

# MARY AND JOSEPH THE DISPLACED

Throughout this year's Advent journey, a journey Pope Francis calls 'A Journey of Hope', lived in the joy of the Gospel message, I pondered what the journey to Bethlehem must have been like for Mary and Joseph. Perhaps, unintentionally, I have always held on to the naive image of the 'tranquil' scene of Jesus in the manger, where Mary and Joseph, some shepherds and a few animals, lovingly welcomed Him. In light of Pope Francis's invitation, followed up by the invitation to participate in this Advent blog series, I was struck by how noisy the journey must have been, and how so many people nowadays still are forced to flee, facing separation from family and friends.

In excerpts from Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato 'Si* [Praise be to You] these past weeks, we have seen that he challenges us, women and men of faith, to respond to his urgent plea to care for our world, our common home, to take swift and united action to eradicate the wrongs of the past. According to Pope Francis, the heart of the problem is that we humans no longer see God as the Creator, often seeing other living creatures as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination merely for our selfish purposes. Pope Francis encourages us to view humanity not as having 'dominion' over the earth, but to recognize that everything is interconnected and that all creation is a kind of universal family meant to live in harmony.

So, I turn to the image that struck me this Advent - Mary and Joseph walking into the unknown. Joseph, eyes focused on the endless barren desert road, leading the donkey carrying the woman he loves. Their plans were not changed by their desire, but by the demands of another, who wielded power over them. The journey they were on was not a quiet, solitary one. Undoubtedly, it was a noisy, confusing caravan of people forced to leave familiar places, occupations and customs, heading to an unknown destination. I may have been aware of this in the past, but admit that I have never before taken the time to reflect on this aspect of their journey.

I am reminded of my experience as a seminarian at St. Joseph's Chapel at the Canadian Forces Base in Borden in 1988, where we 'welcomed' 4000 refugees displaced from their homes in Kosovo. How well I remember all the preparation made by groups like the CWL and Knights of Columbus, to provide as much support as possible. Naturally, we had no idea who these people were, nor what they had been through, until they shared their many stories of sadness, of loss and longing for some peace and quiet. Amidst all of this unsettledness we also heard stories of faith in God, of hope, of joy, and of gratitude for being able to come here. In Canada, they found a haven where they could start a new life, akin to what my own parents had looked for when they came to Canada. These Kosovo refugees were the ones who, Pope Francis says, had become victims of poverty at the hands of rich nations, relying on us to respond to their cries for help. Their spiritual poverty, of course, was an even darker place, where we tried to bring light and hope by sharing our resources. To this day, as in the time of Jesus, the displacement of people is not because they want to leave their homeland. Like my parents, parents continue to search and take risks for better futures for their children and grandchildren.

Mary and Joseph took refuge in a simple stable, the shelter for animals. In this makeshift home their 'bedding' was straw, the fruit of the earth. Amidst the noise and smell, in the uncertainty, there was love, there was faith. And this is where Jesus was born, frail and depending on his parents for everything. May we remember that Jesus chose to be born in a humble manger. In His unassuming way, we are saved from individual sin and those communal sins evident in our cities, our countries, our world. God never stops loving us, but is always there offering us the grace which will free us to respond to the cry of the poor, the lost, the homeless, the addict, the refugee, the stranger in our midst.

Encouraged by Pope Francis's desire and prayer for a change of heart in all peoples, let us respond as one to the needs of our suffering sisters and brothers. Let us pay attention to their cries and pleas echoing the cries of the entire earth, our common home. Dear sisters and brothers, while you celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Peace with your family and friends, listen with your heart to His invitation to see every woman, man and child as sister or brother, gifts from God with whom to share all the God-given gifts of our beautiful earth.

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