

Reflection on Visit with Refugees in Jordan, Sr. Martha Bertsch, SSND

Not long ago a man near our house was looking very sad. When I asked him why, he told me that the situation for refugees from Iraq and Syria is terrible, and now that it is getting colder, they have no warm place to be! And we can do nothing, he said, because they are far away from us, and we cannot go to Iraq.

I told him: "We do not have to go so far; these refugees are coming now to us; they are already our neighbors in Jordan. We will ask Christians from Nazareth to help Christians from Iraq." ...and we did. Many people gave money for our brothers and sisters in the refugee camp in Amman.

I have just returned from Jordan where I spent a few days visiting with refugees, Christians from Mosul, Iraq. In Jordan, there are many, many refugees from Iraq. The churches in Amman open their doors and empty rooms for Christians from Mosul. Most of the Syrian refugees are in big refugee camps further north...1 ½ million Syrian refugees in Jordan!

What I saw in the smaller camps, what I heard from the refugees was very moving and difficult! They told me many stories, like how the Islamic State (IS) came at 2:00 in the morning near their houses and with a loudspeaker would wake them up, telling them to leave the country, or turn to Islam, or give over their wives and daughters, or leave immediately,...otherwise they will be killed!

In a short time, people put some belongings together and quickly left their homes, especially the wives and children, going north, hoping to find a safe place or the border open for them. In the rush many of them forgot their passports or other important papers. Some people are still waiting for the border to be open for them one day. Some shared what they saw in villages, how IS brutally killed people.



Thousands of refugees are in the city of Amman. Caritas takes good care of them; priests and sisters open their houses, halls, and empty rooms, and put containers in their gardens. While I was there, we had lots of rain; some roofs were not fixed well, so the rain easily came in. The refugees just moved with their mattresses to another corner, for there was no other place to go.

People sit around on the floor in small rooms the whole day, having nothing to do!!! These refugees cannot find work; it is not allowed. The children cannot go to school yet. Some places have hot water just one day a week! By the time 125 people take a shower, the water is cold or gone.

It was great to see how Christians from Amman take care of the refugees; even so, there are many other poor people in Jordan! Everywhere I went, I just tried to listen, to hear their sad

stories. What I wanted or tried to say seemed useless! I felt very, very poor and helpless!



To see their faith, to meet these strong Christians, was very moving! Before leaving each place, we would stand together and pray...even for IS, because hate will not help! To pray for them every day is important! Only God can take away the heart of stone from them and give them a heart of flesh! One man stood up and said: "IS has taken away all that we had, but they can never take away our faith!"

The hospitality is still great even though they have nothing! Vegetable or fruits or Arabic coffee they want to serve to others immediately. People help each other in different ways, sharing what they have like one big family.

Among these people are some doctors and nurses from hospitals, and I asked them where were the sick now? How could they be move? "They are in the hands of IS," they answered.

Not so much the money that I could bring from the Christians in Nazareth that was important. They said that though they need money for some personal things, to visit them and to listen to them, to spend time with them, and to show solidarity...this is what they appreciated!

Some of them already have walked for a long time through a dark tunnel. They have lost family members in Baghdad in terrorist attacks, been sick, wounded, moved from their homes and then from place to place for safety,....and IS came and friends were killed,...and now they are refugees in Jordan, not knowing how long the tunnel will be, but they don't give up faith!

I thought of Bethlehem 2000 years ago: doors were closed; people were killed; the holy family became refugees.

"GOD is coming and only empty hands are able to receive HIM!"

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