

THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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JESUS STOPPED AT KAKUMA

I saw Salesians who, in the midst of immense suffering, keep open a house of hope, consolation, living in communion, and education

Dear friends, today I wish to share with you the impact that a profound human experience I recently lived had on me. I am referring to the visit that I, along with other Salesians, was able to make to the UN refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya, a few weeks ago. You can easily understand that any visit to a refugee camp would always have a profound impact. Added to this was a very particular and important motivation: I did not go there only to be near to the refugees from South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo, among others, but also to be able to greet and embrace my five brother Salesians (from Tanzania and Kenya). These five confreres belong to this beautiful community and live with these 150,000 persons – among whom there are many boys, girls, teens, and young adults.

The community has been living in the midst of the refugee camp for many years. This is unusual, yet this is how it is. Further, not only is it allowed but it is hoped for by the UN Commission responsible for the site because the Salesian work is an important element as it generates living in communion, sociability, education, and formation.

I encountered a Valdocco of the 21st Century

This is why it is this way:

When arriving in the city of Kakuma, which is very close to the border with South Sudan, which is suffering the entanglement of very strong internal tribal conflicts, one finds oneself in the middle of the town of Turkana, a city of 340,000 inhabitants who live in this region of northeast

Kenya – an arid and extremely hot one. After passing over a bone-dry river, one reaches the UN refugee camp where these 150,000 people live. People of the most diverse races, tribes, customs, and religious professions all live together. In the midst of this diversity, our brother Salesians of Don Bosco continue to be for many of them what Don Bosco was for his boys at Valdocco. There, in that place, I encountered a Valdocco of the 21st century and one with completely African features.

More than 250 young people go to the technical school every day. There, some teachers and the Salesians themselves teach them a trade: masonry, electrical systems, electronics, working with wood and other materials, and management and secretarial skills. These are all simple trades that allow these young people to have some skills “under their belt” so they can live a dignified life when they leave the refugee camp once conditions of peace and of survival have been established in the places where they wish to go.

Every day, food is provided for these young people and for many others. It is supplied by the UN, for it is guaranteeing these services. We ate with them: generous helpings of rice spiced with great joy and huge smiles. They taught me about their little handiwork and what they were learning. The great majority of these young girls and boys are more young adults than teenagers.

I truly felt that that house was a veritable school that prepares for life. They get a simple education, but that does not make it any less valuable; indeed, it is quite the opposite, for they learn each day about living communion in diversity, living in peace, combining forces, valuing differences, respecting everyone’s opinion, and respecting the various expressions of culture and religion.

I took the opportunity to greet the lady in charge of this UN operation as regards the Salesian work. She came to join us and share our plate of rice. I was very happy to hear from her lips that they very much value the presence of our brother Salesians and the collaboration

(partnership) being carried out between the UN and the Salesian Congregation in this part of the world.

To go beyond the dry river bed

I also thanked her because the UN permits us to work there in the midst of those young people, for it is not just a work of social assistance or of survival. It may begin that way, when they arrive in a helpless state, but soon it is transformed into preparation for one's future life, whether that time may be close at hand or more distant.

The joyful atmosphere of the house and the surroundings made me very happy. The young people truly feel that they are at home during all the long hours they spend there. And we are not alone in this, even if the Salesians in this community are the only non-refugees living in the camp. It gave us great joy to hear how close the young bishop is to them. He is in total harmony with them and has guaranteed his collaboration at all times – both with us and with another community of Religious with whom we have been sharing the mission in the midst of Turkana for years.

Their dream is to have another Salesian community, but not in the refugee camp; rather, in the area of Turkana – beyond the dry river bed – and, as much as is possible, to expand the technical school, in both size and level, so that it can also serve the youths living there.

The community also runs a parish for the Catholics in the camp, as well as another nine chapels (you can imagine how vast the territory must be to accommodate such a huge population). When you see the care given to faith for those who seek it or who cultivate their faith in the Lord Jesus, you truly feel that Easter has taken place even in the refugee camp. Indeed, Jesus rose for all, especially for the last, the poorest, the displaced, and those whom the world ignores.

I returned home. The others remained. Still, I came with a heart filled with the joy of having touched with my own hands how, in the midst of poverty, there is so much humanity and so great a presence of the God of Love.

I wish you every possible good but, above all, that you never lose your sensitivity for the young, the women, and the men such as these who have welcomed us as friends and brothers and sisters.