

Pastor's Point

September 1, 2024

As we all return from our summer vacations and breaks, Father John has asked us to reflect on the article below.

Who might be at our doorsteps that we need to bridge the gap with?

SEEING WHAT LIES NEAR OUR DOORSTEPS

By: Father Ron Rolheiser, OMI

Henri Nouwen once suggested that if you want to understand the tragedy of the Second World War, you can read a hundred history books about it and watch a thousand hours of video documentaries on it, or you can read the Diary of Anne Frank. In that single memoir of young girl imprisoned and later executed by the Nazis you will see, first-hand, the tragedy of war and what war does to the human soul.

The same might be said about the refugee crisis now taking place everywhere on borders around the world. According to statistics from the United Nations, there are now over eighty million refugees, displaced, homeless, nationless, frightened, and often hungry people on our borders around the world. Two-thirds of these are women and children, and the vast majority are not there by choice, seeking a better economic opportunity in another country. The vast majority of them have been driven from their homes and their countries by war, violence, famine, hunger, ethnic and religious cleansing, and by fear for their lives.

For many of us, this is a faceless, abstract problem. We have a generic sympathy for their plight but not one deep enough to keep us awake at night, unsettle our conscience, or make us willing to sacrifice some of our own comfort and security to do something for them or to pressure our governments into action. Indeed, too often we are over-protective of our borders and the settled, comfortable lives we live inside our nations. This is our country! Our home! We worked hard for the things we have. It is unfair to us to have to deal with these people! They should go back to their countries and leave us alone!

We need a wake-up call. A recent book, a novel by Jeanine Cummins, *American Dirt*, gives us a fictionalized account of a young Mexican woman who because of violence and fear of death had to leave her life behind and flee with her young son in an attempt to reach the borders of the United States as an undocumented immigrant. Full disclosure, the book has been heavily criticized by many because it doesn't always measure up to the exact facts. Conversely, it has also been highly praised by many others. Be that as it may, the bottom-line is that this is a powerful story and a wake-up call, one meant to wake us up to the real tragedy of those

who for reasons of poverty, violence, famine, fear, and hopelessness are forced to flee their countries in search of a better life (or any life at all!) elsewhere. Whatever the book's imperfections, it helps shatter the abstractness we can lean on to protect ourselves against having to look at the issue of refugees today.

Admittedly, the issue isn't simple. There are extremely complex issues involved in protecting our borders and in having millions of people freely enter our countries. However, as men and women who share a common humanity and a common planet with these refugees, can we remain callous to their plight? Moreover, as Christians, do we accept the fundamental, non-negotiable principle within Christian social doctrine that tells us that the world belongs to everyone equally and we may not adhere to any nationalistic belief that says, explicitly or implicitly, that our country is ours and we have no obligation to share it with others. To espouse this is unchristian and goes against the clear teaching of Jesus.

We might all, I submit, contemplate a certain parable of Jesus (Luke 16, 19-31) where he tells the story of a rich man who ignored a poor man sitting at his doorstep and refused to share his food with him. The poor man dies and finds himself in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also dies and finds himself tormented by thirst in Hades. He begs Abraham to send the poor man, whom he had ignored during this lifetime, to bring him some water to quench his thirst, but it turns out this is not possible. Jesus tells us that there is an "unbridgeable gap" between the two of them. We have always simplistically assumed that this unbridgeable gap is the gap between heaven and hell, but that is not exactly the point the parable is making. The unbridgeable gap is the gap that already exists now between the rich and poor, and the lesson is that we had best try to bridge that gap now, in this life.

Notice that Jesus does not say that the rich man is a bad man, or that he didn't earn his riches honestly, or that he wasn't an upright citizen, or that he wasn't going to church, or that he was unfaithful to his wife, or that he was a bad father to his children. It only says that he had one fault, a mortal one – inside his rightness he did not respond to a hungry man sitting on the borders of house.