

The Society of Jesus and the Refugee Problem

Letter of Fr. Pedro Arrupe to all Jesuit Major Superiors

November 14, 1980

Dear Father, Pax Christi!

Around Christmas time, last year, struck and shocked by the plight of thousands of boat people and refugees, I felt it my duty to send cable messages to some 20 Major Superiors around the world. Sharing my distress with them, I asked what they in their own countries and the universal Society could do to bring at least some relief to such a tragic situation.

Their response was magnificent. Immediate offers of help were made in personnel, know-how and material; supplies of food and medicine as well as money were sent; direct action was taken through the mass media to influence government and private agencies; services were volunteered in pastoral as well as organizational capacities; and so on.

As a follow up to this first wave of action, I called a Consultation in the Curia to consider what response the Society might make to the increasingly serious refugee problem throughout the world. The October 15 issues of News and Features reported on this meeting.

At the outset, I explained that this situation constitutes a challenge to the Society we cannot ignore if we are to remain faithful to St Ignatius' criteria for our apostolic work and the recent calls of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations. 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 (cf Const VII, 2, n 623). 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 organisations and groups. An additional incentive might be that the kind of service required, calling for relatively short periods of time from individual Jesuits, need not, if well planned and co-ordinated, disrupt the life and progress of existing apostolates and institutions. 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".

We spent two days looking at the considerable amount of work already being carried out in this field by the Society and considering ways in which it might be extended and better co-ordinated. We examined the possibilities the Society already has, and especially could have in the future if this work were to be developed. A fuller account of

this meeting, together with examples of what Jesuits are already doing for refugees in several parts of the world, is given in the current October issue of *Promotio Justitiae* (n 19) which will be mailed to you shortly.

In the light of our consultation and after further discussion with my General Counsellors, I have decided to set up within the Curia a service to co-ordinate Jesuit refugee work, which will henceforth be referred to as the "Jesuit Refugee Service" (JRS). For the time being the JRS will be an extension of the Social Secretariat and come under the responsibility of Father Michael Campbell-Johnston. If, however, its work increases, the JRS may be reinforced, though primarily with collaborators in other parts of the world.

The aims and objectives of the JRS are as follows:

- a. To set up a network of contacts within the Society so that existing work for refugees can be better planned and co-ordinated;
- b. To collect information that might lead to new opportunities for assistance to refugees;
- c. To act as a switchboard between offers of help from Provinces and the needs of international agencies and organisations;
- d. To conscientize the Society about the importance of this apostolate and the different forms it can take both within countries of first asylum and receiving countries;
- e. To direct the special attention of the Society towards those groups or areas that receive little publicity or help from elsewhere;
- f. And to encourage our publications and institutes of learning to undertake research into the root causes of the refugee problem so that preventive action can be taken.

It is not intended that the JRS become a big operation. In carrying out the above task, it will endeavour to work mainly through men in the Provinces themselves. It is for this reason I am announcing this new assignment of the Social Secretariat to you, as Provincial. I shall be counting largely on you and members of your Province to support and help develop this side of its work.

As an initial step, I would like to make the following requests of you:

- a. To bring the contents of this letter to the attention of the members of your Province and encourage them to respond to this new call;
- b. To provide the JRS with information about any work already being undertaken for refugees in your Province and how you foresee future possibilities for extending it;
- c. To let the JRS know what services or help you would like to receive from it;
- d. To identify, if you feel this necessary, a member of your Province who could serve as a liaison with the JRS.

I hope you will accept this letter and the request it makes in a spirit of alacrity and

availability. St. Ignatius called us to go anywhere we are not needed for the greater service of God- The spiritual as well as material need of nearly 16 million refugees throughout the world today could scarcely be greater. God is calling us through these helpless people. We should consider the chance of being able to assist them a privilege that will, in turn, bring great blessings to ourselves and our Society.

I commend the Society and myself to your Holy Sacrifices.

In the Heart of Jesus,

Pedro Arrupe, SJ Superior General