

1-1-2013

# If the People of God Moves, the Church Moves

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Published version. "If the People of God moves, the Church moves," in *Side by Side: Learning What Accompaniment Is All About*. Eds. Kenneth Gavin SJ, Danielle Vella. Rome: Jesuit Refugee Service, 2013: 78-82. [Publisher link](#). © 2013 Jesuit Refugee Service. Used with permission.

# ‘If the People of God moves, the Church moves’

*The church has always been close to people on the move in different ways. For the early Christian community, hospitality was a fundamental attitude and way of life. Throughout the centuries, hostels offered shelter to travellers and pilgrims, with special concern for the vulnerable. Today, ministry to refugees is a key missionary field, where the Good News of Jesus’ love and compassion is proclaimed. Recalling the insightful comment of JRS founder Pedro Arrupe, “If the People of God moves, the Church moves”, AGBONKHIANMEGHE OROBATOR highlights the close relationship between the church and displaced people. God does not abandon his people: even in exile, he is present, accompanying them all the way. This awareness can change our understanding of God. He, who walked with the refugees of the biblical Exodus in search of a land free from slavery, continues to walk with today’s refugees. In accompanying refugees we, like God, “pitch our tent” among them and become a living sign that the church has not forgotten them.*

Ugandan theologian Peter Kanyandago once asked a poignant question: “What is the church on a continent where 20 million people live in exile?” Theologically speaking, I believe that the experience of displacement sheds light on the meaning of the church. This became clear to me a few years ago when I visited refugee camps in eastern Africa. Although the primary purpose of my visit was to

collect data for my doctoral dissertation, the stories and testimonies of the refugees who were accompanied by JRS confirmed the truth of the claim that refugees embody an image of the church as the people of God. The roots of this understanding run deep in the Scripture.

Christian theological appreciation of displacement draws on events, stories and narratives from the Old

and New Testaments. The experience of migration, exile and deportation shaped the covenantal relationship between the people of Israel and their God. From Abraham’s migration (Genesis 12) to Joseph and Mary’s flight into Egypt in order to save the life of their newborn son, Jesus (Matthew 2:13-15), God reveals himself as a God who constantly accompanies his people. I remember a



**Uganda:** Celso Romanin SJ hearing confession in Adjumani back in the nineties.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ? How do I, in practical ways, demonstrate my accompaniment of refugees? Can I see myself as a sign of God's deep presence among his people of all faiths?
- ? The World Council of Churches said: "the faith journeys of people who suffer uprooting are a heritage of the whole church." What can the religions of today learn from the witness of uprooted people?
- ? If accompaniment is an image of the church, what actions might we encourage local Christian communities to take to welcome and support the refugees in their midst?
- ? What are some of the ways in which refugees could participate in and enrich the life of JRS and of local Christian communities?

For the church, the refugees are a constant reminder that the people of God is essentially a pilgrim people, never settled, always on the move, always searching, always reaching out further.

*JRS directors, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1985*

conversation with a catechist, Juvenal Niboye, in Lukole camp in Tanzania, about the theological interpretation of being a refugee. He said: “Our experience of exile is like that of the Israelites in Egypt. God chooses them as his people... They belong to God who will lead them home.” For him, being a refugee did not mean God had abandoned him; rather, he believed God was *present* in his experience and God will *accompany* him home. Displacement and exile do not dispossess refugees of the *presence* and *accompaniment* of God.

From a faith perspective, displacement is not merely about isolated people moving from place to place; it is the church, in its original sense as *people* of God, which has moved and has been displaced. The people on the move are

the church, the people of God, in the particular context of displacement, migration and exile. The JRS founder, Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ, captured this idea concisely when he stated: “If the People of God moves, the Church moves.” Arrupe’s statement establishes a fundamental connection between ‘church’ and ‘people’, no matter the socio-economic or political situation of the latter. To say that the church moves when the people move clearly suggests that the church does not exist apart from the people. So strong is this link that the actual condition or situation of the people reflects the locus and identity of the Christian community. This explains why, perhaps, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People proposed the radical idea that not only

should priests and bishops visit their people in refugee camps and settlements; they should actually *follow* them into exile. The idea that bishops and priests *follow* refugees into exile clearly demonstrates the reality of accompaniment as a useful metaphor or image of the church.

When I visited Kakuma camp, Bishop Harrington, who at the time was the bishop of Lodwar, used the imagery of the nomadic lifestyle of the Turkana people to describe the identity of the church. “The church is in constant movement,” he said; “it has become a nomadic church, displaced here and there.” Clearly, to be a refugee in the harsh terrain of Turkana is a traumatic and neuralgic experience. Yet, from a faith perspective, the idea of ‘nomadism’ relates to the

essence of the church. In other words, in the context of this reflection, refugees embody the meaning of the church as a pilgrim people, as the JRS directors noted in a meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1985: “For the church, the refugees are a constant reminder that the people of God is essentially a pilgrim people, never settled, always on the move, always searching, always reaching out further.” The World Council of Churches makes a similar point by affirming that “the faith journeys of people who suffer uprooting are a heritage of the whole church. As our understanding of God’s love has been illustrated throughout the history of the church by Old Testament stories of exile, so too must the church today receive the word of God through the witness of uprooted people.”

However, it is not enough to merely reiterate the principle that refugees remind us of the pilgrim nature of the church. To understand the phenomenon of refugees in this light generates ethical and moral responsibilities of solidarity, hospitality and accompaniment. My focus is on accompaniment.

Accompaniment demands presence; it does not make sense from a distance. An authentic and living Christian community is one in which nobody is left behind; it is a place of ‘*with-ness*’ and ‘being with’ – side by side and face to face – where we accompany one another as followers (and after the example) of Jesus Christ. In this context, accompaniment enables the Christian community in exile to deepen the awareness of its identity as a living

embodiment of the church and a community of *witness*. In his 2001 message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope John Paul II made the important point that “History shows that in those cases wherein the Catholic faithful were accompanied during their move to other countries, they did not only preserve their faith, but also found a fertile soil to deepen it, personalize it and bear witness to it through their lives.”

Over the years that I have been associated with JRS, I have come across some striking examples of accompaniment and presence. I recall a diocesan priest from Burundi, Fr Leonidas Njebarikanuye, who lived in Kanembwa camp, Tanzania; the Jesuits who lived in Rhino camp, Uganda; and the SMA (Society of African Missions)

priests who lived in Benaco camp, Tanzania. In reality, it is not physical proximity that matters; what matters is the quality of our presence to and accompaniment of displaced people as the pilgrim church of God. “The mere presence of a sister or a priest (or a lay woman or man) in a camp is a sign to the refugee of the church’s presence, walking that lonely path too; it is a sign that the church cares” (*Refugees are people*, Simon E. Smith and Joseph G. Donders).

In the final analysis, the awareness that accompaniment of refugees embodies the image and identity of the church as the pilgrim people of God transforms our understanding of God – “God, who walked with the refugees of the Exodus in search of a land free

of any slavery is still walking with today’s refugees,” in the words of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People. Here, there is something profoundly evocative of the Incarnation. The catechist, Niboye, said to me, “God has pitched his *cahute* or *blindé* (‘hut’) in the midst of his displaced people.” I believe that when we accompany refugees we pitch tent in the midst of God’s people. The veteran JRS pastoral worker, Fr Gary Smith SJ, calls this experience “a mystical theology of presence among the people”.

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