Alessia PASSARELLI

A Place to Call Home

When we talk about homeless people, generally we have in mind those who live at the margins of our society, sleeping in the streets of our cities; we usually remember them during the wintertime when the community mobilizes itself, collecting blankets and preparing hot meals to distribute to them.

The old lady sitting on the stairs of a church feeding the birds, the man outside the train stations building a refuge with papers—in our imagination those are naïve images we have inherited, which are not inclusive at all of the homeless situation today. There are, indeed, many ways of being homeless, and the one that I have chosen to reflect upon is the phenomenon of global homelessness.

Sometimes they leave home in the dark of the night, taking only what they can carry, knowing that because of their politics, religion, race or ethnic community they won't be safe tomorrow morning or any other morning. In some places they leave in shock and despair, driven away by bombings, wars, or by earthquake or flood. These are people without a home, without a country. These are refugees.

Being born and living in a place that automatically is called home is something most of the time we take for granted. We may have changed homes, or sometimes countries, but in the majority of circumstances it is a matter of choice for us, it is an improvement that we make in our lives. Millions of people around the world, however, are forced to leave their homes. They flee to survive, escaping wars, torture, violence and death. Those people become, suddenly, homeless—the global homeless.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

A refugee or asylum seeker is a homeless person, either in terms of house or often in terms of state. A refugee, to be designated as such, must fit the criteria defined in the Geneva Convention (1951) or into the asylum law of the country of asylum; before that, a person who flees her or his home because of persecution of any kind is an asylum seeker.

Refugees have no choice but to leave everything behind them and search for stability elsewhere. They find themselves uprooted and living in an alien and sometimes hostile environment that, while certainly safer than the one from which they have escaped, cannot in any way be thought of as "home."

The status of refugee is a temporary one; it is a provisional response to an immediate problem which needs to be solved. Ultimately, however, such problems need a "durable solution," a long-term solution acceptable to the refugees themselves, which takes care of their rights and needs.

In other words, "durable solutions" are ways to give opportunity to refugees to rebuild their lives, to create a new home away from their original one. Which durable solutions are we talking about? Voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement.

Voluntary repatriation to the country of origin occurs when the situation and the factors which forced the refugees to flee and to seek asylum in another country are no longer there, so the refugees can go back home feeling safe and regain their lives. Unfortunately this option is not possible for every refugee; sometimes what they have been through is so deeply rooted in their minds that going back to their country of origin is not an option anymore.

One must be aware that being repatriated is not an easy step to undertake, either. When refugees finally are able to go back home, they often return to a country devastated by conflict. Emotions can run high; their absence might be judged as a desertion, and they might still be the target of ethnic rivalries which erupted and caused them to flee in the first place.

Local integration happens when refugees are able to put down roots in the country of asylum. As we mentioned above, the situation in the country of origin cannot always be solved in the short run, and the foreseeable future might remain so dim that settling in the country of asylum becomes a better option than repatriation.

In some countries, refugees are able to integrate themselves because the host country provides them with access to services and access to the labour market or to land, while in others they remain confined to camps where they depend on assistance from the international community. This is, for example, true of Kenya, where refugees are stuck in camps more than 15 years in some cases.

As for resettlement, among the durable solutions this is the least known and most misunderstood tool of protection, especially in Europe. Resettlement is often confused with repatriation or return, while in reality it is the movement of refugees from the country of first asylum, where for several reasons local integration is not foreseen by the local government, to a third country where they can rebuild their lives.

Sometimes when refugees' lives are at risk, resettlement in a safe country is the only way to protect persecuted or endangered people—for example, they might be denied basic human rights in their country of refuge. Resettlement may also be used for survivors of torture, injured and traumatized refugees who are unable to obtain treatment in their country of refuge.

Resettlement is scarcely known in Europe and rarely used as tool of protection—actually only six European countries are resettling refugees from various parts of the world: Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK. But this is not enough, both in terms of numbers and in terms of commitment by Europe to share responsibility for the world refugee situation.

All the durable solutions, all those ways to create a home away from home, have to be seen and understood as whole mechanism of protection for those people who are homeless in the wider concept of the word.

EUROPE: FORTRESS OR REFUGE FOR UPROOTED PEOPLE?

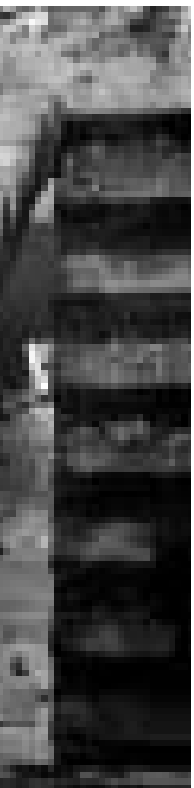
According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2005 the number of global refugees—those who have been granted asylum—reached an estimated number of 8.4 million persons, the lowest since 1980. The same phenomenon is true for asylum seekers: the figure, which is 668.000 persons, decreased by 2 percent from 2004.

Looking at the figures of refugees in Europe, those show that since the beginning of 2005 there was a decrease equal to 15.2 percent. This is not an anomaly, because it was at least the fifth year that there has been a decrease in both refugee and asylum seeker requests.

Interestingly enough, the media within European countries seem not to be aware of those figures because they always try to emphasise, often negatively, the arrival of strangers, migrants, aliens and refugees to Europe. Moreover, they create confusion and misunderstanding among those categories of migrants.

When we look at the current policy of European Union member states, we can easily see that each country has its own asylum law (or none at all); so far there has not been a common European asylum law, although it is on the agenda of the EU Commission.

Although other countries in the world share far greater responsibility for refugees and asylum seekers than European countries do, the perception of an invasion of immigrants, shared by some politicians and by the public alike, is there and it is real. Other widely held misconceptions include the idea that the asylum system is subject to widespread abuse, and that most asylum seekers are not genuinely in need of protection but are really economic migrants in search of a better life for themselves and their families.



HOMELESSNESS VS. UPROOTEDNESS

The Churches are not only aware of the global phenomenon of homelessness, but also they have developed a global network addressing this important issue.

In 1995, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches unanimously adopted a statement on uprooted people: "People leave their communities for many reasons and are called by different names—refugees, internally displaced, asylum-seekers, migrants. As churches, we lift up all those who are compelled by severe political, economic and social conditions to leave their land and their culture—regardless of the labels they are given by others. Uprooted people are those forced to leave their communities: those who flee because of persecution and war, those who are forcibly displaced because of environmental devastation and those who are compelled to seek sustenance in a city or abroad because they cannot survive at home."

The paradigm of uprootedness was meant to challenge the distinction between refugees and asylum seekers on the one side, and migrants on the other. Refugees and asylum seekers are recognized as those fleeing persecution and deserving of protection and assistance. Migrants, on the other hand, have usually been characterized as persons moving voluntarily, choosing to leave, in order to obtain better economic opportunities.

The WCC document highlights the importance of considering the effects of globalisation and recognizing that, however it is defined, globalisation is reshaping the world economy and the relations among states, regions and people. War, civil conflict, human rights violations, colonial domination, and persecution for political, religious, ethnic or social reasons are major causes of forced human displacement today. Taking into consideration what we have just said, it is clear that that the vast majority of people who leave their countries and their homes have little or no choice in this matter.

HOME SWEET HOME

"A place to call home" was the slogan of the campaign launched by UNHCR on the occasion of World Refugee Day 2004 (June 20), to raise awareness of the need to share responsibility for global homelessness towards the uprooted people. It is important to continue to raise awareness of the fact that Europe cannot stay behind, it cannot be led by fear of an "invasion" of strangers without considering seriously the numbers, without taking into consideration that the movement of people is only one of the consequences of the world being "globalised." "Globalisation" means that people flee their countries of origin also because of the politics of industrialized countries. The export of arms to developing countries, the war for oil, and the privatisation of water are causing refugees.

As Europeans, what is our role in making refugees and migrants feel at home? Jesus said: "For I was a stranger and you welcomed me in." Are we a welcoming society? Does Europe offer a home to uprooted people? And if yes, which kind of home? Is it the kind of home where we would like to live ourselves?

Saying "home," we mean being secure, feeling safe, comfortable, cosy. Does Europe offer that? And we, what is our role as Christians and as students? Have we welcomed uprooted people in our country, in our city, in our community, in our SCM, in our life?

Having a roof above your head does not automatically transform a place into a home. To feel at home, people have to be integrated in the place where they live, and integration does not only mean living according to the customs of the hosting society. Integration has to be a proactive process from both sides—the receiving society as well as the refugees and migrants themselves.

As a matter of fact, we live in multicultural societies which at the moment are far from being inter-cultural or trans-cultural; each community remains within its ghetto and they rarely have contacts among themselves. Unfortunately uprooted people are often seen as a danger in our communities and in our churches as well; we are afraid of losing our own identity, and for this reason we close the doors of our congregations to strangers, to uprooted people who are not welcome anymore.

To stay on the side of the "lasts," to stay and support uprooted people in re-building their homes materially and psychologically, is not only a matter of charity, but it is also our responsibility as we are part of the causes which forced people to flee. And, besides, as believers we should never forget that Jesus Himself was a refugee.

Suggested Reading

http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect?id=3d4545984

http://www.ecre.org

http://www.ccme.be

Alessia Passarelli is a graduate in Cultural and Social Anthropology. Her thesis was based on a two-year-long field research on Romanian Roma people in Rome. She has been the Chairperson of WSCF Europe Region since September 2006. She is currently working as project assistant for the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, Brussels. Her e-mail address is alessia_passarelli@hotmail.com.