When the Stranger Summons

Spiritual and Theological Considerations for Ministry

Mary Jo Leddy

From a Canadian perspective, the author explores the recognition of the mystery of Christ in the interaction of minister and refugee. Encounters and relationships with real persons who are refugees call us to compassionate welcome and should lead us to be credible witnesses in action.

For the last seventeen years, I have been summoned to become ever more Christian by a stranger who knocked at our door, who phoned from a detention center, or who mailed from an Internet café in the village by the camp on the border. During this time, I have lived with and worked for refugees in a small community called Romero House—which is actually four houses and a storefront center in the west end of Toronto. It is a project rooted in the Catholic Tradition and yet open to people from other Christian denominations and from other faith traditions.

Romero House is the context in which I have dug deep in search of the spiritual and theological foundations for welcoming the stranger. I have discovered shards

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of insights, fragments of faith from another age, wisdom solidified under the pressure of the times. These, I think, are worthy of some consideration.

**Facing the System**

As I have listened to frontline church workers, refugee advocates, and immigration lawyers, two realities seem to emerge as constants in their experience: the first is that many of them are rooted in some church tradition; the second, that most of them got involved in “refugee work” through a personal encounter with a refugee or a refugee family.

This “conversion”—this change of mind and heart and moral imagination—through a personal relationship was certainly my experience. It has also been true many times over according to church people who have been “faced” by a refugee in great need. This is, as Emmanuel Levinas has written, the ethical moment. This is the moment when you are summoned, addressed, commanded. This is the time of annunciation and visitation. I would describe it in this way:

There is a knock at the door.
You can choose not to answer.
For reasons unclear even to yourself
you open the door slightly and see
THE EYES and then
the blur of a face as it looks down
and then up again.
It is the face of a stranger,
the face of a man.
You do not know who he is;
you do not know who you are.
You could close the door. Perhaps he senses this.
The face of a man with a mouth says
“Please help me.”
You could say No.
You do not know what to do.
You used to know before
you learned how the system can file
people away . . . forever.
But you know you are, here and now
the one, the one who must respond:
This YOU must do. There is no other.
You are faced.
The stranger moves forward
This is the core of the ethical experience of Christians who have become involved in working with refugees. These Christian citizens are often rather middle-class people who would not normally associate themselves with peace and justice “causes.” For many, the encounter with a real person called a refugee evokes feelings of profound compassion that lead to practical forms of kindness. It is within this reach of mercy that the necessity (and near impossibility) of justice begins to emerge.

**Systems That Deface**

As ministers become companions to real people called refugees, they begin to see the immigration system (and other systems such as the welfare and health systems) through different eyes.

These systems seem designed to deface human beings, to render them invisible, to muffle their cry for justice. This is a social and religious shock for the Christian who now knows the refugee by name, who now sees the face as the landscape of one particular history. This person has been given a Client ID number and has been filed away. From time to time pro forma letters arrive to signal that another hurdle has been passed and that the end, the place of safety, has been reached.

However, sometimes the letter says, “You have not been determined to be a Convention Refugee.” And then, “You have fifteen days to present yourself at the Immigration Detention Centre.” Case closed. Another life is filed away.

The immigration officer who issued the form letter never has to see the hand that trembles after the envelope is opened. The church worker sees and is afraid. Sometimes this fear galvanizes a whole church community into action. Then comes the long process of letters and visits to politicians. A sense of futility grips those of little faith.

This is the time of temptation. It is all too easy to begin to demonize “the system” or particular people who are supposedly in charge of the system. It is tempting to engage in the struggle of us against them and indeed such a struggle tends to attract people inclined to this contemporary form of Manichean dualism. We are right and they are wrong. We are on the side of the angels and against the unjust and deceiving enemies.

The authentically Christian response, in the midst of this struggle, is to remain life-size. The church worker who now knows the real refugee, who is neither better nor worse than the conventional stereotype, must resist the temptation to demonize
immigration officials and/or politicians. The Christian must preach (in action more than words) that the employees of the system are also human and must be summoned to life-size responsibility.

There is indeed something demonic in this situation, but it is not the officials in the system, but rather the system itself. The reflections of the political thinker Hannah Arendt on bureaucratic systems are as relevant today as they were more than fifty years ago. She described the ways in which ordinary people doing a good job could contribute to evil of great consequence—without ever knowing it or willing it—because the system acted as a buffer between their intentions and the consequences of their actions. Bureaucracies, in her analysis, are structured in such a way that it seems as if nobody is responsible for the terrible consequences of its cumulative action—not those on the top, who never see the people affected by their decisions; not those on the bottom who see the people but experience themselves as helpless victims (for a contemporary interpretation of Arendt, see Shorris). Those on the top can argue that they never really killed anyone while those on the bottom can say that they were only following the orders of someone else.

Arendt makes the important observation that, in some medieval paintings, the devil has a mask. He is the faceless one, the Nobody. In the various systems that hold the power of life and death over refugees, it often seems that Nobody is responsible. Refugees who arrive in the West know what happens when Nobody is responsible. Nobody can kill you just as anybody or somebody could do so.

One of the challenges involved in working with refugees is to summon all concerned to face themselves. It is an act of ethical resistance to say that systems have been created by human beings and, therefore, can be changed by human beings. Systems must be changed so that human beings can face each other and face the consequences of their actions. For the church worker who knows a refugee as a person, this is not an abstract ethical statement about what ought to be done. It is the stubborn statement of someone who holds another by the hand . . . and trembles.

Myths of Innocence

However, it is not only the structures of our institutions that deface the refugee; it is also the way in which our political culture makes us look good in its historical mirror.

I take it as a given that most church people are generally compassionate to those in need. I know for a fact that most church people, when faced by a refugee in need, respond with decency and generosity. They tend to think of themselves as hardworking and decent and, if they read stories about refugees being mistreated, tend to assume that the refugees must have deserved it, must have done something
wrong. Our cultural myths of innocence have blinded us to the injustices of our own social systems that refugees know in their bones.

The Canadian myths of innocence are probably related to the fact that the country has never been an imperial power and tends to think that responsibility in the world lies with the other “great” powers. Canada has been a colony first of France, then of England and now of the United States. As a result, Canadians have developed a branch plant mentality that assumes that the centers of power and influence are elsewhere and that is where responsibility lies. It has been argued that Canadians prefer this colonial status that makes them morally innocent.

It is a dangerous myth that blinds Canadians to the actual racism and injustice that has taken place in the past and is still present today, here. For example, few Canadians know that their country had the worst record in the Western world in terms of accepting Jewish refugees during the Second World War. Fewer still know that Canada’s treatment of the Japanese during the war was far harsher and more extensive than what happened to Japanese Americans. The Canadian Parliament invoked the War Measures Act on the smallest of provocations. Canadians marched against the Vietnam War that the Americans were responsible for—but never acknowledged that Agent Orange was being manufactured in the beautiful little town of Elora in Ontario.

Only a short time ago Canadian bureaucrats finessed an agreement that closed the border to refugees seeking to enter Canada through the United States. The so-called “Safe Third Country Agreement” effectively cut the flow of refugee claimants to Canada by half. It was done quietly, nicely, through an administrative agreement that was implemented in the sleepy news time after Christmas. Church workers in refugee shelters on both sides of the border held prayer services and wept as the door was closed to desperate people. And the transport trucks full of goods rolled on over the bridges at the border.

The culture of the United States is far more imperial than colonial in its consciousness. Thus, Americans in general are far more attuned to the responsibilities and abuses of power. However, they have other ways of distancing themselves from the injustices done to others like refugees. Americans tend to divide the world between “the government” that is guilty and responsible and “the people” who are
as innocent as apple pie and as good and wholesome as little league games in small towns on a Sunday afternoon.

Given the sociohistorical context of North America, those who seek to minister to and with refugees need to think long and hard about their underlying theological assumptions about the way the world is, about the way people are. Just as it is tempting to cast the refugee as either a morally superior being or a socially inferior type, it is also tempting to divide the world between the unjust and the just. Yet, as Augustine reminded his people when the Roman Empire began to crumble and as Solzhenitsyn prophesied when cracks appeared in the Soviet Empire: The line between good and evil runs through the middle of each of us. It is not out there, it is in here, in each of us. This perspective helps us to work with refugees with a life-size spirituality, one marked by truth, humility, and a measure of hope.

Sanctuary

A sense of life-size responsibility is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the Sanctuary Movement (for a comprehensive overview, see Cunningham). In all its various shapes and forms in North America today, it remains essentially a movement of conscience that usually begins with a knock at the door. “You must help us.” No church authority has ordered sanctuary to start, and no church authority can command local churches to stop offering this option for life.

Sanctuary begins in the ethical moment when a church congregation is summoned by a refugee in great danger. The congregation sees and listens and, after careful research, recognizes the situation as a matter of life and death. It is this personal encounter that provokes the radical response of sanctuary. As I have suggested, this personal relationship lies at the heart of ministry to refugees, the stubborn refusal to reduce refugees to an impersonal cause or a concern. All too often refugees are an abstraction, the object of social contempt or social concern. They become scapegoats for national fears or a kind of romantic outsider for those who also feel alienated from the system.

The members of a local congregation see the real person, the eyes that dart around the room, the hands that twist the tablecloth. They see the children and hear them singing, “I love you, you love me . . . we’re a happy family.”

In offering sanctuary, a church congregation is taking an action that is at once intensely religious and thoroughly political. It calls into question the laws and procedures that have left human beings in such a perilous situation. Sanctuary is a radical statement and is recognized as such, even by non-Christians or by those of no religious belief. It illustrates how religion, which can sometimes—for better or worse—be a conservative force in society, can also become a liberating political force.
The shape of sanctuary is necessarily different in various contexts. For example, in the 1980s the sanctuary movement developed in the United States when the government refused asylum to thousands of Central American refugees who were fleeing regimes that were being propped up by the American government. The part of the movement that originated in the Tucson, Arizona, area boldly declared that it was taking a civil initiative—on the grounds that when the government refused to uphold international law then citizens must take the initiative to do so. The movement that developed in the Chicago area chose to emphasize sanctuary as an act of civil disobedience against the law of the state. The difference is significant. Nevertheless, wherever sanctuary was offered in the ’80s in the United States, it was always a short-term matter. Refugees were moved from church to church, usually on their way up to Canada.

However, the situation was much different in Canada. If a refugee had been refused by the Canadian refugee determination process, where would they go? To the United States? To Greenland? The one country was too dangerous and the other too distant.

As a result, the experience of offering sanctuary in Canada has been a long, drawn-out process that has become a time of intense spiritual testing for the almost thirty church communities that have been involved. For example, an Iranian man lived in an Anglican church in Vancouver for three years before he was eventually granted status on humanitarian grounds.

It takes immense inner reserve for a refugee to live in such confinement for so long. It takes spiritual resources of great substance for a church community to sustain a commitment to providing for a person or family in sanctuary. There is the ongoing challenge of providing for the basic necessities of life, food, a place to live—and how to justify this expenditure when it means siphoning funds from other worthwhile projects and using space that would otherwise be used for a daycare.

On a more difficult level there is the reality of sheer boredom, the real and present possibility of despair and even suicide. For families, the strict confinement puts immense stress on marriages and on the relationships between parents and children. Some marriages cannot survive this time of forced togetherness.

Because there is nowhere else to go, the church inevitably becomes involved in the process of lobbying for the refugee with the various politicians and masters of the refugee universe. Thus begins the long and weary relationship with Nobody.
It is usually at this point that church leaders get involved and go head to head with politicians. Sometimes this helps and sometimes it does not. The media begin to cover a story and then weary of it. And then, quietly, someday—when everyone is looking the other way—the papers arrive, and the refugee walks out of the church.

Needless to say, there are church communities that are still “in recovery” from such a situation. These parishes can hardly remember what it was like “before they came to live with us.” They have been sorely tested not only by the bureaucratic nobodies but also by the refugees themselves who have become petulant, demanding, and ungrateful. Yet most church people I have talked to will also say that the time of sanctuary was a time when they really discovered what it meant to be a church community, when they began to understand the Gospel as a living commandment, as a way of life. A new standard of authenticity enters the life of that congregation. They know their church has become significant, weighty, consequential.

The public attention given to the witness of sanctuary today is telling. There was a time in the ’70s and ’80s when statements by church leaders and ecclesial documents were considered a matter of public importance. The media was interested in what the churches had to say on a wide variety of social and political topics.

This is no longer the case. In a culture saturated with information, in churches demoralized by the revelations of sexual abuse, statements alone no longer have the power to convince. “We read what the bishops say,” I once heard a young person say, “but we know they don’t mean what they say. Look at how they live.” A statement may have authority but not credibility. The only credible church statements now reside in the text of Christian witness, in the significance of a life. Only our lives give weight to our words. Through the practice of sanctuary, people know the church means what it says.

The witness of sanctuary is living testimony to the fact that refugees are human beings. They cannot be filed away, they cannot be consigned to bureaucratic oblivion. Because they are not invisible, God is not invisible. The practice of sanctuary is a statement that refugees are not disposable. Sanctuary enacts a contemporary Credo: human beings are holy. Despite what our consumer culture tells us, what is holy cannot be and should not be thrown away.

The In-Between Christ

My association with the Sanctuary Movement has made me acutely aware of the ever present possibility of weariness that besets those who work with refugees. The demands are daily, relentless, and the results are often very long in coming. For example, I have been assisting a woman who has been trying for seventeen years to get her husband to Canada. We have aged together.
Nevertheless, as I compare those who minister with refugees with those who work in other areas of peace and justice, I find the refugee workers remarkably focused, less given to ego trips, and more doggedly hopeful than most. In the midst of great suffering, they have found a modicum of joy. With them, I am constantly reminded of the saying of Frederick Buechner that “the place where God calls you is the place where your deep joy meets the deep suffering of the word.”

It is always that mysterious mix of suffering and joy that identifies the authentic living of the Gospel. On the one hand, we cannot lounge on an island of joy in the midst of a sea of suffering; on the other hand, one can drown in the hot water of suffering and injustice without life-saving joy. In my experience, this is what the refugees have taught me: how to find joy without denying the reality of suffering. If you work with refugees, you are inevitably drawn to the deep spiritual significance of parties!

Years ago I might have said that I have found Christ IN the refugees. I no longer think this is an adequate or helpful way of speaking about the experience of Christ who is discovered in the process of welcoming the stranger.

To say that Christ is IN anyone, whether in oneself or in another, is to somehow objectify Christ and make him into a kind of hidden icon. And what spiritual contortions we go through as we try to see Christ in the sometimes ungrateful refugee, in the sometimes smelly, poor person. And what a spiritual challenge to find Christ IN oneself or IN the machinations of the church!

Yet, it is undeniably true that Christ is real, present, and alive as one begins to open the door to the stranger. This mystery is so, I now think, because of the fundamental relationality of grace. Christ is the mystery that comes alive in the interaction between the refugee and the minister. This mystery is perhaps expressed better in poetry than prose.

As we are companions of each other
We discover Christ
in the in-between of our lives.
In-between us Christ is recognized,
comes alive, grows up, is resurrected.
It is not that Christ is IN we who are citizens.
It is not that Christ is IN the refugee who arrives.
The spirit of Christ is born between us
As we live together, suffer together and rejoice together.
Christ is not only in one culture
or in another culture.
Christ is not IN Canada or IN the United States
or IN Zimbabwe or IN Colombia.
Christ is not in the Church as some frozen icon
that we possess.
Christ is not in the refugees as some hidden image that we must discover. Christ lives along the border that we cross and recross everyday. So too Christ is not the treasure of Christianity waiting to be shared. Christ is not hidden anonymously in other faiths. Christ is discovered anew along the boundaries between Christians and Muslims and all others as they live together, as compassion and need meet and summon each other to justice and peace.

Living with people called refugees, working for them, is a daily opportunity to meet Christ in the interface of life, to see his face, which is the difference and the relationship between you and an other.

References


