

Easter edition 2021: Refugees are our teachers



Director's letter: Introducing Tamara Domicelj

I am delighted to have joined JRS Australia as the new Country Director and extend my warmest thanks for the kind welcome which I have received during my first days in the role.

I feel honoured to succeed Carolina Gottardo, with whom I have had the pleasure of working closely over recent years, particularly in relation to global and Asia regional advocacy to strengthen the protection – in law, policy and practice – of refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in situations of vulnerability. I've also enjoyed collaborations with successive

prior JRS Australia Directors – Fr. Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, Fr. David Holdcroft SJ, Fr. Aloysius Mowe SJ – and staff, as well as JRS colleagues in the Asia region.

My respect for JRS runs deep and I'm humbled by the opportunity, now, to contribute to its excellent work from within.

By way of brief introduction, I am fortunate to have worked in the field of refugee protection and forced migration for a couple of decades. Most recently I worked with Act *cont on p2*

cont from p1 for Peace – the international aid agency of the National Council of Churches Australia – where I led Asia regional and global advocacy in these areas, partnering with the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) as its focal point for the development and initial roll-out of the Global Compact on Refugees, adopted in 2018.

My earlier roles include having been the Director of the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC), the National Policy Director of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), working on detention monitoring and refugee and asylum seeker policy at the Australian Human Rights Commission, managing the Families in Cultural Transition program at STARTTS, and working with internally displaced peoples and indigenous rights activists in Mexico.

Across it all, I have witnessed exceptional resilience, leadership and a relentless drive to contribute on the part of the refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants with and for whom I have been privileged to work, as my colleagues, teachers and service beneficiaries.

And I have seen unwavering generosity from diverse supporters, who donate time, talents, funds and work tirelessly to achieve a 'fairer go' for all who have been forced to flee their homes, and for their families and loved ones, wherever they may be.

All of this is part of a global fabric of goodwill and determination which I believe is gaining strength rather than flagging in these volatile and challenging times.

It has been an extraordinary year for us all. A global pandemic has at once laid bare our interconnectedness (the virus does not discriminate; and no-one is safe until we all are) and the deep inequalities and exclusions by which our societies are beset. And those whom JRS serves, denied most COVID-19 support packages, have been amongst the hardest hit. With income loss rife, collectively, we are their safety net. Now more than ever, every contribution counts.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, JRS Australia has faced an unprecedented 263 percent increase in demand for our



 Tamara Domicelj

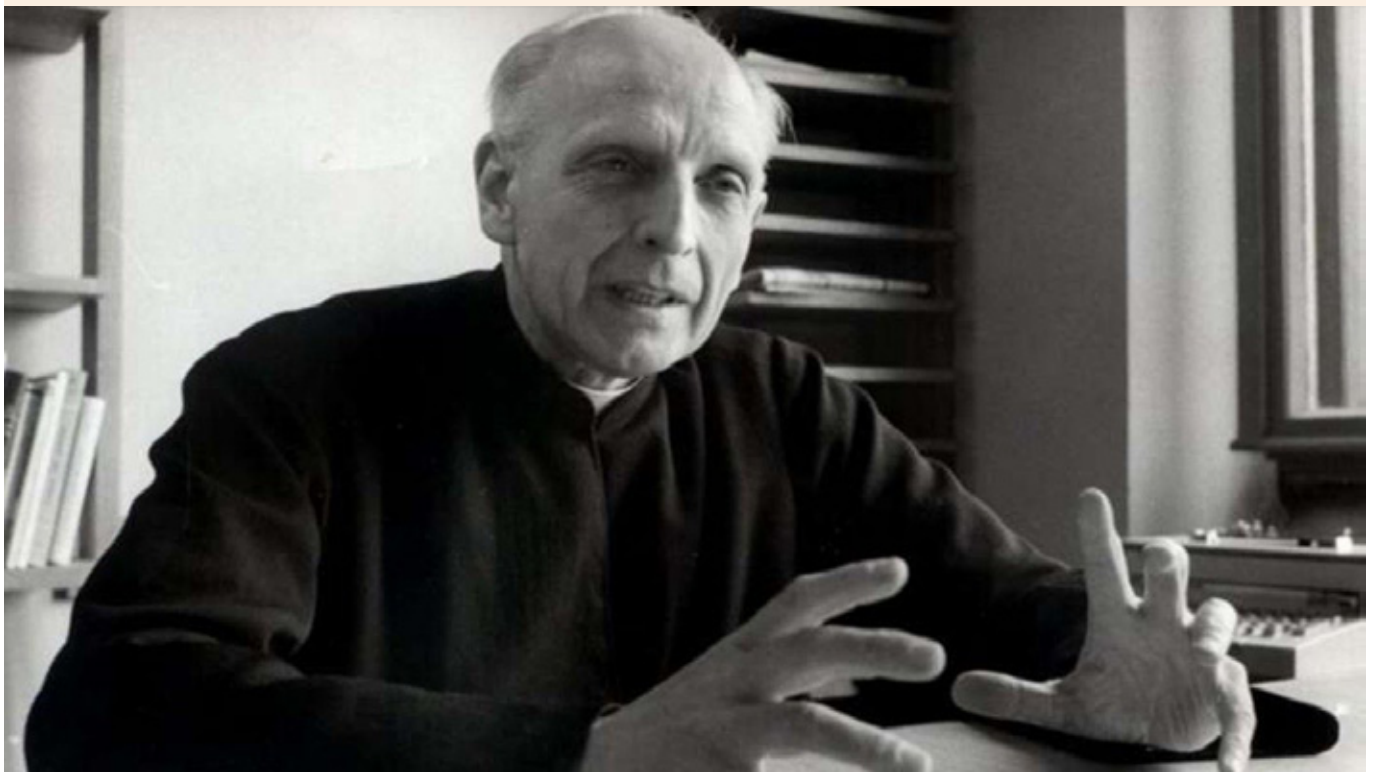
services, and has responded by digging deep, innovating and scaling up. The JRS staff, volunteers, Board and supporters have put in exceptional efforts, for which I thank and honour them.

As Easter approaches, a time of suffering, hope and renewal, I look to the future with optimism that together we can 'build back better', walking with purpose and high ambition alongside those whom we serve.

Warm thanks again for your support and welcome.

In peace and solidarity,
Tamara Domicelj

The evolution of JRS Australia



This is the second in a series of reflections to acknowledge Jesuit Refugee Service's (JRS) 40th Anniversary.

After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese fled their homes, setting out in overcrowded boats across the South China Sea. Many did not survive the journey. Some were killed by pirates. Others drowned at sea.

Fr. Pedro Arrupe SJ (pictured above), the then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, called on the Jesuits "to bring at least some relief to such a tragic situation." Jesuits around the world rallied, and JRS was born in November 1980. JRS has since grown to respond to the ever-increasing numbers of forcibly displaced peoples worldwide, and attempt to meet their needs and aspirations. Today JRS has operations in over 50 countries, including in Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Colombia, Mexico, and Indonesia.

Each nation has its own unique story of how its JRS country office has sought to fulfill our mission to accompany, serve and advocate for

the rights of forcibly displaced people.

At JRS Australia, our approach is framed by the notion that "the refugees are our teachers." This is a mindset that Fr. Mark Raper SJ, president of the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific, says is shared by all associated with JRS. It is a mindset that ensures JRS maintains a closeness to the people and communities we serve. Indeed, our priorities in service, accompaniment, and advocacy are informed by the people we serve – our teachers.

JRS Australia has existed for approximately fifteen years in an official capacity as an NGO. But, JRS operated in some shape or form in Australia long before that. Sr. Patricia Pak Poy RSM AM of the Sisters of Mercy remembers the work of the Australian Jesuits in assisting refugees from Indochina in the 1970s. Sr. Patricia writes:

"In 1975 with the fall of Saigon thousands of refugees from Vietnam fled to the camps and the issue had been taken up by the Asian Bureau Australia (ABA)

founded [in 1973] by the Australian Jesuits – Peter Dwyer, Mark Raper and Michael Kelly and others...ABA was there moving on the refugee concerns when Fr. Arrupe called on the society to put itself very deliberately at the service of refugees and displaced peoples."

In August 1981, Fr. Arrupe met with Fr. Mark Raper SJ in Manila. Arrupe asked Fr. Mark to establish JRS Asia Pacific. From the beginning, JRS and ABA had strong associations.

Between the late eighties and 2007, Australian Jesuits played pivotal roles in serving, accompanying, and advocating for forcibly displaced people across the Asia Pacific region. Both Mark Raper SJ and Steve Curtin SJ served as regional directors of JRS Asia Pacific, and domestically, Jesuits helped create and manage new NGOs such as the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC). The UNIYA Jesuit Social Justice Centre conducted important research, provided expert input *cont on p4*

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into policy development processes, and engaged constructively with the decision makers of the period.

In 2007, JRS Australia established the Shelter Project. As the years progressed, Arrupe's vision of a 'short term' JRS project evaporated, and in Australia, like elsewhere, operations expanded. JRS Australia has established a range of projects since those early days. One such project was the 'Blaiket Shelter' located at St. Canice's in Potts Point. For thirteen years, 'Blaiket' (2007–20) housed men seeking asylum. Anne Porter, JRS' long-serving volunteer (pictured right), recalls the tremendous diversity of the men served and accompanied at this space during their stay. Anne writes:

"Blaiket housed men from about twenty five countries including Tibetan monks, doctors, labourers, engineers, a High Court Judge and an Iranian weightlifter airlifted from Manus Island. Extroverts who loved chatting lived in the residence, along with incredibly shy and troubled young men who found it hard to share their

thoughts and to share a room also calling Blaiket home."


In 2014, Sister Margaret Guy RSC, was asked by JRS Australia's then-Director, Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ, to be part of a new JRS drop-in hospitality centre in Western Sydney to serve and accompany people seeking asylum. The space came to be referred to as "Arrupe Place," in honour of JRS' founder.

In more recent years, JRS Australia's services have reached an annual average of 3000 forcibly displaced people in NSW alone. In the 2019–2020, this number grew to almost 4,000 people, and with the pandemic increasing demand on our services this number will be much higher for 2020–2021.

But as we reflect on JRS' operations in Australia over the last four decades, there is much to be grateful for.

Forty years ago, when Arrupe came up with his original vision, it was with a faith in humanity. Arrupe believed JRS would be supported in its work in "collaboration of



 Anne Porter, one of JRS' dedicated volunteers.

many lay people who work with us." This has been the story of JRS Australia. Whilst the elected federal government chose to exclude all people seeking asylum from its COVID packages, the broader community chose to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate those in dire need. With you beside us, and the refugees as our teachers, and as leaders, JRS Australia continues to evolve to accompany, serve, and advocate for the rights of forcibly displaced people.

 In COVID, JRS' volunteers continue to assist in providing critical support to people living in Sydney, and their families. Image credit: Flashpoint Labs.



New year, old uncertainties

A short policy update:

2021 could not come soon enough. The new year has brought with it a number of remarkable, positive changes for developments for refugees and people seeking asylum. In the United States of America, President Joe Biden announced a historic increase in the annual refugee admissions cap to 125,000 people in the coming year, up from 15,000 in 2020.


In another positive development closer to home, the Federal Government announced, after some deliberation, that the majority of non-citizens on Australia soil, including refugees and people seeking asylum, will be eligible to access COVID-19 vaccines free of charge.

Yet, refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia face significant, enduring challenges. The October 2020 budget saw the Government cut the allocation of financial support for people seeking asylum from \$39.5 million to \$19.6 million. Soon after, more than 500 women, children, and men were exited from government-funded community detention arrangements onto six-month 'Final Departure Bridging Visas,' and given a mere three to six weeks of financial and case work support whilst they looked for employment and housing. Neither is easy to find in the context of an economic downturn and pandemic.

Then, in January 2021, the Federal Government began releasing people (61 to date), transferred from PNG and Nauru for medical reasons, from Melbourne Immigration Transitional Accommodation (MITA) and the Park Hotel, where they had been detained since arrival into Australia. JRS Australia welcomes this decision, which gives these men freedom from arbitrary detention after, in many cases, eight long years. Approximately 150 from this cohort remain in detention facilities across Australia – in Darwin, Brisbane, and Adelaide – and the call for their release continues.

For those men now in the community, there is no certainty. Like those released late last year, these individuals have no access to refugee status determination (RSD) or substantive visas in Australia. Their 'Final Departure Bridging Visas' give them six months in the country, after which they must reapply for a new one. Many are recognised refugees, and as such they, and most others, have no prospects of returning to their countries of origin. Whilst a small number have been able to find employment, many are joining an ever-growing cohort of skilled, motivated people confronted with a challenging job market. In the absence of secure employment, homelessness, housing insecurity and poverty are the reality. Although state governments and Church communities continue to provide crucial support, how long must they be expected to fill the gaps?



 The lack of any COVID federal government support for people seeking asylum means that people are forced to depend on charities, like JRS, more than ever before. Pictured above: an insight into the organisational process of our JRS Refugee Foodbank delivery service that now feeds about 1,000 people per week, largely in the South-Western Sydney region.

The closure of Australia's borders to temporary non-citizens has meant that prospective applicants for asylum have not been able to enter the country and seek protection. Even so, between March and December 2020, there were over a thousand new applicants for asylum each month, primarily from people in Australia on other substantive visas.

Specialist organisations like JRS Australia shoulder a significant part of the response. Demand for our services has increased by 263% since COVID-19 began, and we are providing food to more than a 1,000 people a week, including 300 hundred children. We also saw a 40% increase in requests for emergency accommodation in December.

Advocacy for systemic reform, part of JRS Australia's mission, remains crucial. At present we are conducting listening and consultations with service beneficiaries, staff, and stakeholders to consider where to focus energies. We hope that parishes, schools, church partners and community groups will remain key collaborators in the drive for change!

We are also kickstarting a major new, organisation-wide initiative aimed at improving the ways in which we collaborate with leaders and communities of lived experience. More to come on this shortly.

Catholic communities stand with people seeking protection

Zoe Grant, Community Organiser, JRS Australia, reflects on how Catholic communities have lived out Pope Francis' call to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate forcibly displaced people, during the pandemic.



COVID-19 has impacted everyone in one way or another, but for people on temporary visas it has been a particularly challenging time. I started in the role of 'Community Organiser' at JRS Australia early in March 2020. My role affords me the privilege of working with leaders of goodwill, compassion, and expertise from across Australia to welcome and protect refugees, people seeking asylum, and migrants in situations of vulnerability. I had been excited to take on the position and had plans on how I would engage and work with the community over the long term.

Only a week after I started in the role, Sydney went into lockdown. I was left wondering how we could make a difference for people seeking asylum when we couldn't physically bring the community together. With the urgent needs rapidly emerging, I suddenly had to jump into new communities and ask for help. Which wasn't quite how I imagined I'd be starting! So many communities responded so

 Springwood parish drops off food for JRS' Foodbank.

generously. It was beautiful to see how many parishes and schools started donating food regularly to keep people fed.

Soon after, many parishioners were asking us, "We can see the great need and the impact COVID-19 is having on everyone. How else can we help?"

It was really special to see that through a time of uncertainty for so many, these people wanted to spend their time making sure people seeking asylum were not left behind.

So we got to work! We brought people together who shared this desire to do more and started meeting regularly to make plans. These community leaders saw the need to act in three key areas: 1) emergency relief, 2) community conversations and awareness-raising in their local areas, and 3) engaging with their MPs for support.

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In 2020, between March and December, the broader JRS Community did so much for refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in vulnerable situations:

- Approximately 10,900 food deliveries to people seeking asylum and migrants in Western Sydney through JRS Australia's food bank delivery service.
- More than 50 parishes and schools in Sydney helped to provide food, shelter, and life-saving medication.
- At least 10 Catholic action groups led by parishioners, school teachers and principles, Congregational leaders, and university students held ongoing dialogues with their local decision-makers about issues affecting people seeking asylum.
- Parishes and social justice groups organised at least 5 public webinars attended by more than a thousand people, and, crucially provided a platform for leaders with lived experience to share their expertise. 41 schools, including 17 Catholic schools around Australia participated in National Week of Solidarity.



 Zoe Grant, Community Organiser, JRS Australia

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To achieve these goals, we worked with parish social justice groups, other NGOs, local constituents, local parishes, youth groups, the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, the Diocese of Parramatta. It was amazing to see the skill sets people were sharing to get actions underway.

Some parishes went all out on running a food drive and turned up with huge trailers full of food. Others recognised that the parishioners might not know a lot about refugee issues in Australia and realised that it was important for their people to understand what was happening. From this, four groups ran public webinars sharing about the impact of COVID-19, hearing from community leaders with lived experience and sharing how people could help. 600 people joined these webinars, which showed that our wider community was standing in solidarity with people seeking asylum and cared for them.

A highlight was seeing how groups taking action snowballed into the wider community, who also joined in. One webinar was organised with 'Social Justice around the Bay', who did an excellent job.

I got a call a few days after the event from a school Religious Education Coordinator, Anthony who said he had been supporting JRS through food donations for years, but after hearing Zaki Haidari's story of lived experience at the

webinar, he wanted to do something more. Anthony told me on the phone, "I'm at a parish with 3000 people, how can we get involved?" Since then Anthony and the Social Justice Group at his parish have run a webinar of their own, have reached out to their local MP and will be running a Community Conversation in a few months.

Before the October budget there was a recognition in the sector of the need for federal funding support for temporary migrants and people seeking asylum in need. We all banded together to engage key Government, Opposition, and Independent MPs in parliament and help them understand the impact of the pandemic on these peoples' lives.

Again, a wide range of people answered the call: there were experienced advocates who brought so much wisdom and knowledge, along with some who cared deeply about this issue but had never met a politician. These people brought a valuable passion and determination.

Reflecting back on 2020, it was amazing to see how everyone came together to support people seeking asylum. It has shown me that, even in a global pandemic with so many people suffering in so many different ways, there can be so much kindness.

Onward and upward in 2021!



🗣️ Refugees are our teachers. Hava Rezaie is one of those people. At the JRS Women's Space, Hava runs workshops. She is an advocate for people seeking asylum, refugees, and women at risk of violence. As a trained lawyer, former government official in Afghanistan, former refugee, and community leader in Australia, Hava has always fought for people on the margins. She is currently an Advisory Committee Member of the JRS Finding Safety project hosted at the JRS Women's Space. JRS is honoured to work with leaders like Hava, who act as teachers and leaders for all associated with JRS around the world.

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What JRS Does

JRS Australia advocates for policies of welcome and protection at all tiers of government. Through COVID-19, JRS Australia continues to provide emergency assistance, a Foodbank, professional casework support, an employment support program, facilitates free legal advice, as well as conducting targeted advocacy work, and a project to empower women.

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donate

How your donation will help

Your support allows us to continue to advocate for policies of welcome and protection and to provide people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations with COVID-19 safe specialist casework support, employment support, emergency payments and assisting women who are experiencing violence as well as providing food via our JRS Refugee Foodbank to people who have been otherwise left behind.

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