From hostile environment to loving encounter

Sophie Cartwright

The government's 'hostile environment agenda' was brought to the front of the collective consciousness earlier this year with the Windrush scandal, which illustrated the devastating effects of policies that seek to instrumentalise people and their suffering. This Refugee Week, Sophie Cartwright of JRS calls for a radically alternative approach to immigration that seeks to engage with rather than control people.

Pope Francis suggests that the situation of forcibly displaced people is a 'sign of the times'.[1] It is something significant about this point in human history that the Church, here and now, is called to interpret in light of the gospel.[2] It is significant that Francis talks not simply of the fact of forced migration, but of the *situation* of those who experience it. We are called to interpret human experiences, and to do this we must ensure that those experiences are heard. This is a challenging endeavour, as the situation of forcibly displaced people here in the UK shows.


Photo: JRS UK

At the Jesuit Refugee Service, through our day centre in East London, we accompany refugees struggling to gain recognition of their need for protection by the government. They have sought sanctuary in Britain, placing themselves in the hands of the asylum system, only to be let down by it and then rendered destitute by government policy. Those seeking asylum are routinely barred from work and consigned to poverty while their cases are considered.[3] When an asylum case is refused, all support is cut off. This much has been true for years. More recently, the difficulty of destitution is compounded by the 'hostile environment agenda', which is a matrix of legislation and policy measures designed to make life unbearable for undocumented migrants. This criminalises for them many everyday activities, such as renting and driving, and makes it difficult to access basic services such as healthcare.

In November 2017, we asked those we work with at our day centre about their living conditions.[4] It emerged that virtually everyone was legally homeless, and sporadic street homelessness was widespread. People would sleep on different friends' floors, but sometimes a floor or sofa would not materialise, or they would find themselves locked out. The streets beckoned. This inevitability left people vulnerable. One young woman, Litzian, remarked that on the streets, 'We are left at the mercy of people we don't know. Abuse is common and somewhat expected.' Being forced to accept any roof that is on offer also placed large numbers in dangerous situations: troublingly, over a third did not feel physically safe around those with whom they lived.

This is the situation of many forcibly displaced people in the UK.

This occurs against the background of an unfair asylum system, in which a culture of disbelief is well-documented.[5] A new report by the charity Refugee Action correspondingly observes among asylum seekers a widespread sense of hostility towards them in asylum interviews, as well as significant difficulty in accessing legal support and navigating the system. It also noted a lack of engagement or even explanation on the part of the Home Office.[6] In the report, asylum seekers explained: 'everything is concealed' and, 'trying to contact the Home Office is like talking to a brick wall.'[7] This echoes what many refugee friends tell us at JRS: one spoke to me of a system working against them –a system extending far beyond the Home Office, right across society.

If we are to interpret this sign of the times, we must reflect deeply on how our society got here, on what has allowed and forged this depth and breadth of human suffering, aware that this may well reveal sins that reflect on ourselves, not only others, and that may be uncomfortable. And as we think about a way forward, we allow faith to enable 'reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly... the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.'[8]

The inhumanity of the Home Office's approach to immigration was recently brought to public attention in the horrifying experience of the so-called 'Windrush-era' citizens. There has been, in some quarters, a tendency to see their experience as somehow anomalous. However, once it is placed in the context of government targets for removing undocumented migrants, an asylum system that aims to refuse claims more than it aims to determine their authenticity, and an overt policy of hostility towards certain categories of migrant, we can see that this is not the case. The Windrush-era citizens fell victim to a system that reads migrants with a hermeneutic of suspicion and errs on the side of excluding, removing and detaining them, regardless of the human cost. It is a system that places unfair barriers in the way of obtaining up-to-date immigration documentation, and makes removing those without it an end in itself, seeing them only under the one-dimensional and homogenising rubric of 'illegal immigrants', and not as three-dimensional people, with particular histories and relationships.

As the then Home Secretary acknowledged when the story hit the headlines, the 'Windrush' scandal arose from a systemic failure to look properly at the human person.[9] I would like to suggest, more specifically, that much UK immigration policy, and particularly the treatment of more vulnerable migrants, implicitly rests on an instrumental conception of the human person: not only does it treat people as objects, expendable to some external cause, but it also seeks to transform them into instruments for the Home Office to wield at will. The point is illustrated by examining one aspect of UK immigration policy – the hostile environment. This can also give a window onto an underlying problem that extends far beyond that particular group of policies.

Shortly after the Windrush scandal, the new Home Secretary, Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, distanced himself from the terminology of the 'hostile environment' by explaining, 'it's a compliant environment'. In fact, the hostile environment was always intended to enforce compliance, and this newer phrase has been in use among policy-makers for the last few years. Indeed, it appeared in Amber Rudd's letter to the Prime Minister, in which she mentioned removal targets of which she had earlier denied knowledge. Exploring the relationship between hostility and compliance can shed light on the wider culture of UK immigration policy. In seeking to cement the terminology of 'compliance' over that of 'hostility', Sajid Javid sought to reassure the public that the Home Office does not pursue hostility in and of itself: human suffering is not the hoped-for *end*, but only the *means* to ensure control over certain categories of migrants.

Javid's terminological switch amounts to a defence of life-destroying hostility on the grounds that it is a *tool* of immigration enforcement. The decision to pursue hostile policies is cast as a purely instrumental one – and therefore as devoid of moral content. The destruction of human lives is instrumentalised. But as Pope Francis reminds us, our mode of praxis is not morally or socially neutral. 'Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.'[10] We cannot force people onto the streets in the dead of winter, or withhold healthcare from the sick, without major consequences for our communities. If we allow this, we have made a decision about how we relate to each other, about what kind of people we want to be.

The proposed aim of manufacturing suffering – compliance – is itself profoundly problematic. We have already seen that what is sought is, frequently, compliance with unjust immigration decisions – decisions that are very dangerous when they fail to recognise someone's need for international protection. Recall the lack of engagement or interaction on the part of the Home Office; it neglects the histories, relationships, hopes and fears of those on whose cases it pronounces. The aim of hostile policies is to render people pliable to a system that does not engage with them, but only seeks to wield power. What the 'compliance environment' pursues *is* the manipulation of people who are deemed expendable, that is to say, the denial of their personhood.

Pope Francis observes a related cluster of tendencies in contemporary societies: 'the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests...which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects.'[11] This pursuit of total power, relativisation of human value and objectification of others, he argues, foster exploitation and abandonment of the vulnerable. He makes his remarks with reference to our interaction with technology, but he overtly situates this within a wider anthropological and meta-ethical framework, which, he believes, has far-reaching implications.[12] Some of those implications, I suggest, are for the UK's treatment of undocumented migrants.

The fundamental error of the UK asylum and immigration system is to neglect migrants' humanity, and so not to treat them as persons. To challenge this, we need to start by looking at migrants as human persons, rather than as things to be used. In this way, we see the 'face of God', and we see the infinite and intrinsic value in people whom our society, like many others, so often does not value:

> ...Jesus clears a way to seeing two faces, that of the Father and that of our brother. He does not give us two more formulas or two more commands. He gives us two faces, or better yet, one alone: the face of God reflected in so many other faces. For in every one of our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the most vulnerable, the defenceless and those in need, God's very image is found. Indeed, with the scraps of this frail humanity, the Lord will shape his final work of art.[13]

In the face of the other, and particularly those who are excluded or powerless, we see God. In the face of the vulnerable migrant, the refugee, we see Christ.[14] This necessarily entails a profound care for vulnerable people: an accompaniment of grieving with all the cost that it entails, but also a share in their rejoicing, and in our work at JRS we see both, however materially difficult are the circumstances with which people are struggling. Crucially, it also involves a readiness to be humble before and with others, and to learn, to discover something new about God and ourselves and allow that to change us. The contrast with a system that seeks to exploit and magnify the vulnerabilities of purported outsiders so that it can render them malleable could hardly be starker.

This ethic is anthropocentric because it is Christo-centric, and is fundamentally about relationship. In this, Pope Francis closely follows Benedict XVI: 'Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.'[15]

To encounter people as they are, in light of the gospel, means to see them and treat them as a brother or sister, as God's image.[16] That suggests that authentic encounter must involve love.[17] Benedict XVI's reflections on love of neighbour offer a good framework for such encounter. Christian love is both universal and concrete.[18] Our neighbour may be someone very different from us, an 'outsider' from the perspective of the earthly city, but they are not some abstract other. They are encountered and loved in their particularity. As Benedict XVI insists, this concept of love is closely tied to an intrinsic respect for the person. It is the antithesis of a reductive and instrumentalising approach to the person that ends up concluding that some are expendable.

Refugee Week is an opportunity to celebrate refugees' contributions, creativity and resilience. At JRS, we are privileged to participate in a community that strives to open up space for refugees' contributions to be noticed in small human ways on a daily basis, whether through creative activities or by giving volunteering opportunities to those otherwise denied the right to work and participate, so that they can share their skills and experience. Over our shared lunch it can be hard to tell at first glance who around the table is staff, who a volunteer, a visitor or a beneficiary. This informality evolved naturally over the history of JRS, not consciously, but we prefer it this way – it creates space for more human, dynamic relationships than traditional service-orientated models, without the categories or limiting labels.

And in the fluid, surprising conversations that flow over food, ranging from football and humour through the dark struggle of asylum, detention and homelessness, to faith, family and more besides, we meet one another as real people, equally broken; we relate to one another as peers, friends, even family. We know it is here that we have been given a glimpse of something true, something of God. And we know it is the foundational experience that must guide any way forward.

Sophie Cartwright is the Policy Officer at JRS UK. She previously worked with people seeking asylum in Glasgow and has a PhD in theology.

[1] Message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2018.
[2] See *Gaudium et Spes*, §4.
[3] The current level of asylum support is £37.75 per week.
[4] Full details can be found in our report 'Out in the Cold: Homelessness among destitute refugees in London' (2018): https://www.jrsuk.net/out-in-the-cold/
[5] Refugee Studies Centre: 'The Culture of disbelief: an ethnographic approach to understanding an under-theorised concept in the UK asylum system.' https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/files-1/wp102-culture-of-disbelief-2014.pdf.
[6] Refugee Action, 'Waiting in the Dark'. Over a third of claims refused by the Home Office are granted on appeal to the courts, giving further indication of problems with the decision-making process. 41% were granted in 2016 (Home Office Asylum Statistics, February 2017).
[7] 'Waiting in the Dark', p.20.
[8] *Deus caritas est*, §28.
[9] Amber Rudd stated that the Home Office had 'lost sight of the individual' and become 'too concerned with policy'. The point here is not so much that the Home Office should focus on a *lone* individual, as opposed to a person-in-relationship or a community, but on people, as opposed to rules abstracted from human experience.
[10] *Laudato si'*, §107.
[11] *Laudato si'*, §122-123. Cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, §4:
[12] See e.g. *Laudato si'*, §101: 'A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry.'
[13] *Gaudete et Exsultate*, §61.
[14] See *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, §12.
[15] *Deus Caritas Est*, 1. See also *Caritas in Veritate*, 47, cited by Francis in this year's Message of Hope for the world day of Migrants and Refugees: 'the principle of the *centrality of the human person*...must be preserved.'
[16] *Gaudete et Exsultate*, §98.
[17] *Deus Caritas Est*, §18: 'Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well.'
[18] *Deus Caritas Est*, §15.