

# Refugee Sponsorship Program

Fr. Richard Au

*“If a soul does not exercise mercy somehow or other,  
it will not obtain My mercy on the day of judgment.  
Oh, if only souls knew how to gather eternal treasure for themselves,  
they would not be judged, for they would forestall my judgment with their mercy.”*

– Lord Jesus to St. Faustina

In early October, I visited my ophthalmologist for the relentless redness in my eyes, especially I had a sudden blurred vision while I driving. At the same time, it is time to get a new pair of glasses since my 3 year old glasses were falling apart. After the eye checkup, we were talking about various Church events during lunch because he is very active since became Catholic. He asked me a question, “Are you doing anything for the Syrian refugees?”

I told him that I have given some thoughts. But, I am new to Canadian Martyrs Parish as the Pastor. The parishioners are very welcoming, but I still have to earn their trust. Without the basic trust, no one is going to support me on this refugee fundraising campaign. In addition, I know that sponsoring refugees can be a divided issue because there are those who believe that we worked so hard to achieve what we get, why we should single handedly give the Canada permanent resident status to others so easily just because their own countries are falling apart. My parents, like many other families, came to Canada with 4 children struggled with finding new job while breaking the ties of families, and friends to give the younger generation a better place to study and live. It may sound very selfish, but that’s an undeniable fact. We can be generous to help others, but charity begins at home. There are so many poor people in Canada that we can help. We can send some money to help the refugees where they are. Those were my thoughts in those days, until I actually looked into the situation with great details.

In any case, my friend just said that if I am sponsoring Syrian refugees, he will back me up.

Then, I found out that there are other people who wanted to support me in this direction. That thought lingered in my heads, especially when I was paying more attention on the situation. But, the dilemma was that how does one sponsor the right family? How can I be sure the sponsoring are actually Christians? What is scary was that the ISIS was infiltrating everywhere. They can print their own passports pretending to be Syrians. They can fake the baptismal certificates claiming to be Christians.

Since I was giving a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I was in contact with the office of the Latin Bishops in Jerusalem. I asked for some suggestions from Jerusalem. They should have more information about human sufferings in the Middle East. Even knowing the horrible situation there, I tried to keep my mind clear that it should not be just the political atrocities that moved me to sponsor. Rather, it must be the movement of the Holy Spirit was should stir my heart and mind.

When I was in Jerusalem for the final day of our pilgrimage, we met the Bishop Shomali whom I knew for over 10 years. He said that there is a Syrian refugee family hiding in Amman for almost one year. The bishop guaranteed that Albert Sayegh family is Christian. When I came back to Vancouver in November, I called for a meeting for our parish groups and those who are interested to sponsor refugee families. Many parish groups came for the information night. Diane Chua, from the Archdiocese Migration and Refugee Office, and Gloria Tam from one of my previous parish who is sponsoring refugees to Canada came to explain the basic government procedures, the budget to sponsor a family, etc. Diane told us it cost around \$25,000 to support a family of four,

since we will responsible for them for the first year.

I was truly surprised over 20 people join this new group, which is now called the **Faith in Action Today (FIAT)**. I loved that name because it reminds me of the Angelus in Latin where our Lady replied to the invitation of the Archangel Gabriel who asked her to be the Mother of God – *Fiat Mihi secundum verbum tuum*. It means that “Be it done unto me according to your word”. I loved that Marian undertone.

So, I thought that there is enough of support of manpower both inside and outside the parish, but only manpower without financial support, it won't work. It is God's mystery that sent me this friend – my ophthalmology – to donate the CAD 25,000 for the first refugee family. I prayed if it is God's will I should really do something for the refugees with the support of our own CMCC parishioners. We started 2 different types of envelopes, “Youth Helping Youth”, & “Children Helping Children”. The purpose was twofold. I want children and young people to start thinking about the livelihood of those who are running for their lives to escape danger of annihilation because of their faith. Another reason is to help children and young people to start thinking about stewardship, i.e. a sharing of talents, time and treasurers. I still have to make this project more clearly understood, nor I need to encourage the young people on this project with greater zeal.

Obviously, there are other needs of the parish. I cannot just focus on this fundraiser. That would not be fair toward our future development of our parish. Even though I cannot help everyone, but at least, I hope to help some Christians who are fleeing from dangers. Literally, there are terrorists who would want to kill Christians within the 1,000 miles from Syria. Even in the refugee camps, Christian woman and children are often humiliated and even raped. There are also ISIS cell members in those refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey who are targeting Christians. There is no safe place really for the followers of Jesus Christ. Thank God for the Bishops of Latin Catholic Church have been taking care of the Syrian Christian refugees by offering them safe housing.

While getting ready to embark this new project to help the refugees, all the priests had to attend the annual Study Days in mid-November. Evelyn, director of the Migrant and Refugee Office at the Archbishop Office told us the difficulty of the refugees' situations. She knows that I want to sponsor Syrian refugee families. In her talk, she told all the priests that I am sponsoring 5 refugee families. I froze. I did not say that I was going to sponsor 5 refugee families, rather a refugee family of 5. After that talk, the Archbishop even came over to congratulate me taking on these humanitarian tasks. I said reluctantly, “Thank you.” Actually I was pondering if whether our parish can actually sponsor 5 refugee families. I have not revealed this desire to anyone, except to Jesus.

At the Study Days, other priests began to talk to me about sponsoring refugees. It seemed that I became the unofficial person for sponsoring Syrian refugees, even though the Archbishop has an office. Nonetheless, I began to talk with Bishop Shomali of Jerusalem and the Vicar General Fr. Twal who are in charge of the administration for Israel and Jordan if they recommended more refugee families. Through their contacts in Amman and Beirut, I was given Christian families that desired to come to Canada. Most of the screening of candidates is done by the Catholic representatives in Jordan and Lebanon. I asked for their baptismal and Church marriage certificates. We checked their needs to make some good selections before passing over to other parishes that are requesting for refugee families. Some of these families contact me directly and asked me many questions about Canada, about their possible future. I got to know many refugee families and their stories. Now, I think I can write a book about their loss and the dangers that they are fleeing. Learning about their struggles, it reminded my own calling to the priesthood, that is, to share the Passion of Christ, and so to give a ray of hope to the people walking in darkness. While these refugees are worrying about their future, especially, the future for the children, we're able to lighten their burdens in this vale of sorrows. While darkness has overtaken humanity in these parts of the world where our Lord Jesus has taken on flesh,

God uses his priests to continue to bring the light of Christ to see God's mercy. How unique to be a tiny light to the people who are suffering! In a way, we are living as the modern prophets of the Lord.

After the Study Days were over, I was very busy interviewing candidates for sponsorship to Canada. But, I was also preoccupied with all the spiritual and physical preparations for Christmas celebration at CMCC. I even went back to Maple Ridge with a truck to cut some Christmas trees with the help of a few friends. Since my announcements to sponsor Syrian refugees beginning in the Year of Mercy, many people have been very generous. I told the parishioners I received a CAD 25,000 donation for this purpose from that the ophthalmologist friend. So, I invited our CMCC parishioners to match this donation. Well, within 2 weeks, another family felt that they were moved by the Holy Spirit to donate another CAD 25,000. Wow, this is truly the best Christmas present that I have received because it is not for me, but for the work of the Lord.

What I have seen is that generosity continues to pour out from this parish. More people joined the FIAT group wanting to lend a hand to the refugees that we are sponsoring. The group even came up with a Lenten box to support our refugee families. Different parish groups, like the English prayer group, CWL and Knights of Columbus initiated fundraising projects for the refugees. For the Chinese New Year, they even come up with getting the Archbishop Miller to sing a song to fundraise for the refugees. That song brought in almost \$6,000. We are also planning 2 concerts for the refugees. On May 1, there will be the performance of Vivaldi's Four Seasons. On our annual Feast Day, the Chinese choirs are going to perform beautiful songs in a concert on September 25. Some of the songs are actually composed by our choir members. Not only are we using our talents to glorify God, but also to help

the refugees in great need.

Personally, I was tired with the preparation of Christmas & youth retreat, the Handel's Messiah concert, Advent Confessions, but the Lord gives me strength to look after almost 30 refugees that are to be shared with other parishes. Yet, I am truly consoled when I thought what a privilege to be an instrument of God's Mercy and to be a light of hope to the people suffering so much. Also, I received a short message Bishop Shomali from Jerusalem that really lifted my spirit. What I am doing is like the Good Shepherd searching the lost sheep out of the 100. Bishop Shomali equate the lost sheep are the refugees, whom I have no personal connection. That really strikes a cord in my heart even now. Somehow we are reminded that there is One Father, we are God's children. Only in Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the World, we are truly united.

Through the dedication of our parishioners, it shows that our parish is not just focusing on our needs and our future, but also the bigger Catholic Church. This is a great achievement – caring for those whom we do not even know and supporting our vulnerable brothers and sisters who know only sufferings. Our generosity in our words and actions is giving to the world that we are prophets of the Lord.



*Sayegh family starts a new life in Canada*

***God does not have a human mouth and breath:  
his mouth is the prophet, and his breath is the Holy Spirit.  
“You will be my mouth,” he says to his prophets, or  
“I will put my words in your mouth.”***

*– Fr. Cantalamessa, Papal Preacher*

