

JRS commemorates 25 years

On 21 October 2005 at 11am, in Istituto Maria S.S. Bambina, via Paolo VI 21, Rome, JRS held a press conference to mark 25 years of service to forcibly displaced persons.

Fr Lluís Magriñà SJ, JRS International Director, provided an overview of forced displacement and JRS activities worldwide. He presented two new books on spirituality and education, which reflect on the way JRS has accompanied, served and advocated for the rights of refugees through life, death, hope and difficulties for 25 years.

Mr Paolo Artini, Protection Officer for Malta and Italy, United Nations High Commission for Refugees examined recent developments in migration and refugee issues in Italy and on the continent. Steps towards the creation of a common procedure for asylum and migration in the EU were welcomed by UNHCR, but it was emphasised that measures to control borders were not sufficient. It is the responsibility of Europe to develop policies that combat the causes of displacement, and encourage the integration of those who are recognised as refugees.

The two books by ex-JRS staff were presented at the conference with a short explanation. 'God in Exile: towards a shared spirituality with Refugees' was presented by Fr Pablo Alonso SJ. He described how the book seeks to give meaning to the rich spirituality that underlines the journey in exile and the specific JRS response. It is a practical book, echoing the structure of JRS, always basing reflections on practical experience.

"We must deepen our spirituality in order to find God in camps, detention centres and closed borders. A shared desire for a better world brings hope: hope is a gift which refugees can offer", said Fr Alonso SJ.

'Horizons of learning: 25 years of JRS education,' was presented by Sr Lolín Menéndez RSCJ.

"Education can give displaced people hope, and in this sense it is as important as food, shelter and water. A time of exile can be used to provide skills and a sense of future in a terrible situation. Education is not just about schools, books and academic learning. Programmes such as education about conflict resolution are very useful, and can mobilise leadership, monitor human rights abuses and even improve health. The book is a celebration of efforts made by refugees to educate their children or themselves. It also celebrates JRS workers worldwide who believe in the power of education", said Sr Menéndez RSCJ.

In November 1980 when Fr General Pedro Arrupe SJ called on Jesuits to establish a service to accompany, serve and advocate for refugee rights, there were 16 million refugees in the world. Jesuits accompanied Vietnamese boat people and provided humanitarian assistance and education services. Today, with 50 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, the context in which JRS works has changed dramatically and the number and scope of services provided has increased radically.