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## **The Jesuit Refugee Service and the John Felice Rome Center**

*Photo Exhibition  
20 May 2009*

### **Respecting Strangers: replacing fear with welcome**

Two weeks ago on a visit to JRS projects in the Middle East, I happened to be in the Jordanian capital, Amman, at the same time as the Pope.

Ten young Iraqi refugees who participate in JRS programmes were part of a group of young people who had been invited to meet his Holiness. Everything had been arranged; their names were on the list after being cleared by security controls.

However, on the morning of event, three young refugees did not show up. They and their families were terrified of being arrested by the police.

Yet both of these countries are welcoming. Jordan and Syria, whose combined populations are 27 million, host more than 1.5 million Iraqi refugees. One in 20 people in these countries is an Iraqi.

The insecurity and anxiety felt by refugees are not so visible, but they are there. The terror of violence and persecution caused them to flee Iraq. The same terror continues to prevent them from returning and these experiences are still fresh in their minds. As they struggle to get by on their savings, fear still permeates their meagre rented homes. This is often an integral part of the refugee experience.

With this in mind, I think it is only appropriate that here on the Rome campus of Loyola University Chicago I quote St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus. In his Spiritual Exercises and the rules on discernment, Ignatius speaks of fear as being the worst enemy of human nature. He invites us to look at the causes, to discern and **not** be driven by it.

Terror and threats are the instruments used by armed groups and governments to control and drive away their peoples. Refugees seek safety and protection in foreign countries. Hoping to find security, all too often, they meet fear on the other side of the borders. Xenophobia – the Greek term meaning the **unfounded fear** of the stranger – has become all too common a reality in the world, not just in Europe and North America, but also in countries such as South Africa and Ecuador. This **unfounded fear** is often hyped up by media and manipulated for political interests.

Only 12 months ago, 60 people were killed and 30,000 African migrants and refugees were displaced in a wave of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Until recently, more than 15,000 Zimbabweans were being deported per month from the country.

Closer to home, here in Italy, things are equally worrying. Less than two weeks ago, the government prevented the arrival of a boatload of men, women, some of them pregnant, and children from coming to the country. Instead seeing if they were fleeing human rights abuses, they returned them to Libya, a country without an asylum determination process and whose human rights record is questionable, to say the least.

A week later, the lower house of the Italian parliament voted to make irregular entry or stay a criminal offence. If approved by the Senate, undocumented migrants apprehended in the country will be fined and anyone who rents housing to them faces a three-year prison sentence. Is the arrival of people fleeing extreme poverty and human rights violations such a threat to us that we are prepared to criminalise them and jail those who offer them housing?

It is true that many of these migrants who are fleeing extreme poverty would not be recognised as refugees as defined by the UN Refugee

Convention. But I do not want to question the appropriateness of the UN Refugee Convention, of whether the hurdle of well-founded fear of persecution is a hurdle too high for many refugees to jump. I would like to reflect with the words of Ignatius. According to St Ignatius, fear is not a good advisor. To be afraid or to create fear does not help us to make good decisions or carry out just actions.

This exhibition seeks to help all of us to find the welcome in our hearts. We are invited to see the human faces of refugees, just like ours.

These photos present the lives of refugees in many different situations where JRS has worked, like that of Augusto and his family in Angola, which you find on the exhibition leaflet. After losing his leg in a landmine explosion, he went on to study carpentry. When JRS closed its projects in 2007, Augusto was working as a carpenter and supporting his family in Luena, the capital. Sadly, shortly after the war ended in the country, his son also lost his leg in a landmine accident.

Looking into their faces, we see their dignity and courage. Neither faces nor photos evoke fear in us. They touch us. They are just normal people who have been thrown into abnormal circumstances by powers beyond their and our control, driven by economic and political interests, often far removed from their lives.

I hope that all of you and many others who come to this exhibition will gain a better understanding of the tragic contexts and the **well-founded** fears that push refugees to seek security and protection in stable countries, such as Italy. I wish that any doubts we have will be put aside and that we find the compassion and love for our fellow human beings, particularly those who, unlike Augusto, have not been able to return home.

Just in case there is some xenophobia deep inside our beings, these photos can help us to leave such feelings behind. Our attitudes and feelings can be powerful agents of change, helping us to replace our fears with welcome.

Thank you and welcome