Prayer for World Refugee Day

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35)

Introduction:

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ annual Global Trends Report on June 19, 2018 revealed that:

- Around 68.5 million people around the world have been forcibly displaced at the end of 2017 and approximately 25.4 million are refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. Some have fled across an international border but majority of them have remained within the borders of their own country.
- 31 people are newly displaced every minute of the day
- 52% of the world’s refugees and displaced are children
- 85% of the world's displaced people are in developing countries
- 44,400 people forced to flee their homes due to conflict and persecution
- 57% of refugees worldwide came from three countries (South Sudan, Afghanistan and Syria)
- There are 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement.

And the current economic and political conditions around the world do not show any signs of improvement, with the likelihood that things will only worsen in the coming months and years.

The 30th Congregational Chapter-Direction Statement has identified the issue on refugees as one of most pressing issues that needs radical global response.

Pope Francis in his message for the 2014 World Day of Migrants and Refugees said, “The presence of migrants and refugees, at times uncomfortable, helps to debunk the myth of a progress that benefits a few while built on the exploitation of many.” “We ourselves need to see, and then to enable others to see, that migrants and refugees do not only represent a problem to be solved, but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved.” “They are an occasion that Providence gives us to help build a more just society, a more perfect democracy, a more united country, a more fraternal world and a more open and evangelical Christian community.”

And so as a Congregation, we strongly emphasize our recognition and affirmation of all persons, regardless of country of origin, as members of God’s family. We affirm the rights of all people to equal opportunities for employment, access to housing, health care, education and freedom from social discrimination. We consider the issue of migration and displacement within the framework of our faith community that is inclusive and particularly compassionate to the poor, homeless and oppressed. We do not only welcome them and assist them with love but we allow ourselves to be led by them to deeper understanding of justice and hospitality.
Prayer of a Refugee

Choir 1: Jesus, you knew what it was to be a refugee when your parents fled from Herod.

Choir 2: You knew what it was to be homeless with nowhere to lay your head

Choir 1: You knew what it was to be friendless when those you loved betrayed you

Choir 2: You knew what it was to be utterly derelict as you cried from the cross

All together: Whatever we suffer
You have been there first.
Forgive us for doubting you
And give us the strength to go on. Amen

Reading of the story of Graciela

Source: UNHCR – By Marta Martinez in Cúcuta, Colombia - 14 December 2018

When Graciela Sánchez first arrived in Las Delicias looking for safety, she only carried her two children and a small bundle of clothes with her. The armed conflict in Caquetá, western Colombia, took everything she had.

In 2007, Graciela decided to settle in a hilly suburb of Cúcuta, all the way to the east of Colombia, because it was near the border with Venezuela. Back then, the Venezuelan side was bustling with business and many Colombians would cross the border every day to go to work or buy goods.

“We Colombians depended on the border,” Graciela says.

Today, the reality is quite the opposite. Over three million Venezuelans have left their home country. An estimated 5,500 cross every day to Colombia with the purpose of staying in the country or continuing their journey southwards.

Over 35,000 people enter Colombia every day through the crossing in the North Santander region, many of them Venezuelans looking for protection, food or medicine who then return to their country.

In Cúcuta, the main city on Colombia’s side of the busiest border point, health and social service providers are struggling to deal with the growing influx of Venezuelans.

In an example of true solidarity, neighbors of Las Delicias suburb have opened their arms and doors to those fleeing Venezuela. 23 families are currently hosting more than 150 Venezuelans in the community.
UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, supports this solidarity network by covering water and electricity costs. The families within the network identified this need as a priority to improve their life conditions.

“The program in Las Delicias builds on five years of experience working with the displaced population in the neighborhood, and it seeks to strengthen solidarity and to promote activities that benefit the community as a whole,” says Rafael Zavala, head of UNHCR’s office in Cúcuta.

Most neighbors of Las Delicias know very well what Venezuelans are going through – over 60 per cent of them were displaced by the armed conflict in Colombia and built this informal settlement they now call home. With the help of UNHCR, Las Delicias is today a legal neighborhood of Cúcuta, which allows its community to access services and official investment.

“I lost everything. I arrived here with empty hands,” Graciela says. “After having been through that, I decided to open my door to Venezuelans.”

During her first weeks in Las Delicias, Graciela and her two sons, who were three and eight years old at the time, slept on the floor. The three of them got sick with dengue fever. “It was really hard in the beginning,” Graciela recalls.

A generous neighbor, Juan, offered her and her children a place to stay. A month later, she bought a small plot from him next door, and she started building her own house. She paid Juan back in small installments, since her salary as a part-time supermarket assistant was meagre.

Graciela made a promise to Juan: “One day, when you’re not able to work anymore, I will take care of you in my home.”

As more and more Venezuelans were arriving in Cúcuta seeking help, Graciela could not remain passive. She could see herself in them: “They are Venezuelans and we are Colombians, but we both had to experience the same: leaving our families; fleeing to look for opportunities; starving; and starting from zero.”

Jenire Rojas, 30, is one of the 18 Venezuelans currently living with Graciela. She arrived five months ago with her husband. Back in Tínaquillo, Venezuela the economic situation was so bad that they struggled to buy basic necessities like food, she says, and the family was starving. “The monthly minimum salary is not enough to cover food for two days,” she adds.

Jenire’s two children, who are 10 and three years old, are still in Venezuela. “I had never been away from my children before, not even for a weekend,” Jenire says. Her hope is to be able to bring them to Las Delicias before the end of the year.

“We came to Colombia looking for an opportunity we do not have back in Venezuela,” Jenire says.

Jenire and the other Venezuelans in the house are deeply grateful to Graciela. “She has been a great support for us, always telling us not to give up, to keep going,” Jenire says.

One of the things Jenire values the most is how Graciela fully trusts them. “Because we are acquaintances, but not family,” Jenire says.
Graciela has only been able to find work at a Chinese restaurant three days a week and her salary is not enough to maintain the whole community living under her roof. She even went into debt to buy a new plot and build a secondary home to host more Venezuelans.

Being so welcoming to Venezuelans has cost Graciela some friendships. Some people do not understand why she is opening her door to strangers.

The five Venezuelan families living in the compound show Graciela their gratitude every day. Even though they do not pay rent, they help her improve her house, a basic structure of naked red brick, and the two other small houses in the backyard.

“When we got here, there was no floor, the roof was falling apart,” Jenire recalls. They helped her with house repairs and about a month ago they installed gas. They regularly cook, clean and do laundry.

“We have become a family,” Jenire says.

In a side room with yellow curtains, lying on a wooden bed with a bandaged eye and skinny arms, is Graciela’s generous neighbor Juan, the one who first opened the doors of Las Delicias to her.

He is battling cancer and Graciela is taking care of him, as she once promised. “He is like my father,” she says. The Venezuelans in the house also keep a constant eye on Juan when she is not at home.

As she puts on her white and blue uniform to go to work, Graciela says: “We need to be patient. We don’t know what may happen in the future. Tomorrow it could be us too.”


“When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34)

Silence and Reflection

1. Can I/we identify some discriminating attitude in the community that affects our way of welcoming and accepting the homeless and displaced members in our area?
2. As a Congregation, we have been addressing the issue of refugees for a long time. As we prepare for another Congregational Chapter, what more radical move is being asked of us to respond to the plight of the refugees in the local, national and international level? (You can collate the responses and submit to your Unit Leader.)

Sharing of Reflection (After sharing, the community may sing any appropriate song)
Prayer

(Light a candle after each stanza)

1. Compassionate God, creator of the universe, You make all people in your own image, You live and work in our midst. You bless us with an immense variety of cultures and ways of responding to you. You show us new patterns of living and loving in Jesus. We beg you to continue give us strength through Your Holy Spirit.

2. Forgive us and convert those who put boundaries around your presence, love and work; who use diversity to divide people - to demonize some and accord privileged status to others; who seek to dominate or destroy those who are different.

3. Show us all how to live and work with others; to receive diversity as a gift and not a threat; to move beyond tolerance of those who are different to mutual respect and trust. Show us the art of listening with respect to one another. Grant us the help of your Spirit that in humility we may share with others our faith and story.

4. Create us again as one family where there is no alienation and discrimination. Move us as one so that the vulnerable will never be exploited again. In times of conflict and persecution, when your people are in crisis, let Your grace bring out the best in each one of us.

5. {Each one is encouraged to add her/his prayer. Pray for the situation of the refugees in your area.}

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory Be...

Prepared by Minela Alvarez – Province of Philippines-Japan

Sources:
1. UNCHR-Global Trends Report
2. Churches Witnessing with Migrants
3. UMC Responses on Migrants and Refugees
4. Vatican News on Pope Francis message on 2018 World Day of Migrants and Refugees
5. Artwork by Kelly Latimore