

INTERVIEW WITH FATHER RENE MICALLEF SJ, ASSOCIATE LECTURER AT THE GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Efforts focused on immediate needs that could evoke generosity when portrayed in a photo or short video... Yet refugees have little material capital (e.g. fertile agricultural land) and providing them with human capital and skills through education is the only viable way of helping them stand on their feet.”
- “A holistic education of students about the current mass migration and asylum phenomena should weave together personal elements (encounters with the “stranger”), imaginative ones (art, movies), ethical and political reflection, as well as critical analysis of data from social science and economics.”

Dear Fr. René, you teach at the Gregorian University. Could you tell us a bit about the university's history and its role today?

The Pontifical Gregorian University is a prestigious institution in the Catholic world, since it is the major university in Rome entrusted by the Holy See to the Society of Jesus, that is, to the Jesuits, a religious order famous for its standards of excellence in tertiary and secondary education since the 1500s, and for its network of secondary schools and universities all over the world.

The “Greg”, as it is fondly called by students and professors, traces its history back to an experiment in free education launched in a house in Rome in 1551, where the first Jesuits taught poor youths grammar, humanities, and Christian Doctrine at a time when quality education offered in a pedagogically effective manner was sorely needed in Europe. The “Jesuit recipe” was immensely successful, and the tiny school rapidly grew into a centre of learning that provided secondary and tertiary education to lay persons and Jesuits in formation. Already in 1552 it was authorized by the Pope to grant academic degrees.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Father René Micallef, SJ, Associate Lecturer at the Gregorian University, talks his research and work with refugees. The interview is part of a series on vulnerable groups and integral human development.

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The “Roman College”, as it was known at the time, received grants and privileges from various Popes and other benefactors in the 1500s and 1600s; the main benefactor was pope Gregory XIII who provided a large and prestigious new seat (inaugurated in 1584) and sources of income to support the students and professors. Its model offering free education to the poor, its organization of student life and teaching, and its well-designed curriculum of studies (known as the “Ratio studiorum”) were emulated in hundreds of cities all over the world first by the Jesuits themselves and later (especially after the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773) by other religious orders and national governments.



Photo: Conference at the Greg on Evangelii Gaudium.

The Roman College attracted brilliant scholars and students from all over the world. It also used scientific knowledge to finance itself; for instance, it had a famous herbal and pharmaceutical dispensary which imported and sold “Jesuit bark” from South America (a malarial remedy which forms the basis of anti-malarial compounds still widely used today). During the time of the Suppression of the Jesuit Order (due in part to political concerns about the influence of the Jesuit education network), the Roman College was dissolved, though some non-Jesuit students and lecturers organized themselves to complete their courses, and found a new school that eventually became the Pontifical Lateran University. In 1814, the Society of Jesus was restored and the Jesuits started rebuilding their major education centre in Rome; 10 years later the traditional seat of the Roman College was returned by the Pope to the Jesuits, as well as the rights and privileges that the Roman College had before the Suppression. The edifices of the old “Roman College” were lost again due to confiscation by civil authorities in the late 1800s, and in the process, pope Pius IX ordered that the university become known as the “Gregorian University” (in honour of Gregory XIII); this decision, taken in 1873, provided name recognition to the

main Jesuit tertiary education institution in Rome, independently of its historical seat.

Here in Italy, several decades of secularist ideology as regards tertiary education, before and even after the Bologna Process (harmonization of tertiary education standards and institutions in Europe), have made it very hard to offer programmes in non-ecclesiastical disciplines in Pontifical universities. In this context, the “Greg” is mainly focused on Theology and ecclesiastical formation (about half of its students and resources), and has one of the best theological libraries in the world. It however has important faculties of Philosophy, History and Cultural Heritage of the Church, Canon Law, Social Sciences and Mission Studies, as well as well-respected institutes of Psychology and Spirituality and several Centres.

The Pontifical Gregorian University, though relatively small by modern state university standards (with less than 3000 students), is known as the “university of the nations” since both the student body and the faculty are extremely diverse (around 120 nationalities). Many important Catholic theologians and religious leaders have studied at the university. The institution is famous in the Catholic world for its personal accompaniment of students in their learning process, and its unwavering promotion of intellectual honesty, academic rigour and freedom (which, properly understood, go hand-in-hand with a mature respect of Church authority as regards its competence in certain matters of doctrine).

One of your main areas of work relates to migration and refugees. Why did you choose that field?

The Jesuits have a long history of wandering around the world and being expelled and deported (the State of New York and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in the past had severe laws prohibiting “infiltration” by Jesuits). St. Ignatius of Loyola was a pilgrim and migrant, and travelled widely before finding himself tied down in Rome as first superior general of the Jesuits and engaged in founding universities and other institutions that require “stability”. Yet, to some extent, the adoption in all Jesuit centres of higher learning of the standardized curriculum of the Roman College in the late 1500s (coupled with the use of Latin) allowed Jesuit lecturers and students to move around the world within the network with relative ease, and retain some element of the charism of “wandering priests” that characterized the style of Ignatius and his first companions.

I myself have been “on the move” for most of my life, having resided and studied in Genoa, Padua, London, Malta, Paris, Madrid, Boston, Rome and Nairobi in the last 23 years. I believe this sense of inhabiting one world not segregated by political national boundaries, and being available to go and serve the Church and the World wherever we are needed, is something which attracts

people to the Society of Jesus and imbues all we do with an international flavour.

This ability to empathise with and accompany people on the move must surely have influenced the decision, taken in November 1980 by Fr. Pedro Arrupe SJ, the then superior general of the Society of Jesus, to respond to the plight of Vietnamese boat people by founding the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), as well as its rapid expansion, as hundreds of Jesuits responded to Arrupe's call. JRS now works in 45 countries and accompanies over 700,000 people (specializing in the provision of education services to refugees and migrants, as can be expected from the Jesuits). Today Jesuits are known for their commitment to the accompaniment of migrants and refugees (as well as spiritual accompaniment according to the method of the "Spiritual Exercises", and higher education).

I got to know JRS in Malta in the 1990s before becoming a Jesuit. I did some volunteering there, and was attracted to this work. After joining the Jesuits, I had other experiences of accompanying refugees and migrants during my formation.

As regards my academic life, my wide-ranging intellectual interests led me in various directions during my formation, until eventually my superiors asked me to do a licentiate and a doctorate in Moral Theology. I was initially inclined towards doing research on the sources of moral knowledge, but eventually, after some months getting to know the faculty at Boston College, I decided to ask Fr David Hollenbach to be my thesis mentor. Given his interest and mine in forced migration, I decided to focus my doctoral research on the ethical underpinnings of immigration policymaking. As I got to know this field of studies better, I became more and more passionate about it.

What are some of the programs that work best to support refugees? And what does not seem to work well?

My studies in the field of migration focus on ethics of hospitality and human rights; I have no personal experience of administering programmes and have not done social-science research into the effectiveness of different types of programmes in favour of refugees run by NGOs, international relief agencies, Churches and universities. I believe, however, that education is a basic need, and programmes which provide food and shelter for refugees (in camps or urban settings) while offering little in terms of education are short-sighted and do not allow the most vulnerable to flourish and lead independent lives.

To be sure, for many decades, given the difficulty to fundraise for "strangers" in faraway lands, many efforts focused on immediate needs that could evoke generosity when portrayed in a photo or short video: from this

perspective, keeping people from starving and freezing to death seems "urgent" while teaching them to read and write (let alone secondary and tertiary education) seems more of a "luxury". Furthermore, offering decent education to millions of "strangers" in camps in remote areas of third-world countries could create envy and tensions with local populations (especially in places where the state provision of education was or still is rudimentary or practically nonexistent, and most children do not finish primary schooling).

Yet, refugees have little material capital (e.g. fertile agricultural land) and providing them with human capital and skills through education is the only viable way of helping them stand on their two feet and not become dependent on aid for generations. Education also prepares them to return to their country when the persecution or conflict is over with the skills needed to support themselves and to build healthier institutions and a vibrant civil society, capable of unrooting the evils that created the refugee situation in the first place, so to avoid new cycles of violence and oppression that may cause new cycles of flight.

How involved are the Catholic Church and in particular the Jesuits in supporting refugees? What more could be done? What should not be done?

I have already mentioned the work of the JRS. There are many other religious orders who work with vulnerable migrants and refugees; I have collaborated in the past with the Scalabrini missionaries, in particular. Various Catholic foundations (such as CARITAS or Catholic Relief Services), charities and universities support this work providing funding for various projects, resources and staff. Other important sources of commitment to "welcome, protect, promote, and integrate" refugees and vulnerable migrants (the "four verbs" Pope Francis likes to underline) include the work of some Church movements (e.g. Sant'Egidio's promotion of "humanitarian corridors") as well as private persons nourished by their personal faith (e.g. lay people and parish priests in Mexico who founded their own immigrant shelter, some of whom I have met).

The recently founded "Migrants and Refugees" section within the Integral Human Development Dicastery at the Vatican has in recent years also organized many conferences, published important "pastoral orientation" documents (e.g. the one on climate-displaced persons, published in March 2021) and coordinated various international initiatives to raise awareness of the mass migration phenomenon among Catholics, challenging populist fear-mongering, fake news, popular myths and misconceptions. There is of course much more to do in the direct accompaniment of refugees and internally displaced persons (in countries of origin, transit and destination) since most never pass through or reach "traditionally Catholic-majority-countries" where the

Catholic Church has a rich network of institutions (3/5 of persons displaced across a national border are hosted in just 10 countries, of which only one is a first-world western country, namely Germany – cfr. UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2020).

Working with local NGOs, governments and religious authorities in places like Syria, Myanmar, Afghanistan and their neighbouring countries can be challenging. Yet in some cases, helping some Catholics in traditionally Christian countries to overcome fears and misconceptions (e.g. those linking crime, terrorism and unemployment to asylum), and to open their eyes and hearts to the realities of exploitation, social exclusion and human trafficking happening in their own back yard, could be even more challenging. In the light of Catholic Social Thought and the teaching of recent popes, I believe however we should go even further, and help our Christian brethren to start seeing vulnerable migrants and refugees as bearers of rights, persons with agency who have much to contribute to our societies, rather than seeing them mainly as "needy aid recipients", "welfare queens" or "trauma victims".

Are Catholic universities doing enough in terms of teaching or research in this area? What should be their priorities?

I think they can do much more. A few years ago, in 2017, with the support of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), Being the Blessing Foundation and the Pontifical Gregorian University, we held a conference in Rome challenging universities to respond to the call of Pope Francis to face this challenge using their own resources (namely education and research), collaborating with NGOs working in the field, as part of the "social responsibility of universities". The result was the foundation of a network which is currently called the "Refugee and Migrant Education Network" (RMEN), and which now also includes secular, Muslim and Jewish universities and NGOs. The chairperson is Dr. Anthony Cernera, former IFCU president and former president of Sacred Heart University (Connecticut); I myself have been on the coordination committee since its origins.

Though it is still an incipient organization mostly dependent on the work of volunteers and with few resources, it is a source of hope for me. RMEN networks initiatives focused on the education of refugees and vulnerable migrants (especially by universities and education NGOs), the education of students and staff about the reality of people on the move in the world (both in specialization courses and within general undergraduate programmes and pastoral and social outreach activities) as well as research (especially on the effectiveness of such education). Yet, in spite of the importance and magnitude of the issue, few of our members have consistent, well-funded and well-staffed initiatives to report and share, at this point in time, and

most of our energies are dedicated to present the few examples of best practices and getting members to talk among themselves, hoping that they will find the will and resources to launch new initiatives themselves.



Photo: Session with Pope Francis at the 2017 conference.

As regards priorities, much depends on the context. Firstly, the education of refugees and vulnerable migrants in wealthy destination countries should focus on scholarships, individual accompaniment and mentoring (many migrants suffering from PTSD and years of destructed life on the move need help to complete their studies successfully); in terms of content, refugees often need help to achieve the recognition of past academic titles (the certification for which has been lost or is controlled by hostile persons in their home-countries), as well as secondary and tertiary education that offer training that provides realistic access to the job market, makes good use of the personal skills learnt during their life on the move, but also offers some intellectual tools to make sense, critically, of their personal experiences (e.g. some elements of a "liberal arts" formation). To some extent, education of migrants in camps and cities in transit countries and poorer destination countries should have the same focus, but be more pragmatic.

Secondly, a holistic education of students in our universities about the current mass migration and asylum phenomena should weave together personal elements (encounters with the "stranger"), imaginative ones (art, movies), ethical and political reflection, as well as critical analysis of data from social science and economics. I am wary about starting with "hard" scientific data, since in our world of social media and "creative" online spin-doctoring of scientific data, presenting statistics and graphs will not convince students with deeply-held ideological beliefs about refugees and migrants.

Finally, as regards research, I think universities should collaborate more with NGOs in the field, which can provide data points and interesting concrete research

questions for our research staff and doctoral students, while universities can share some of their resources and manpower with education NGOs, and push to take a long-term view of the core issues, rather than just prepare themselves to face the next emergency, which is what many NGOs often do best.

What is your advice for students or others who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or specializing in this area?

I think some personal contact with migrants and refugees is helpful. As noted above, I volunteered in a JRS Office in Malta in the 1990s, working with refugees from the First Gulf War and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, doing little errands and editing newsletters for the office staff. Later, I helped migrant children with their homework when I lived in Spain, ministered to migrants in a prison in the US during my doctoral studies, travelled the migrant corridor between Guatemala City and Mexico City following the railway tracks and meeting migrants and staff in the shelters along the way. I also spent some time teaching English in Kampala, Uganda, to refugees from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burundi. These experiences helped me know certain realities first-hand, while also helping me construct in my mind a series of (idealized) intelligent and experienced interlocutors whom my hypothesis and arguments needed to convince, so as to be truly honest and grounded in the lives of the people I was writing about. The memories of particular migrants and relief workers help me overcome my writing blocks: in those moments when research and teaching become stale and lifeless, especially during a pandemic year as the one we have been living, I remind myself that I am doing it “for them.”

The other bit of advice is to network with people on the ground to figure out the emerging trends and seek their help to ask the deeper questions, to delve into issues that are neglected. NGO staff are wary of researchers dropping in from the global north for a few days or weeks, using up their precious resources (internet connection, guest rooms, driver time and gasoline) and asking lofty and sensitive questions while expecting to be catered to continuously and entertained; they have thousands of more urgent problems and more vulnerable people to tend to. Thus, they will only open up and provide interesting insights for research when graduate students and researchers come along with something concrete and useful to offer in return, and are willing to spend a number of months with them, facing the messy, beautiful, and tragic realities of their work, diving below the surface showcased by “humanitarian tourism.”



Photos: Teaching with refugees in Uganda.



Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I like cooking, especially concocting "fusion" dishes without using a fixed recipe, mixing flavours and elements from many cuisines. It reminds me of my chemistry studies before becoming a Jesuit (I understand some of the reactions happening when I prepare food) as well as the places I have been and people I have met. I love good Italian and Mediterranean cuisine, but I get that every day while I am here in Rome, so I usually rely on Asian, South-American, North-African and Northern-European flavours when I am cooking. Some years ago I spent eight months in Africa, and was asked to cook some Italian and Maltese food. One particular challenge was to prepare a good lasagna in Kampala using only ingredients sourced from a local supermarket (that is, without going to a shopping mall for expats and buying imported pasta, bechamel, parmesan, canned tomatoes, etc. that often cost more than they do in Italy, given that Uganda is a landlocked country). Taking into account that I have very little experience preparing baked pasta and making bechamel and slow-cooking meat sauces from scratch, I believe I managed to prepare a decent dish, though it was a far cry from the mouth-watering lasagna served here by our community cooks on great feast days.

It was also instructive in many ways: in poorer countries, it is not easy to find certain "simple" ingredients, such as tender ground beef (animals are slaughtered at an older age, meat cuts are different from what we are used to), good cheese (people are not used to the flavour of

seasoned cheeses, and to the consumption of hard cheeses in general), or locally-made durum wheat pasta. It is probably easier to find some of the more "exotic flavours" we associate with Asian and North African cuisines: I particularly enjoyed a visit to a spice plantation in Zanzibar during those months in East Africa, as well as the peculiar spicy and tangy flavours of Ethiopian cuisine during a two-week visit to Addis. Ugandans, on the other hand, make delicious dishes with plantains, cassava and rice, for instance, mixed with ground peanuts and other spices.

This story also reminds me also of the times I collaborated or volunteered with JRS in Malta. There was a Jesuit (who is now in Iraq working with Chaldean Christians, Muslims and Yasidis) who visited Ethiopia regularly with Maltese medical students to minister to sisters who accompany AIDS and drug-resistant TB patients there. After each visit, he used to bring back large bags of Horn-of-Africa spice mixes (berberé, mitmitá) for the Eritrean refugees in Malta. For many of the women refugees, it was an extremely precious gift: being able to prepare dishes from one's home country and give them the cherished traditional flavours is a great source of pride and self-esteem. It is very humiliating and depressing for a woman refugee, especially in cultures where family roles are very clearly gendered, not to be able to cook a delicious meal according to the traditional standards of taste and texture, especially when she is facing the effects of PTSD. This is why flavours and spices are such a very serious thing.



Photo: Orientation week for licentiate students in moral theology.