

## **Letter to Oregon Province from Gary Smith, JRS Limpopo Project, South Africa.**

Dear Everyone,

It is spring in Makhado, South Africa, near the Zimbabwe border. We anticipate rain and warm temperatures now, a welcome respite from the cold and dusty days of winter. Zimbabwean refugees continue to move through Makhado and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) office. We are seeing 150--200 people per week. Since last December over 13,000 refugees have come to our location. These numbers are a reflection of the fragile and unstable situation in Zimbabwe and how desperate the situation is for the ordinary Zimbabwean trying to survive. One hears often: "No job, no money, no food."

### **Birth and Relationship**

Recently one of our South African JRS staff, Veronica, gave birth to twin girls after a long and demanding pregnancy. I went to the hospital the day after the birth and walked into a room full of family members happily jabbering away in Venda, one of the languages spoken in this part of South Africa. I was greeted by the family and then presented with one of the babies by her aunt. I looked down at the bundled-up five-pounder in my hands while she squinted up at my star-struck and goofy-grin face; it was a lovely, knock-out experience for me, and a contrast to the daily pressures of JRS activities. Later in the week the children were constantly crying, so one of the nurses suggested that they be placed together, speculating that maybe they missed each other after being womb-bound and nose to nose for almost nine months. It did the trick; the girls calmed down. That reunion for me became a new metaphor for an old truth: we find ourselves in the presence of one another.

As these events unfolded—pregnancy, birth and a child discovering the need for relationship—they occurred simultaneously with the lives of refugee women, who come to us at JRS. Most are young, most are mothers and many are pregnant. And all are seeking a connection with another—like the twins—that can help them claim their lives.

## **OF REFUGEE WOMEN**

### **The Photo**

One such woman was Julian Joy, 26. A photo is at the heart of her story. It was a tattered photo, proudly presented for my inspection, one that had traveled for seven years and for hundreds of miles. In it Julian was dressed in a beautiful white dress and her husband was wearing a splendid black tux. They were at their wedding reception, the two of them sandwiched between the bridesmaid and the best man. Julian, her accountant husband, and the best man were listening intently to an animated bridesmaid whose words were cracking up the other three. It was a scene of celebration and love and familiarity.

I held the photo. It was snapped in better times—good times—when a young couple, nuts about each other, were looking to the future, including making their contribution to the life of Zimbabwe. Now Julian sat in front of me a long way from the cheer and joy of the wedding day. She was in the barren surroundings of an industrial section of a little town in the north of South Africa; she left a country in economic and political disarray; she was tired and had traveled a long distance with a six-year old daughter; she was

seven months pregnant. Her plan was to join her husband who, months before, had left Zimbabwe looking for work and had acquired a job in Johannesburg, four hundred miles south of Makhado. In the cut-throat job market of Johannesburg, a city choking with refugees, to support a young family is a challenge. He had a job, as a laborer, not as an accountant, but it was work and it meant family survival.

To reach our location Julian and her daughter had endured the slings and arrows of a refugee on the move: leaving family in Zimbabwe, unreliable transportation, lack of money, hunger, the threat of border robbers, walking long distances in crummy weather, anxiety over her daughter's safety, fear of the unknown, creepy men and the uncertainty of life ahead in a foreign country, let alone ominous Johannesburg. But there was no doubt about her unyielding resolve to press forward. Looking at her, I remembered words of Anne Sexton in her poem, *Courage*:

*You did not fondle the weakness inside you  
Though it was there.  
Your courage was a small coal  
that you kept swallowing.*

We talked at length. She had much on her mind. We made the arrangements for her to take the train to Johannesburg. I reached across the desk and held her hands, saying, "You will travel tonight. We will help you get word to your husband that you will arrive tomorrow at sunrise."

### **Thandolankosi**

Sometimes there is no husband to whom a woman can go. Scholastica, 35, told me that she was named by her mother with the hope that her daughter would become a successful student. Lack of money and a prematurely dead father prevented that. She had a striking face, full of frailty and courage.

She came to us with her seven-year old daughter in tow, a delightful shining-smile girl by the name of Thandolankosi (a Zulu word meaning: *Love of God*, [accent on *ko*]). Scholastica had two other children, one with her mother in Zimbabwe and the other, severely handicapped, in a government facility in Zimbabwe. Her journey to South Africa had been terrible. They had left Harare, the capitol of Zimbabwe, several weeks before. She was robbed at the border, but not molested. "Why did you come," I asked. "To feed my children," she replied. "And your husband?" Tears. "He left us years ago." It was a short and tragic commentary about a social problem that plagues the times of social upheaval: husbands who abandon their families. Her goal was to find a domestic job in Makhado and to support herself and Thandolankosi as well as to send money back home to her mother. We provided her with accommodation money.

The two of them were obviously close, and even as the child exhibited a self-confidence in relationship to me and the rest of the staff, it was clear that she was utterly dependent on her mother. As they left the JRS Offices, heading for their new residence, rented for a month, I watch them exit our compound and walk the short distance to an adjacent road. There they were: Mom carrying a piece of luggage on her head and a five kilogram bag of corn meal in one hand and, a few feet behind her, was Thandolankosi, double-stepping to keep up, barely managing a bag of vegetables that filled her arms, and cheerfully chatting with her momma all the way. In my heart it will remain an image of

enduring singularity. They were like two sisters who had crossed an enormous desert, caring for one another, sharing with one another. Now they leaned their faces once again into the wind, resuming the next part of the journey. How can one not admire the beauty of this woman, the love she had for her daughter, and her fierce determination to make it?

**“Without brains, honor, love or pity”**

And then there is this: at prayer with the Zimbabweans one morning in our office, a woman in a corner of the room, weeping. Her name is Rejoice. She was still in shock later when Eulanda, our staff person, interviewed her. Here is her story:

*There were four of them traveling through the bush on the Zimbabwe side of the border. Rejoice was traveling with friends, three men who were brothers; all from the same village in Zimbabwe. She had left her two children at home with her mother with the hope of finding a source of income in South Africa to support them all. Their destination was the Limpopo River. Once crossed, they would make their way to west to Musina, the South African border town and apply for temporary asylum papers. To simply move down the road between the Zimbabwe to South Africa is financially impossible for many poor Zimbabweans since it is a road lined with army and police check points where pay-or-go-back bribes are extracted.*

*In the bush they were approached by about fifteen young men armed with knives. Their money was demanded from them and then Rejoice was told to take off her clothes. It was going to be a gang rape. She shuddered as she recalled the moment. At that point the older brother who was about forty-years-old challenged the gang. A commotion ensued. The gang members knocked him down and told the remaining three to leave saying “You must go now; we are going to take care of this guy.” At that point they were stabbing the man. The other three fled. They stopped, turned, watched helplessly at a distance, as the man was murdered and his body pulled off the beaten path. The younger brothers were crying but they and Rejoice resumed their running, crossed the Limpopo and then made their way to a main road. From there they were given a ride to Makhado where the brothers informed her that they were going back to avenge their brother, even if meant they would die too.*

Eulanda was shaken as she listened. She said to me, “I felt Rejoice’s pain. It like I was there. I forgot my normal interview process as she talked. I was crying too. I can still hear her ask, ‘where is God, where is God, where is God?’”

It is a story of implacable cruelty; its horrors pouring out like lava, horrors executed by people who are—as Paul put it in Romans—“without brains, honor, love or pity.” (Rm. 1:30) Sadly, JRS staff hears this kind of story often. Frequently the women are robbed and raped. Some are killed. And most of this stinking depravity is done with impunity. Hearing these kinds of awful episodes, seeing them in the eyes of the victims, beats and bruises sacred places in my heart and those of our staff

In the end we arranged for Rejoice to obtain her necessary asylum papers. We settled her in Makhado and will continue to walk with her until she can make a transition into South African life.

## **JRS and the Search for Indignation**

Tatenda, a Zimbabwean staffer, commented, “Zimbabwean women suffer very much, Father, very much.” She knows. It is tough to hear about that suffering, to unlock it and to write about it. But however difficult the refugee situation is for us, it is one of the bleeding breaches in the wall of humankind into which Jesuits are called to stand. There, in the breach, in the confrontation with this evil inflicted upon the world, we are seized by the indignation that empowers us to effect change.

Before we begin the formal activities of JRS each day the staff prays to be led in our time with the refugees. I think again of holding Veronica’s baby in my hands. There was an unspoken promise in that hospital room, made in the hearts of the little girl’s family: *we will walk with you as far as we can—you in all your vulnerability; we will stick up for you when you are alone; we will assist you in your needs.* Could anyone who cares for this child— a child made in the image of God and cherished by the heart of God—refuse to make such a promise? Our JRS mission is to be with and cherish refugee women, holding them in their vulnerability. We anoint their wounds with the oil of respect and tenderness, wounds inflicted by poverty, violence, abandonment, second class human status, and—often—male stupidity. Each day our goal is to bring them the best of our compassion and the best of our skills. Each day we prayerfully ask God to give us the wisdom to realize that goal.

**I will be thinking of you and praying for you on Thanksgiving and Christmas.**

**Gary Smith, SJ.**