



Synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium” – Pope Francis

I OFTEN COMPARE A REFUGEE TO A MATCH

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Synod delegates urged to tackle scourge of domestic violence

Elise Ann Allen

Clinical psychologist and specialist in intimate partner violence Christauria Welland has long asked that Church leaders pay more heed to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, and she is now making a special appeal to participants in the upcoming Synod of Synodality to address the issue.

In a letter sent to dozens of delegates at last year's October session of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, Ms Welland said, "We can no longer turn a blind eye to these insults to the rights and the sanctity of the human person!"

It is time, she said, "to be outraged, to break the silence, to follow in our Holy Father's courageous footsteps, to denounce what we all know is evil, and to take collective and effective action".

Ms Welland has been a clinical psychologist for 25 years and a catechist for over 50 years.

She and her husband Michael Akong for two decades have travelled the world educating pastoral agents, professionals, and couples on the reality of domestic abuse and offering resources in treatment prevention for survivors and those who abuse their partners.



Participants in the assembly of the Synod of Bishops exchange a sign of peace during Mass as part of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops presided over by Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo of Kinshasa at the Altar of the Chair in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican October 13, 2023. Photo: CNS/Lola Gomez

In 2014, they founded the Pax in Familia organisation dedicated to the prevention of violence and abuse in Catholic families, seeing an opportunity given Pope Francis' repeated condemnations of violence against women.

Together they give online courses through their organisation and travel the world, mostly Latin America, Africa and

Asia, offering workshops to families, priests, bishops, religious, and lay people to raise awareness of the problem of so-called Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Catholic homes and to teach prevention skills.

They were among the speakers at the World Meeting of Families in Rome in 2022 and in Philadelphia in 2015. Ahead of the synod's second session, set for Octo-

ber of this year, Ms Welland is reiterating her appeal to synod delegates.

In her letter, Ms Welland said she wanted to reach out to synod participants on behalf of "the silent, the unheard, the neglected and marginalised victims and survivors of domestic violence". Drawing on her decades of expertise as a catechist and as a psychologist, Ms Welland said she

has heard many hundreds of tragic stories from Catholic men, women, and children who experience violence in the home, most of whom "received little or no support from their parish".

Many victims choose not to speak out due to either shame or ignorance, she said, saying some have been blamed for the violence and have been told to simply

bear it. "May their cries for help not remain unheard in this great gathering! May the serious threat that domestic violence is to the well-being of Catholic families be acknowledged and included in your prayer and your discussions," she said. Ms Welland asked that pastoral responses to domestic violence and preventative measures be both comprehensive and compassionate.

NEXT WEEK: AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH GHANAIAN SYNOD PARTICIPANT NORA K. NONTERAH

'I often compare a refugee to a match'



Penelope Middelboe

I often have coffee with Mary, who is now in her late 80s. Last time I met her she told me about the winter boxes she had been packing at her church.

It had all been so different when she was younger. Then, she says, all the wives fortunate to have husbands with well-paid jobs willingly gave their time to the church - doing the flowers and the cleaning, running the tombola for the fete, visiting the sick, preparing children's liturgy, baking for the Cafod cake sale, and selling Traidcraft. The backbone of the Catholic Church. There'd been the other jobs in the community. Before her sciatica made it impossible, Mary used to do life-saving work for Home Start, basket-weaving with the blind, and seats on both civil parish councils and pastoral parish councils.

This time, in the now much less well cleaned back of the church, Mary resorted to using her walking stick to create some sort of order amongst the hastily deposited packages on the floor. Once the new chairman of the Pastoral Parish Council (who'd brought along his wife and daughter to show willing) joined in they eventually managed 50 boxes for male asylum seekers between them.

"I was late for my bridge game," she told me. "I told them I had been packing winter boxes for asylum seekers."

"Oh you don't want to do that, Mary," said her host. "It will only encourage them!"

Boxes

We wondered where these rather hurriedly conceived boxes might end up. Maybe some might go to the 300 men on the Bibby Stockholm barge in the middle of a bleak, abandoned naval base, Portland Harbour, on the south coast. Ever since Napoleonic times they've kept prisoners there. My husband knows, he grew up there. The Bibby Stockholm is itself one vast floating wintry accommodation box repurposed in 1972 to contain 200 single little cabin-boxes. It's been all over Europe as some form of detention centre. The men currently on board in England have to suffer airport-style security and body searches simply to step outside for a cigarette, and the only way out of your box-within-a-box is by bus for daily exercise. The British government's dream is for the



Bibby Stockholm detention centre for men seeking asylum in Britain.



Bibby Stockholm being brought by tugs to Portland.

barge box to eventually hold 500 male asylum seekers.

These men are seeking asylum. They have applied for protection as refugees and are waiting for their request to be processed. Many have been tortured. The 1951 Geneva Convention recognises that people fleeing persecution may have to use irregular

“These men are seeking asylum. They have applied for protection as refugees and are waiting for their request to be processed. Many have been tortured”

means in order to travel for the specific purpose of seeking asylum. There is no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker. The latest figures from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees for the end of 2022 - before the war in Gaza - showed 108.4 million forcibly displaced. Some of them are being sheltered

in the world's poorest nations. Most want to stay as close as possible to their home.

Refugee

Mary had brought a book for me. *Refugee for Life*. She told me it was written by a man in Malawi she had got to know after he married a close friend. Innocent Magambi is now in his 40s. He has spent almost all his life as a refugee in countries close to his own.

I discovered that Innocent was born in the Congo to refugees from Burundi - a country plagued with the same Tutsi-Hutu ethnic cleansing as its neighbour Rwanda - and for

good reason was given the nickname Innocent in his birth camp. His wife, Florisa, a professional NGO worker originally from Italy, describes their first meeting in Malawi. "I saw Innocent briefly in 2004, on a visit to Dzaleka Refugee Camp. He looked like anyone else there - a match in its matchbox. I recall nothing remarkable about him apart from his hot pink windbreaker, which my mzungu (white person) eyes thought slightly odd for a man."

But as Florisa discovered, and Innocent's book makes plain, Innocent is no match in a matchbox. In fact, people

come to him because he has always thought out the box. By the time he was 27 years old he'd lived in five different settlements or camps around Lake Tanganyika - in Congo, Tanzania, Zambia and Malawi.

Teenage Innocent was ambitious for education, and every time his right to study was cancelled he would run into the woods and howl his anger at God. But now Innocent is convinced that his ordeal was been God's way of preparing him for his work today. Through it he's acquired a unique set of tools to help others living in refugee camps. "The good-



INUA team at Dzaleka camp.

“Anyone who discovers a match outside the matchbox will try to put it back in. Anyone who discovers a refugee outside the refugee camp will try to put him back in”

ness that was done to me,” he writes, “if it ends with me it is a broken chain. If I touch someone I command them to touch someone else and to continue that chain.”

“They assist people to develop the skills needed to help other refugees. It’s a living chain”

Mary told me that now Innocent has a degree and a passport and is the founder of two organisations in Malawi working with refugees – a not-for-profit to empower through education, and an advocacy organisation to fight for rights so that no refugee is trapped in statelessness. The non-profit, *There is Hope*, was deliberately located just outside the camp so that they could offer higher education and income generating activities annually to about 250 people from both the camp and their host community in Malawi. They assist people to develop the skills needed to help other refugees. It’s a living chain.

“I often compare a refugee

to a match,” Innocent says. “A match is expected to be in a matchbox. Anyone who discovers a match outside the matchbox will try to put it back in. Anyone who discovers a refugee outside the refugee camp will try to put him back in.”

Challenges

But everything has suddenly become much more difficult for Innocent and his family, Mary went on. Productive refugees, many of them given new skills by *There is Hope* and long-integrated in society after encouragement from the government, have now been violently forced back into the already overcrowded camp. Many of the women have been raped. The camp was built for 12,000 and now holds over 52,000. Most recently the government has banned Innocent’s advocacy society from operating inside the camp. Once Innocent never thought he’d get out of the camp, now he’s not allowed back in.

I found him on Facebook. Two days before, he had written, “Despite the fact that we are not allowed to work in the camp, our stance has not and

will not change. We will continue to demand accountability from the government and all other institutions working for the welfare of refugees in Malawi.”

The new priest in Mary’s parish happens to be from Africa. He is trying to put Mary and her fellow parishioners back into a pre-Vatican II box: pay, pray, obey. The result is that most of them are leaving. Mary never ever imagined it would come to this but is being forced out. “I don’t like to talk about it,” she tells me, “because it bothers me.” Ever the master of under-statement.

Mary is resourceful in a very different way from Innocent, but she shares his compassion. He will keep being a beacon of hope. She will find somewhere else to shine her gentle light. But just how many Marys can the Church afford to lose, without impacting directly on human suffering?

i Refugee for Life. My journey across Africa to find a place called home by *Innocent Magambi with David Aeilts (2015)*. *There is Hope - thereishopemalawi.org*. INUA Malawi - inuaadvocacy.org

i On 17 November 2023, after exhibiting signs of distress for several hours about being treated as an ‘animal’ on board the *Bibby Stockholm*, 27 year old Albanian national Leonard Farruku, took his life.



Innocent Magambi, Chief Exec. Officer of INUA Advocacy.