

## **SANCTUARY: THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE**

The New Sanctuary Movement in Europe, Berlin, October 7-10, 2010  
By Mary Jo Leddy (Toronto, Ontario)

### **INTRODUCTION**

I bring greetings from the Sanctuary Churches in Canada. I have come on behalf of a wide variety of Christian communities that have offered Sanctuary since the 1980s. Personally, I have been involved from the beginning of the Ontario Sanctuary Coalition in 1991. I have come to encourage you in your efforts and to find courage for our own, increasingly difficult, challenges.

Our Coalition has been strengthened by the witness and reflections of Sanctuary Movements in other countries. We were particularly influenced by the concept of “civil initiative” which originated with the Sanctuary group which formed in Arizona in the 80s in response to the dangers faced by Central American refugees. Jim Fife was the pastor of Southside Presbyterian when this articulation was developed. He is with us today and I want to thank him for his witness. We also take heart in the courageous actions of your churches in Europe.

### **A VARIETY OF EXPERIENCES WITH COMMON FEATURES**

There is no one “Canadian experience” of Sanctuary. Since the 80s there have been 50-60 Sanctuary experiences and each one has grown in response to specific persons and in response to a particular context and political situation. In some situations, for example, a family or person was publically living in the Church, at other times a family was “hidden” in the house of a religious community.

Yet, in spite of these diverse experiences there are some realities there are certain common features:

- 1) The move towards Sanctuary almost always involves a face to face encounter with a real person called a refugee.
- 2) This always leads to a long and difficult engagement with the bureaucracy of government
- 3) The experience of Sanctuary reveals Canadian myths of innocence
- 4) The Demand for Sanctuary is directly related to political factors.

## 1) The Face to Face Encounter

As I have listened to front line church workers, refugee advocates and immigration lawyers one reality emerges as a constant, that most of them got involved in “refugee work” through a personal encounter with a refugee or a refugee family.

This “conversion”, this change of mind and heart and moral imagination, through a personal relationship, was certainly my experience. It has also been true many times over according to church people who have been “faced” by a refugee in great need. This is, as Emmanuel Levinas has written, the ethical moment. This is the moment when you are summoned, addressed, commanded. This is the time of annunciation and visitation

This is the core of the ethical experience of Christians who have become involved in working with refugees. These Christian citizens are often rather middle class people who would not normally associate themselves with peace and justice “causes”. For many, the encounter with a real person called a refugee evokes feelings of profound compassion which lead to practical forms of kindness. It is within this reach of mercy that the necessity (and near impossibility) of justice begins to emerge.

In November 2007, a national consultation on Sanctuary was held at Romero House. Almost fifty people attended. In sharing their reflections, all of the participants remarked on the significance of this face to face encounter. It was summarized in this way by Michael Creal, the chair of the consultation: “It is important to understand that in the process of reaching a positive decision, members of the congregation have time to come to know the person/family more completely than immigration officials or refugee board judges. It is not a matter of the sanctuary providers being “better” than the immigration authorities but of their being in a position to see and hear the desperation of the refugee claimants and getting to know their stories more fully. This is simply a fact though it may not fit well within the perspective of government officials.” (pg. 71, *Refuge* Spring 2009)

## 2) The Struggle With Bureaucracies

As church people become companions to real people called refugees, they begin to see the immigration system in Canada (and other systems such as the welfare and health systems) through different eyes.

These systems seem designed to deface human beings, to render them invisible, to muffle their cry for justice. This is a social and religious shock for the Christian who now knows the refugee by name, who now sees the face as the landscape of one particular history. This person has been given Client ID number and has been filed away. From time to time pro forma letters arrive to signal that another hurdle has been passed and that the end, the place of safety, has been reached.

However, sometimes the letter says. “You have not been determined to be a Convention Refugee”. And then, “You have fifteen days to present yourself at the Immigration Detention Centre.” Case closed. Another life is filed away.

The Immigration officer who issued the form letter never has to see the hand that trembles after the envelope is opened. The church worker sees and is afraid.

Sometimes this fear galvanizes a whole church community into action. Then comes the long time of letters and visits to politicians and bureaucrats. A sense of futility grips those of little faith.

This is the time of temptation. It is all too easy to begin to demonize “the system” or particular people who are supposedly in charge of the system. It is tempting to engage in the struggle of US against THEM and indeed such a struggle tends to attract people inclined to this contemporary form of Manichean dualism. WE are right and THEY are wrong. WE are on the side of the angels against the unjust and deceiving enemies.

We have discovered that the authentically Christian response, in the midst of this struggle, is to remain life-size. The church worker who now knows the real refugee, who is neither better nor worse than the conventional stereotype, must resist the temptation to demonize immigration officials and/or politicians. The Christian must preach (in action more than words) that the employees of the system are also human and must be summoned to life-size responsibility.

There is indeed something demonic in this situation but it is not the officials in the system but rather the system itself. The reflections of the political thinker Hannah Arendt on bureaucratic systems are as relevant today as they were more than fifty years ago. She described the ways in which ordinary people doing a good job could contribute to evil of great consequence – without ever knowing it or willing it -- because the system acted as a buffer between their intentions and the consequences of their actions. Bureaucracies, in her analysis, are structured in such a way that it seems as if nobody is responsible for the terrible consequences of its cumulative action – not those on the top, who never see the people affected by their

decisions; not those on the bottom who see the people but experience themselves as helpless victims. Those on the top can argue that they never really killed anyone while those on the bottom can say that they were only following the orders of someone else.

She makes the important observation that, in some medieval paintings, the devil has a mask. He is the faceless one, the Nobody. In the various systems which hold the power of life and death over refugees, it often seems that NOBODY is responsible. Refugees who arrive in the West know what happens when NOBODY is responsible. NOBODY can kill you just as anybody or somebody could do so.

One of the challenges involved in working with refugees in Canada is to summon all concerned to face themselves. It is an act of ethical resistance to say: Systems have been created by human beings and therefore can be changed by human beings; systems must be changed so that human beings can face each other and face the consequences of their actions. For the church worker who knows a refugee as a person, this is not an abstract ethical statement about what ought to be done. It is the stubborn statement of someone who holds another by the hand...and trembles.

A sense of life-size responsibility is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the Sanctuary movement. In all of its various shapes and forms in North America today, it remains essentially a movement of conscience that usually begins with a knock at the door. "You must help us." No Church authority has ordered Sanctuary to start and no church authority can command local churches to stop offering this option for life.

I recall participating in a very interesting meeting with Judy Sgro, then the Minister of Immigration. She had been quoted as saying that the Church should not offer Sanctuary because it was illegal and because there were ways of resolving difficult situations within the system. In fact it, Canadian law seems to describe Sanctuary as "illegal" although Sanctuary has been violated only twice that we know of. The general attitude of the Immigration officials is that they will simply wait out the refugee.

After these remarks the Church leaders asked to meet with Minister Sgro. She said that she wanted to open a confidential process which would allow the Churches to present a list, of about 20 people a year, and their cases could be quietly resolved by the department. The Church leaders, to their credit, noted that they did not start Sanctuary and they could not stop it. This revealed the extent to which Sanctuary is a

local grassroots response – usually to a particular individual or family who has “faced” the congregation. The Church leaders said that they could not withdraw the possibility of Sanctuary and that they would not be part of a process that was not open to other groups concerned about refugees.

In offering Sanctuary a church congregation is taking an action which is at once intensely religious and thoroughly political. It calls into question the laws and procedures which have left human beings in such a perilous situation. Sanctuary is a radical statement and is recognized as such, even by non-Christians or by those of no religious belief. It illustrates how religion, which can sometimes, for better or worse, be a conservative force in society can also become a liberating political force.

As I have mentioned, the practice of Sanctuary necessarily varies from context to context. For example, wherever Sanctuary was offered in the 80s in the United States, it was usually a short term matter. Refugees were moved from church to church, usually on their way up to Canada.

However, the situation has been much different in Canada. If a refugee had been refused by the Canadian refugee determination process, where would they go? To the United States? To Greenland? The one country was too dangerous and the other too distant.

As a result, the experience of offering Sanctuary in Canada has been a long drawn out process that has become a time of intense spiritual testing for the more than 30 church communities that have been involved. For example, an Iranian man lived in an Anglican Church in Vancouver for three years before he was eventually granted status on humanitarian grounds.

It takes immense inner reserve for a refugee to live in such confinement for so long. It takes spiritual resources of great substance for a church community to sustain a commitment to providing for a person or family in Sanctuary. There is the ongoing challenge of providing for the basic necessities of life, food, a place to live – and how to justify this expenditure when it means siphoning funds from other worthwhile projects and using space that would otherwise be used for a daycare.

On a more difficult level there is the reality of sheer boredom, the real and present possibility of despair and even suicide. For families, the strict confinement puts immense stress on marriages, on the relationships between parents and children. Some marriages cannot survive this time of forced togetherness.

Because there is nowhere else to go, the church inevitably becomes involved in the process of lobbying for the refugee with the various politicians and

masters of the refugee universe. Thus begins the long and weary relationship with NOBODY.

It is usually at this point that church leaders get involved and go head to head with politicians and bureaucrats. Sometimes this helps and sometimes it does not. The media begin to cover a story and then weary of it. And then, quietly, someday, when everyone is looking the other way – the papers arrive and the refugee walks out of the church.

Needless to say, there are church communities that are still “in recovery” from such a situation. These parishes can hardly remember what it was like “before they came to live with us.” They have been sorely tested not only by the bureaucratic nobodies but also by the refugees themselves who have become petulant, demanding, ungrateful. Yet, most church people I have talked to will also say that the time of sanctuary was a time when they really discovered what it meant to be a church community, when they began to understand the gospel as a living commandment, as a way of life. A new standard of authenticity enters the life of that congregation. They know their church has become significant, weighty, consequential.

The public attention given to of the witness of Sanctuary today is telling. There was a time, in the 70s and 80s when statements by church leaders and ecclesial documents were considered a matter of public importance. The media was interested in what the churches had to say on a wide variety of social and political topics.

This is no longer the case. In a culture saturated with information, in churches demoralized by the revelations of sexual abuse, statements alone no longer have the power to convince. It is only the witness of lives that speaks now.

The witness of Sanctuary is living testimony to the fact that refugees are human beings. They cannot be filed away, they cannot be consigned to bureaucratic oblivion. Because they are not invisible, God is not invisible. The practice of Sanctuary is a statement that refugees are not disposable. Sanctuary enacts a contemporary Credo: that human beings are holy. In this consumer culture, that which cannot be and should not be thrown away is holy.

### 3) Sanctuary Reveals Canadian Myths of Innocence

However, it is not only the structures of our institutions which deface the refugee; it is also the way in which our Canadian political culture makes us look good in its historical mirror.

I take it as a given that most church people are generally compassionate to those in need. I know for a fact that most church people, when faced by a refugee in need, respond with decency and generosity. They tend to think of themselves as hard-working and decent and, if they read stories about refugees being mistreated, tend to assume that the refugees must have deserved it, must have done something wrong. We Canadians are so wrapped around by cultural myths of innocence that we are blind to the injustices of our own social systems which refugees know in their bones.

The Canadian myths of innocence are probably related to the fact that the country has never been an imperial power and tends to think that responsibility in the world lies with the other “great” powers. Canada has been a colony first of France, then of England and now of the United States. As a result, Canadians have developed a branch plant mentality which assumes that the centers of power and influence are elsewhere and that is where responsibility lies. There not here. It has been argued that Canadians prefer this colonial status which makes them morally innocent. For those who live with a branch plant morality, guilt lies with the powerful who are always elsewhere but not here.

It is a dangerous myth which blinds Canadians to the actual racism and injustice that has taken place in the past and which is present today, here. For example: Few Canadians know that their country had the worst record in the western world in terms of accepting Jewish refugees during the Second World War.

A few years ago Canadian bureaucrats finessed an agreement which closed the border to refugees seeking to enter Canada through the United States. The so-called “Safe Third Country Agreement” effectively cut the flow of refugee claimants to Canada by half. It was done quietly, in a “nice” Canadian way, through an administrative agreement that was implemented in the sleepy news time after Christmas. Church workers in refugee shelters on both sides of the border held prayer services and wept as the door was closed to desperate people. And the transport trucks full of things rolled on over the bridges at the border.

#### 4) Political Factors and the Demands for Sanctuary

Sanctuary efforts in Canada are also influenced by government policy and changes in legislation. When we first started, in the early 90s, we were able to present our concerns to politicians or senior bureaucrats in an effort to resolve situations. However, our present Conservative government has been virtually inaccessible. We have turned increasingly to the courts to try to resolve some of our situations and to challenge some laws and procedures.

Like so many other western governments, we are closing our doors very effectively. Canadian Consulates and Embassies overseas are virtually inaccessible to refugees. Those seeking to escape persecutions are regularly “interdicted” by airport officials. The few refugees who now make it to Canada tell us stories of relatives who have disappeared into the Mediterranean in their frantic efforts to escape. Only recently we had one boatload of refugees from Sri Lanka who arrived on our western coast – only to be immediately demonized by the government officials as “suspected terrorists”. Fewer and fewer refugees are able to come to Canada.

The tragedy of 9-11 has provided ample justification to implement the concept of a North American Security Perimeter – a virtual union of Canada and the United States. Our concern is that it will have the long term effect of “harmonizing” our refugee policy with that of the United States. Again and again, national “security concerns” trump human rights.

This spring a new Refugee Law (Bill C-11) was passed which is supposed to make the refugee determination process more efficient and speedy. We do support efforts to speed up the process as many are caught in backlogs for years. However, it is also possible that these efforts at efficiency may result in great injustices. We do not foresee any drop in the need for Sanctuary.

As this crisis deepens, the Churches have issued some guidelines for groups considering Sanctuary. The United Church has a very well developed policy on this and it has been used by other churches. One of the most important things we do as a coalition is to offer advice on particular cases that might involve Sanctuary. We try to do everything possible to avoid Sanctuary as it is so demanding but sometimes this is the only option left.

Our Sanctuary Coalition, based in Toronto, continues to meet every two weeks in a very disciplined fashion. Our meetings begin with a Quaker moment of silence and then we discuss for no longer than one hour. We have an excellent chairman, Michael Creal, who moves the early morning meeting along quickly. Even though we are a small group we have been able to make a significant impact on some legislation and



we have helped to ensure a measure of justice for some refugees unjustly accused of being terrorists.

As we look ahead, we have talked about different ways of offering Sanctuary. We have had the thought of taking over an empty church and designating it as Sanctuary and grouping all the various refugees together in one place. The point of this would be to make the plight of these refugees more visible and to attract supporters who are specifically concerned. Above all, we know we must work in solidarity with Sanctuary groups in the United States, in Europe and elsewhere because the injustice experienced by refugees is now globalized. There are no really “safe” places for refugees anymore. We are gathered here because the churches offer a last and finest hope for safety.

REFERENCE: *Sanctuary in Context*, Refuge Vol. 26, No.1 (Spring 2009)  
Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Toronto