

Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal

Volume 5 | Number 1

Article 13

May 2016

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The Rev. Claudine Leary

Director of Annual Giving, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, cleary@mtso.edu

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Recommended Citation

Leary, The Rev. Claudine (2016) "I Remember and I Am Grateful," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol5/iss1/13>

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I Remember and I Am Grateful

The Rev. Claudine Leary
Director of Annual Giving
Methodist Theological School in Ohio
(CLEary@mtso.edu)

Abstract

Jesuit Refugee Service has provided a turning point in my life and in many refugees' lives. I cannot imagine where I would be today if JRS had not been with us in Dzaleka Refugee Camp during the mid-1990s. No matter how much we pray and call on God for help and rescue, God constantly works through people. In my case God worked through JRS and the people of the Society of Jesus to introduce me to Africa University, an institution that became a bridge to success for me.

Reflection

I was born and raised in the small east central African country of Rwanda. I am the youngest of five children: I have one sister and three brothers. Our family had two separate homes — the first was the ancestral farm that has sustained our village to this day and the second was the church home. My father was an itinerant clergyman living in a parsonage. My three older siblings were itinerant with our father, while my brother and I stayed with our mother on the farmland. Our family reunited on weekends or whenever schools were out.

Our parents, like any other parents I know, wanted us to succeed and knew the only way would be through education. It was not cheap to attend local elementary schools or high schools. Colleges seemed out of our reach. However, our parents did the best they could; with the exception of one brother, we all finished high school. With encouraging parents and hard work, I was almost always at the top of the class. When I finished high school, I passed a national exam and I was able to go to Lycee Notre Dame D'Africa of Nyundo in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Nyundo, one of the most prestigious Catholic all-girls boarding schools in the country at the time.

When I finished high school, I had very high grades and I earned one of the best national scholarships. The scholarship covered all school-

related expenses (tuition, housing, and allowance for books and other needs). This was more than I had dreamed of. My family and I were so happy and so proud of my accomplishment. Our neighbors and my teachers were all pleased, and many stopped by to congratulate us. My teachers would say that they were not surprised because I had always been “a promising student.”

When I packed my suitcase and said goodbye to my beloved village, there were three things I did not know. First, I had no idea that I would never see those people again. Second, I did not know that my luxurious academic life was going to last merely a few months. Third, I could not have foreseen that the country itself was about to break apart beyond repair. I had never heard of the word “genocide,” and I had no idea we were on the brink of one. Our village was well integrated, and the two main tribes — Hutu and Tutsi — lived there in harmony. I cannot think of a time when there was a gathering — a church service, wedding, or even children playing outside — where the two large tribes were not represented. Hutu and Tutsi were always together. They intermarried, exchanged cows, and shared in every way. We knew there were tribal challenges and war in the north of the country, but I never imagined it would spread to other parts of the country.

I was living in the capital city of Kigali when all hell broke loose in April 1994. It was by God's

grace that I made it out of the city alive and eventually made it to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), then Zaire. It was an extremely difficult time, to say the least. Looking back, I am amazed at how much stress and struggle a human being can endure. The joy of being alive was mixed with the tears and pain of knowing that many thousands of others did not survive.

Initially, it was very difficult to thank God. There were even times I thought that God was unjust and cruel. Many people had died in churches. They had run to God, and God had let them down — or so I thought at the time. It would be many years later that I came to understand that God did not let any of us down. God created each one of us for the very purpose for which we call upon God: to love and bless each other. Yet, we blame God for our own failures.

The zeal to survive and to live in peace brought me to Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi. This was a much more comfortable place than the DRC since it was further away from armed conflicts. I remember my sleepless nights in Dzaleka, when I wondered if the “promising student” would ever have another chance. The situation was tough, to say the least. I prayed like no one has ever prayed before, even though my faith in God was extremely thin at this point. God had failed us badly, I thought, but I was still convinced that God was present with us. So I talked to God. I would say that God worked through Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) to make His case. The presence of JRS in the camp was a divine presence. The JRS’s staff and volunteers listened to us. They showed us the amazing care and compassion that we so desperately needed. They started sewing, knitting, and educational projects that disrupted our feeling of pain and despair. We had something to look forward to each day. JRS was a blessing. JRS and volunteer Joe Moretti (now deceased) worked a miracle, and I was able to go back to college.

I will never forget the joy I felt when Sister Catherine came to the camp to pick me up for my trip to college in Zimbabwe. JRS was the answer to my prayers to leave the camp and rebuild my life. JRS initiated the beginning of a beautiful new chapter of my life. I remember the whole journey, and I am very grateful.

I finished a bachelor’s degree in business studies from Africa University. I moved to the United States, completed my MBA degree, and joined the American workforce. However, after all my experiences, it became clear that I would be a witness to this good God who heard my prayers and mobilized many people and resources on my behalf. I believe I have a joyous response to teach love for God and love for my neighbors; the absence of this love is catastrophic. I have now completed a Master of Divinity degree and have joined the clergy of the United Methodist Church. All of this has been made possible thanks to JRS. JRS sacrificed their time, resources, and comfort to be with us in the lowest and most vulnerable moments of our lives. The Jesuits mean so much to me, and I pray for them and their ministry always.

My heart still is with people I left behind in refugee camps and those new refugees who continue to join them. I am very grateful that JRS is still with them every step of the way. I am thankful for all people who support JRS financially and with their time as volunteers. It is an enormous undertaking to reach out to every refugee across the globe; I can only imagine how much support JRS needs for what they do. I hope that one of JRS’s supporters or volunteers is reading this article and is reassured that his or her sacrifice was not in vain.

Thank you so very much. My life is full and better because of JRS. 🙏