

Reflections on discernment in JRS by Bill O' Neill SJ

In the mission of JRS, accompaniment, service, and advocacy are distinct, but never separate: they are interwoven in all we do. But the weaving is not done once for all. Just as at the founding of JRS, we must continually discern how best to respond to the “tragic situations” of our time. At its very inception, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, then General of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), appealed to “St. Ignatius’ criteria for our apostolic work and the recent calls of ^dGeneral Congregations. In the Constitutions, writes Fr. Arrupe, “St. Ignatius speaks of the greater universal good, an urgency that is ever growing, the difficulty and complexity of the human problem involved, and lack of other people to attend to the need. With our ideal of availability and universality, the number of institutions under our care, and the active collaboration of many lay people who work with us, we are particularly well fitted to meet this challenge and provide services that are not being catered for sufficiently by other organizations and groups.” ¹ Affirmed by subsequent General Congregations, these apostolic criteria were elaborated in directives of Fathers General, e.g., in the “universal apostolic preferences” promulgated by Fr. Arturo Sosa: promotion of Ignatian “Spiritual Exercises and discernment;” walking with “individuals and communities that are vulnerable, excluded, marginalized, and humanly impoverished;” accompanying “the young in the creation of a hope-filled future;” and “care for our Common Home.”²

Inspired by the Church’s teaching, including Catholic social teaching, these renewed “apostolic criteria” are at play in our discerning “the greater universal good” (the *magis*):

(1) Whom do we *accompany*: Who, we must ask, are “the most vulnerable and excluded persons in our midst,” e.g., victims of rights’ violations, neglected by others or not adequately served?

(2) In light of our commitment to take the victims’ side, how can we best *serve* refugees and vulnerable youth (the second and third apostolic preferences), given our resources and personnel?³

(3) And in view of the “difficulty and the complexity of the human problem involved,” (3) how in our mission of *advocating* for the forcibly displaced can we redress the systemic causes of victimization? We must, that is, redress the “economic, political, and social structures that generate injustice.”

In answering these questions, we must consider:

- “An urgency that is ever growing,” e.g., immanence of harm, particular vulnerabilities (gender, disability, age etc.), relative priority (are there certain interventions which must occur if others are to succeed).
- “The difficulty and complexity of the problem involved:” Are there certain needs which we are especially well-suited to address, e.g., given our history, material and personnel resources, etc. Collaboration across the “Jesuit network” of schools, for instance, may make us “particularly well-fitted to meet [the] challenge.” In a similar vein, our heritage of spirituality and interfaith dialogue may let us address the religious/spiritual needs of refugees and IDP’s.
- “Lack of other people to attend to the need:” in light of contributions of other agencies (NGO’s, governmental and intergovernmental, etc.); what services... are not being catered for sufficiently by other organizations and groups?
- The “*magis*,” concern for the *greater universal good* is thus comparative and a function of our strategic collaboration with other organizations and groups. A final consideration arises from this -- the “multiplier effect:” where can we most *effectively* intervene, e.g., looking to longer-term consequences (especially for the most vulnerable), novel contributions, etc. Gender-responsive education, inclusive care and education for children with disability, care for groups historically marginalized on basis of race, ethnicity, caste, orientation, etc. may have multiple effects beyond our own immediate intervention. Education for the girl child, for instance, contributes not only to her health and well-being, but that of her children.

Pope Francis has reminded us, moreover, that to heed the “cry of the poor” is to heed the “cry of the earth,” e.g., of climate refugees fleeing ecological degradation (the fourth apostolic preference).⁴ Integrating care for “our common home” in all our programs and initiatives thus likewise guides us in seeking the “greater universal good.”

By its very nature, then, JRS embraces both humanitarian care (*specific* redress of refugees and IDP’s) and developmental concern for justice (*systemic* redress of victims) -- goals which may otherwise be at odds.⁵ How we answer these questions, will shape our current policies and programs, e.g., in determining the best “division of labor” between or among (i) international, regional, national and local initiatives and between or among

(ii) our different foci, e.g., programs or advocacy. Our answers will likewise give rise to new emphases, e.g., social reconciliation.⁶

Our discernment is both Catholic (upper case) and catholic (lower case): It is catholic, i.e., universal in as much as JRS serves all those who are forcibly displaced, regardless of their faith, ethnicity, gender, etc. And it is catholic, too, in as much as we serve with colleagues from other faiths or no faith: “Within the Ignatian spirit,” says JRS’s Charter, “All those engaged in the work [of JRS] should exercise co-responsibility and be engaged in discernment and participative decision-making where it is appropriate.”⁷ And increasingly, such discernment, in Fr. Sosa’s words, “enters into dialogue with other religions and with all cultures.”⁸ Indeed, in fulfilling the last three apostolic preferences, JRS fulfills the first, becoming truly catholic/Catholic by embracing other seminal traditions (sacred and secular).⁹

JRS becomes a privileged locus of living, interfaith dialogue in which strands of differing traditions are interwoven in a *common practice* of compassion. And compassion is so different than mere pity which the powerful or privileged bestow on “beneficiaries.” Compassion is rather a “suffering-with,” a way of seeing the refugee or IDP as a sister or brother, “exactly like me,” in Simone Weil’s words, albeit “stamped with a special mark by affliction.”¹⁶ In our practice of hospitality, for instance, a Muslim refugee like Mama K..., may be inspired by the central role of the *Hijrah* in Islam. In a similar vein, a Mahayana Buddhist may seek to imitate the compassionate path of the *Bodhisattva*. And Christians “pass over” to the side of the poor and vulnerable stranger as did Luke’s Good Samaritan. Our stories “rhyme” (bear a family resemblance) in rationalizing action/practice. And *our* story itself warrants such living dialogue. In Luke’s parable, after all, it is the Samaritan stranger, the despised other, who teaches the Lawyer the meaning of the law, i.e., the great commandment of neighbor-love and hospitality.

Our distinctively Catholic/Jesuit discernment thus underwrites our catholic/humanitarian mission: *how* we accompany, serve, and advocate on behalf of our refugee sisters and brothers. JRS is catholic (lower case), embracing many creeds, just because we are Catholic. We must respect the deepest religious convictions of those whom we serve and those with whom we serve -- that is at the heart of our accompaniment, service, and advocacy. Our tolerance is not vacuous as is often the case in secular institutions where religion is confined to the private sphere. Rather our tolerance must be informed, discerning. We must come to know each other’s stories if we in JRS are to tell our own story of accompaniment, service, and advocacy. And for each of us, finally, the story is unique: each of us, Ignatius believed, is called by name, each uniquely, to accompany, to serve, and to advocate on behalf of our sisters and brothers. Finally, then, we respect each person -- refugee and

colleague -- by fully respecting *her* story -- the stories that give and sustain our hope in such difficult and tragic situations. In Fr. Arrupe's words at JRS's founding, "God is calling us" through the refugees -- each of us uniquely but all of us in solidarity as JRS.¹⁰

¹ In founding JRS in November 14th, 1980, Fr. Pedro Fr. Arrupe wrote: "In the Constitutions St. Ignatius speaks of the greater universal good, an urgency that is ever growing, the difficulty and complexity of the human problem involved, and lack of other people to attend to the need. With our ideal of availability and universality, the number of institutions under our care, and the active collaboration of many lay people who work with us, we are particularly well fitted to meet this challenge and provide services that are not being catered for sufficiently by other organizations and groups.... Furthermore, the help needed is not only material: in a special way the Society is being called to render a service that is human, pedagogical and spiritual. It is a difficult and complex challenge; the needs are dramatically urgent. I have no hesitation in repeating what I said at our Consultation: 'I consider this as a new modern apostolate for the Society as a whole, of great importance for today and the future, and of much spiritual benefit also to the Society.'" Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J. "The Society of Jesus and the Refugee Problem", "Letter to all Jesuit Major Superiors", *Acta Romana*, vol. XVIII, Rome, Italy (September 13, 1980): 238-256 (ESP.), 257-276 (ENG), 277-296 FR). <https://Fr.Arrupe.jesuitgeneral.org/en/life?view=archivo&id=36>.

² Building upon the apostolic preferences proposed 15 years earlier by his predecessor, Fr. Hans Kolvenbach (1928–2016) Fr. General Arturo Sosa promulgated the new apostolic preferences on February 19, 2019. Arturo Sosa, "Universal apostolic preferences of the Society of Jesus: 2019-2029," https://www.jesuits.global/sj_files/2020/05/2019-06_19feb19_eng.pdf.

³ Fr. Sosa, "Universal apostolic preferences of the Society of Jesus: 2019-2029." In Fr. Sosa's words, refugees and youth constitute "a complementary and interwoven '*locus theologicus*'" [theological 'place' of discernment].

⁴ Fr. Sosa, "Universal apostolic preferences of the Society of Jesus," 1-6.

⁵ See *Global Compact on Refugees*, United Nations, New York, 2018 <https://www.unhcr.org/5c658aed4>. Cf. Government of Kenya, *Support for Host Community and Refugee Empowerment (SHARE): Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)*, vi, 2 <https://refugee.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Kenya-Comprehensive-Refugee-Response-Framework--CRRF.pdf>. Cf. Government of Kenya, *Kenya Comprehensive Refugee Program: 2019-2020: Programming for Inclusive Solutions and Sustainable Development*

<https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Kenya%20Comprehensive%20Refugee%20Programme%20%282019%29.pdf>

⁶ See *Documents of General Congregation 36 of the Society of Jesus General Congregation*, Decree 1, “Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice,” https://jesuits.eu/images/docs/GC_36_Documents.pdf; *Documents of the General Congregation 35 of the Society of Jesus*, Decree 3, “Challenges to our Mission Today,” section III, “Call to Establish Right Relationships: A Mission of Reconciliation,” https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/2008_Decree3GC35/.

⁷ In the words of JRS’s Charter (no. 13): “Within the Ignatian spirit, JRS welcomes the involvement of lay persons and cooperation and partnership with religious congregations. ‘All those engaged in the work [of JRS] should exercise co-responsibility and be engaged in discernment and participative decision-making where it is appropriate.’” GC 34, 1995, Decree 13, “Co-operation with the Laity,” #343. jrsmalta.jesuit.org/mt/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2011/08/1-JRS_Charter-layout-201108.pdf.

⁸ Sosa, “Universal apostolic preferences of the Society of Jesus,” 2.

⁹ Fr. General, Arturo Sosa reaffirmed the mission of JRS in terms of the universal preferences: “JRS is a ministry of the Society of Jesus, and its role as part of the Society is clear. The ministry of JRS can inspire us to live the Universal Apostolic Preferences, drawing on the spirituality that motivated Father Fr. Arrupe to accompany the forcibly displaced, to give hope to young people, to shine a light on the connection of displaced sisters and brothers with the care of our earth.” Arturo Sosa, S.J., Superior General, “Letter to the Whole Society of Jesus and Partners in Mission: Renewed commitment of the Jesuit Refugee Service” (Rome, May 24th, 2019), <https://jrs.net/en/news/the-audacity-of-the-impossible-father-general-arturo-sosa-sj-on-jrss-mission/>.

¹⁶ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 115.

¹⁰ Fr. Arrupe, “The Society of Jesus and the Refugee Problem.”