

# America

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## 'WE ARE DYING HERE'

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An eyewitness account of the Syrian refugee crisis

In the last chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses ascends to the top of Mount Nebo; from the east side of the Jordan, God shows him the land promised to Abraham and all his descendants. The view of this territory is one of the last things Moses sees in this life, but he never sets foot there. It is left to his descendants to cross over the river and enter the land of promise.

I had a chance recently to look at the world from atop Mount Nebo. I went there as part of a delegation, led by Bishop Anthony Taylor, with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services. We were sent to the Middle East to examine the situation of refugees in the countries around Mount Nebo, particularly Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Our mission was to better understand the Syrian refugee crisis, strengthen networks of support between the bishops and other relief organizations, stand in solidarity with the people who suffer and recommend possible durable solutions to policy makers.



The surrounding land shows that little has changed since biblical times. Brothers here are still selling brothers (Gn 37:27-28); families are still enslaved (Ex 1:1-22); people are still in captivity (2 Kgs 25); Rachel is still weeping (Mt 2:18); nations are still living in exile (Ps 137); refugees are still wandering in the deserts (Dt 2:1-37); and refugee cities are still being created (Dt 4:41-43). Only now these

narratives are echoed by contemporary stories: of trafficked victims in Egypt, tortured Eritreans in the Sinai, persecuted Christians in Iraq and Iran, unaccompanied minors throughout the region and displaced Syrians in the crossfire of a civil war. Throughout my time there, I kept wondering: Is it still possible to see the land of promise amid this desert of human suffering?

The situation is critical. The office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that the number of Syrians fleeing their country's violent conflict could reach 700,000 by year's end and 1.5 million by June 2013. Some refugees are twice displaced: first from Iraq to Syria, then from Syria to anywhere they can find protection.

At a makeshift camp on the Lebanon-Syrian border, inside a precarious, plastic-covered shelter, we visited a number of families displaced by the fighting. Three sisters-in-law, each in her early 20s, had just lost their husbands in the Syrian war. One widow showed us a cellphone video taken just after their husbands had been brutally killed. Then the mother of those men came in, weeping and sobbing uncontrollably, holding in her hands the heart-breaking report that her grandson had been killed the day before. Until that moment I had only seen pietàs carved out of stone. There I saw one carved out of the suffering of Syrian refugees.

### **A Mission of Refuge**

As Syria plunges deeper into chaos, many churches, mosques, nongovernmental organizations and governments of some Middle East countries are doing their best to respond. But the scope, severity and urgency of this crisis require much broader international collaboration because the pressing human needs far outstrip the available resources. The official camps set up by the governments of Turkey and Jordan offer a thin line of protection for these refugees, providing some basic shelter, security, food and medical assistance. But the camps are inadequate to rebuild shattered lives. They are, at best, a stopgap solution for what is likely a long-term issue. In these camps we met people recovering from blasts, bombardment and battles. In a tent a baby had just been born and wrapped in a blanket, a sign that the persistent power of life still bursts forth even amid this deadly reality.

The mission of the church in this part of the world extends not only to other Christians but to any human being in need. As one organization put it, "Being Syrian does not make you our client; being extremely vulnerable does." As the church drills down beneath the complex historical factions, religious differences, social crises and economic problems of this situation, its missiological foundation rests on the bedrock of the gratuitous love of God and the human face of the refugee. When viewed from the perspective of those who are most vulnerable, the issues are indeed very basic. The refugees wanted us to bring back the message that they are hungry, needy, homeless and moving into the winter months, with little protection from the elements.

"We are human beings," said one woman, and "the hardest part is not knowing when this conflict will end." "We are not living here," said another refugee. "We are dying here."

## **Crossing the Jordan**

Even though refugees are not a new phenomenon in this part of the world, each generation defines itself in relation to how it responds to them. According to stipulations of the covenant, inheritance of the Promised Land is inextricably linked to care for those who are most vulnerable (Dt 10:12). Our spiritual ancestors were once refugees in these parts, and God heard their cries (Ex 3:7). Others are living that reality right now. Memory plays an important role in biblical spirituality precisely because it helps us see something of our own lives in those who suffer. When the plight of such suffering fails to move us, then something inside us has become alien, for we have become disconnected from the fundamental bonds that join us not only to God but to one another.

Biblical faith also reminds us that the true greatness of a nation is measured not by its military might or economic assets but by the wealth of its character, expressed particularly in its responsiveness to human need (Mt 25:31-46). Movement toward the Promised Land is not simply movement toward a physical location but also toward a place of human solidarity. We cross the Jordan River, a symbol of our baptismal commitment, every time we create a safe space, foster human dignity, fight for human rights, provide basic needs, advocate for just systems, create opportunities, build networks for resettlement and integration, join people in a shared human vulnerability, denounce injustices like human trafficking, challenge attitudes of xenophobia and create an oasis of hope.

The work of the U.S. Catholic bishops, which resettles about 20,000 refugees each year (more than any other organization in the world), is a step in the right direction. But it is only a small step in relation to the overall need. The humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis requires not only faith-based actors but also governments and nongovernmental organizations, indeed the whole human community. In the face of the world's many needs, this suffering can overwhelm us and make us numb, at times. Yet even if we cannot do everything, we can do something.

## **A View of the Promised Land**

Before leaving the United States, I anticipated that our delegation would help me understand the refugee situation in the Middle East. After speaking with political leaders I attempted to analyze it. In talking with U.N. officials I tried to evaluate it. In conversations with faith-based organizations I faced the scope of it. But conversations with refugees and seeing their plight made me progressively more silent as time went on. The more I heard, the more speechless I became, recognizing that no thought or words could touch the pain of the people we encountered. By the end I was weeping. For a moment I could feel God's heart breaking over what is happening there.

God continues to offer his life not only for those who are trying to help but also for those who are struggling to hope. As people's lives are torn asunder, faith is all many have left when everything else has been taken from them. God remains a refuge for all who place their trust in him (Ps 16:1), even as these refugees do from the exile of their shattered lives.

Christ himself not only migrated to this territory but also became a refugee in these parts. And Christ still migrates into these broken territories of human existence, especially through those who reach out to the refugees in their need. But whether there is room for these refugees in the “inn” of our human community (Lk 2:7) remains an open question. Perhaps, like Moses, some future generation will see a territory of human solidarity on the horizon, where each person’s basic needs are met for protection, food and shelter. But the view of the Promised Land from Mount Nebo today—and the situation of refugees surrounding it—suggest that we still have a vast desert in front of us and a long road ahead.

### **Syria in Brief**

**General:** Arab republic under authoritarian regime; Independence, 1946; Approx. pop. 22 million; majority Muslim, 10% Christian; Basher al-Assad president since 2000.

**The Conflict:** Commenced with pro-democracy protests in March 2011; expanded to all-out civil war. Government crackdown denounced by many in the international community.

**The Costs:** Nearly 40,000, mostly civilians, have died; 1.2 million displaced internally; 2,000 refugees flee to Jordan nightly; number of refugees could reach 1.5 million by June 2013. Most refugees are women and children.

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