Lord:

November 2020 will mark 40 years since the Servant of God Fr Pedro Arrupe founded the Jesuit Refugee Service. In his 1980 letter announcing the launch of JRS, Fr Arrupe said that the situation of refugees throughout the world constituted “a challenge to the Society we cannot ignore if we are to remain faithful to St Ignatius’ criteria for our apostolic work.”<sup>1</sup> JRS’s response has been a source of grace to refugees and to the Society, and I am happy to share with you important changes in JRS that will continue and deepen that response in the years to come.

The challenge Fr Arrupe saw has become even more acute in the intervening years. Last year the United Nations refugee agency reported that 68.5 million people had been forced from their homes, the highest number ever recorded. 25.4 million of these are refugees who fled their own countries to find safety and protection across international borders. Most refugees come from the world’s least developed countries, and the vast majority of refugees are hosted by nearby developing nations. More and more, refugees find themselves in protracted situations of displacement: 13.4 million refugees are now in situations of exile that have lasted from 5 to 37 years.

This reality calls for more equitable sharing in hosting and supporting the world’s refugees. Instead, some governments in the rich countries of the global north have instituted policies designed to keep refugees out, policies more and more copied by developing nations themselves. No one can be unaware of the many political movements that stoke resentment against refugees for electoral gain. In a global situation where refugees stand in great need of hospitality and generosity, they often encounter increased marginalisation and even violence. Instead of an increase in resettlement opportunities for refugees who need a permanent place of residence, we have seen a drastic decrease in resettlement worldwide, almost halved from previous years.

In these challenging times JRS has been freshly inspired in its mission to accompany, serve, and advocate with and for refugees by the prophetic leadership of Pope Francis, who has called on the international community to have a shared response to refugees and migrants that can be articulated in four verbs: to welcome, to protect, to promote, and to integrate. Pope Francis has

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<sup>1</sup> “The Society of Jesus and the refugee problem”, Letter of Pedro Arrupe SJ to Major Superiors, 14 November 1980.



insisted that what is needed is a fundamental conversion, a change in attitude, “to overcome indifference and to counter fears”.<sup>2</sup>

While JRS has been the focal point of the Society’s coordinated response to refugees, I also express my gratitude for so much else that is being done for refugees by the wider Jesuit family. Parishes, retreat centres, schools, social centres and universities have been places of welcome, social action, and research for advocacy, often in partnership with JRS. Many Jesuit communities have extended their own welcome to individual refugees and families. Jesuit communities and provinces have also been generous in their financial support for JRS and other projects serving forcibly displaced people.

The Society has remained steadfast in its commitment to this particular mission of promoting justice for refugees. Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, in his letter of 24 June 2000 promulgating the new Charter and Guidelines for JRS, described the mandate given to JRS as “a grace and a responsibility for us all”, and he added – quoting the Charter dated 19 March 2000 –: “in companionship with Jesus Christ and serving his mission in the midst of refugees, JRS can be an effective sign of God’s love and reconciliation”.<sup>3</sup>

The 35<sup>th</sup> General Congregation (GC 35) in 2008 reaffirmed the service of migrants, refugees, the internally displaced, and victims of trafficking, as an apostolic preference of the Society.<sup>4</sup> Eight years later GC 36 called upon the Society to respond the call of Christ who summons us anew to a ministry of justice and peace, serving the poor and the excluded: “Among these various forms of suffering (that) have appeared with consistency from many of our Provinces and Regions (is) (t)he displacement of peoples (refugees, migrants, and internally displaced peoples): In the face of attitudes hostile to these displaced persons, our faith invites the Society to promote everywhere a more generous culture of hospitality.”<sup>5</sup>

This love of the Society for the poor and the excluded, expressed in deeds more than words, has been most recently confirmed by the process of discernment that led to the promulgation of the Universal Apostolic Preferences, among which is our commitment “to care for migrants, displaced persons, refugees, and victims of wars and human trafficking.”<sup>6</sup> The Society has accepted as a mission of the Church through the Holy Father to “continue to help create conditions of hospitality, to accompany all these people in their process of integration into society, and to promote the defence of their rights.”<sup>7</sup>

In response to the unprecedented number of forcibly displaced people in the world, JRS has had to grow in ways that must have been unimaginable in 1980. JRS now serves 640,000 people in 53 countries; 1 in every 100 forcibly displaced person in the world today is directly supported or served by JRS. With such grave and urgent needs, JRS must strive to be even more effective in its programmes and advocacy, to deepen its strategic planning and agile responsiveness to new situations, and enhance its ability to be a responsible steward of its financial and human resources. This context also demands that JRS reinforce its mission and

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<sup>2</sup> Address of Pope Francis to the participants of the international forum on migration and peace, 21 February 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “Jesuit Refugee Service”, Letter of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach SJ to the Whole Society, 24 June 2000.

<sup>4</sup> GC 35, d. 3, 39, v.

<sup>5</sup> GC 36, d. 1, 25, 26.

<sup>6</sup> “Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, 2019-2029”, Letter of Arturo Sosa SJ to the Whole Society, 19 February 2019.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*



identity as a work of the Society of Jesus, and accordingly, clarify and revise some of its governance structures.

Through a process of strategic discernment that was initially approved by my predecessor, Fr Adolfo Nicolás, JRS has made significant progress in the call to be a more effective sign of God's nurturing love and reconciliation:

- JRS has developed a 2019-2023 Strategic Framework, laying out four priority areas to focus its accompaniment of refugees over the next four years: the promotion of reconciliation and social cohesion; the delivery of quality formal and informal education; innovative livelihood programmes that lead to self-reliance and sustainability; and effective advocacy for the rights of refugees.
- JRS also engaged in a process of discernment that led to a proposed restructuring of its organizational structure and operating procedures, focusing on the development of mission-driven, strong country offices that will strengthen local capacity and encourage subsidiarity.
- JRS is initiating a consultation with the wider Society and its partners in an effort to implement fully its vision of a world where refugees may attain protection, have access to opportunity, and be full participants in the social, political, and economic spheres where they find themselves.
- As part of this consultation, JRS also desires to engage fruitfully and critically with the often complicated questions of governance, and to explore with the Society and other partners the opportunities of mission and identity that manifest Ignatian values and draw upon the riches of our spiritual heritage.

I have given my approval to these efforts. I applaud the willingness of JRS to take risks and to row into the deep during difficult and challenging times, when it would be so much easier to keep to established ways of proceeding. I am grateful for the generosity, the commitment, and the courage of JRS staff, volunteers, and benefactors who have made these efforts possible.

I ask members of the Society and its partners, especially those in leadership roles, to participate in the implementation of the JRS vision of inclusion and integration of refugees, and to engage in the JRS challenges of renewed governance and participation in the Ignatian heritage. This mission of JRS must be shared by all our institutions, whether they are academic, educational, social, intellectual, pastoral or spiritual. They can all contribute to the accompaniment and service of refugees. I also wish to emphasise that, as a ministry of the worldwide Society, JRS should be regarded by Major Superiors as a ministry sustained by Jesuit personnel, especially when a Jesuit seeks to discern a call to service in JRS.

The ultimate goal of all these efforts can be simply expressed: the desire to renew JRS's identity as a ministry of the Society, as it carries out its shared mission of reconciliation and justice, and dedicates itself anew to the accompaniment, service, and defence of refugees around the world.

I am confident that JRS will continue to be inspired by the vision of Fr Arrupe, who saw the Society as "being called to render a service that is human, pedagogical, and spiritual"<sup>8</sup> for

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<sup>8</sup> "The Society of Jesus and the refugee problem", Letter of Pedro Arrupe SJ to Major Superiors, 14 November 1980.



refugees. I am consoled by Fr Kolvenbach's conviction that "our service to refugees is an apostolic commitment of the whole Society ... the Society's service to refugees is one real test of our availability today."<sup>9</sup>

This service to refugees offers the apostolic body of the Society a profound and privileged opportunity to accompany suffering humanity: walking with the dispossessed as we search together for a just future through reconciliation, and rendering a service that not only brings healing in the present, but also creates resources and opportunities for human and spiritual formation towards a better future.

Refugees are present in every region of the world. The call to accompany and serve them is a responsibility given to the entire body of the Society, and it must resonate with the Society everywhere we are present.

This service to refugees requires a discernment that strives to be guided by the Spirit, and apostolic planning that makes effective use of human and all other available resources. It obliges us to deepen our vocation as collaborators in a mission that is only possible if our many efforts are joined together. It also demands that we improve our ability to work through networks that make better use of our resources, rendering us more effective in making the situation of refugees visible and in promoting actions to improve their integration in host countries.<sup>10</sup>

Only if we work together will the world be able to address the causes of forced displacement at their roots, and end a phenomenon that produces so much suffering for so many people of all ages and situations.

We ask Our Lady of the Way to guide our footsteps, as we journey with the people of God on the road that leads us to the very same Jesus who calls us to this service.

**Arturo Sosa, S.I.**  
Superior General

Rome, 24 May 2019  
Feast of Our Lady of the Way

*(Original: English)*

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<sup>9</sup> "Review of the Jesuit Refugee Service", Letter of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach SJ to the Whole Society, 14 February 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. GC 36, d. 2, 4-9.