



Vision and values for a new Europe

The Current Refugee Crisis – The Call and our Response

A Letter to the Jesuit Major Superiors of Europe, to all Jesuits, co-workers and Friends

For community notice boards, province and apostolate newsletters and other appropriate media.

Saturday 5th September 2015.

Dear Major Superiors of Europe, Dear Companions and Friends

We have all seen the terrible images in the last number of days about refugees dying as they try to reach safety in Europe. Most come from Syria, Afghanistan and other places such as Somalia and Eritrea that are war-torn. We are grateful, at European level, that there is so much generosity and solidarity in our tradition, but unfortunately this is not being translated into political terms at the moment. Apart from one or two countries, too many reactions express a hardening of attitudes, fear, a closure of borders. Terminology used, even by politicians, can be extreme and this does nothing to help public opinion or to help people to understand the dire situation in which these people find themselves and that they are, in fact, refugees fleeing for their lives.

We can relate back to the 1940s, after World War II, when so many people were fleeing war and destruction and when the Geneva Convention to protect refugees was then enacted. It was a beacon of light at that time – a sign of solidarity; a sign of commitment to international togetherness and a reaching out in compassion to those who we knew had suffered so much and whose suffering was, indeed, ongoing.

Our European communities today need to be reminded that these values of solidarity and hospitality are needed now more than ever. When we compare refugee crises of the past, in South East Asia or Africa or the ones after World War II, the one that we are experiencing now is on a par with these. JRS was founded by Father Arrupe in a movement of consolation and compassion when he saw the plight of Vietnamese boat people. The plight of so many people today coming by boat across the Mediterranean, fleeing war, especially in Syria, also moves our hearts. Jesuits and those close to us want to do something about it and they want to see the Society doing something about it.

We are proud of the work of JRS in so many parts of Europe, working steadily over so many years on the issue of access to protection, detention and on other concerns. Now new initiatives are needed. JRS is already working in front-line situations, is examining an initiative in Greece and is, also, hoping to start a project in Hungary. I encourage these initiatives and I ask that action will take place as speedily as possible. I ask Major superiors to support and encourage these new initiatives across province boundaries and all of you to give whatever help you can. We have to act together in solidarity - some smaller Provinces and Regions want to help but are unable to do much on their own.

Conference of European Provincials

I thank Jean-Marie Carrière, the Head of JRS- Europe, and his team for the work they are doing and I ask him to work with local Provinces and regions to develop these new projects. Undoubtedly our efforts on the grounds will be humble – we are not a big NGO and there is no suggestion that we act like one. But small projects from a Christian motivation can be prophetic signs of the Kingdom breaking in, of the poor being raised up, of the stranger being welcomed, of the system of oppression being challenged. Surely that is what is needed now – prophetic words and deeds that show the way forward to a continent struggling to recover and express its values.

While this letter refers mostly to the current refugee situation and to JRS, I also want to acknowledge and include the work done for migrants in so many of our provinces and regions across Europe. Jesuits and their colleagues are working, often in very difficult circumstances and with few resources, on behalf of migrants, either recently arrived or who have been here for some time. This work deserves to be honoured and supported, focussed as it is on people whom our societies would, sadly, often prefer to forget.

Concrete steps in the current situation

- I encourage Major Superiors to consider how best to advocate, in the countries of their Provinces or Regions, for a policy that is humane, in solidarity and open.
- Superiors may wish to invite scholastics to volunteer in a refugee shelter as part of their weekly apostolate.
- Can our schools run seminars of awareness for teachers, parents, pupils and in some cases can open their doors to house some refugees?
- Some of our universities have centres for human rights or for migration or have experts on Catholic social teaching. We need to use this expertise now in our analysis of this situation. Can some of these come together, perhaps co-ordinated by JRS, to reflect and to plan action?
- Can our parishes organise a ‘Sunday of solidarity’ where a refugee or a representative of one of our JRS offices in Europe is asked to speak at Masses?
- Communities can consider welcoming a refugee family. JRS Europe has a structure ‘the Welcome Project’ for this.
- Social centres and their reviews already have done much. They can make this analysis available on their sites and re-circulate resources already available.
- I ask JRS Europe in Brussels aided by the local JRS offices to help with resources for journalists, parishes, schools, bishops and episcopal conferences. This is part of its advocacy mission. Those of you who know journalists and opinion leaders can avail of these resources. JRS Europe can help also for more political statements, in order to engage the action of policy-makers.
- Our communications ministries such as web portals, cultural and pastoral reviews are asked to highlight the issue in their on-line and print media, to make available any material they have and to continue to update their analysis?
- All Jesuits can pray, asking: ‘What have I done for Christ, present in these refugees? What am I doing? What can I do?’
- Jesuits in our infirmaries are especially asked to reflect and pray for the refugees - we need their prayers as they have a special mission of praying for the Society and the Church.

While asylum and migration are certainly complex issues, the simple fact is that, in the end, people are dying. At this defining moment, we can and we must reach out. I thank so many of you who are already doing so much.

Christian roots of our Continent

There has been debate in recent years about the Christian roots of our continent. This is a time to show that this is not a debate only about language and terminology. Let us together try to help our continent and our societies move forward, to show that we are Christian not just in name but in fact, to show our love 'not just in words but in deeds'. As we approach the feast of St Peter Claver (September 9th) who did so much for slaves and marginalised people, we can pray, through his intercession, that our efforts for those seeking refuge today may be blessed and that these efforts may bear fruit that lasts.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Dardis SJ". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small flourish at the end.

John Dardis SJ
President, Conference of European Jesuit Provincials.