

Voices of Faith 2017
Arturo Sosa, S.I.
Stirring the Waters – Making the Impossible Possible
Vatican
March 8, 2017

I would like to thank Voices of Faith and the Jesuit Refugee Service for inviting me to celebrate International Women's Day with you and all of those gathered here today.

I take this opportunity to show my gratitude to the women who will be speaking today, women making a difference in their families and communities, especially in the most remote corners of the world. These are difficult times in our world, and we need to stand and work together as women and men of faith.

As you know, the global theme for this year's celebration of International Women's Day is *Be Bold for Change*. Here in Vatican City, physically at the center of the church, Voices of Faith and JRS seek to be *Making the Impossible Possible*. Especially here in Rome, that is a bold change! I would like to reflect on what making the impossible possible means to me as the leader of the Society of Jesus, as a citizen of the world, and as a member of the Catholic Church. We need to have the faith that gives the audacity to seek the impossible, as nothing is impossible for God. The faith of Mary that opened her heart as a woman to the possibility of something new: to become the Mother of God's son.

JRS: Resilience

As you may be aware, I come from Latin America, a continent with millions of displaced people. With almost 7 million, Colombia has the largest number of internally displaced people in the world, and a disproportionate number of them are women and children. I served at the border between Colombia and my native Venezuela for 10 years. I have seen first-hand the suffering of those forced to abandon everything to save their lives.

In Colombia, for example, women and girls are among the most vulnerable due to widespread violence caused by decades of conflict. They are exposed to armed recruitment and are likely to fall victim to one form of exploitation or another, ranging from modern day slavery, to survival sex and human trafficking. Many of them flee to neighboring countries in search of safety, and often find themselves on their own in efforts to sustain their families.

I have also witnessed women's *resilience*. Despite this traumatic reality, women often find their way to not just surviving, but also overcoming all the difficulties of exile and forced migration. Resilience is what enables us to move forward and think of the future. Resilience is essential for making the impossible possible. Let me offer an example.

At the Venezuelan-Colombian border, the Jesuit Refugee Service has been present for more than ten years. During this time, JRS has brought refugee women from Colombia together by using their artistic expression as a starting point for rediscovering resilience.

While expressing themselves creatively through art, women also share their experiences and create a network of support to improve their psychosocial well-being. This healing environment is a place for listening and coming together—in other words, resilience. Resilience empowers women and ultimately results in hope and the possibility of reconciliation with the past, with those who have harmed them, and with those where they now live. Reconciliation requires courage, and too often, even in 2017, women's courage, women's resilience, is unrecognized and undervalued.

By building human connections resilience reknits the communal fabric. Some may say such resilience is impossible to discover: JRS and Voices of Faith say otherwise.

The World: Collaboration

As a member of the human community, each of us is likely appalled at the situation of our world. Human displacement has hit an all-time high, representing incredible human suffering around the world. Ongoing conflicts are at the root of most of this forced exile. There are more than 65 million forcibly displaced among us: one in every 113 people globally is now an asylum-seeker, an internally displaced person, or a refugee.

We have to think about the ways that we, as the human community can respond. I cannot put enough emphasis on this need for collaboration between women and men. I believe that only together we can achieve what today seems impossible: a humanity reconciled in justice, living in peace in a common house well kept, where there is room for everyone because we recognize that we are sisters and brothers, son and daughters of the same God who is Mother and Father of us all. We need to collaborate, support and learn from one another. It already seems impossible to imagine peace in places like Central African Republic, or South Sudan, or Colombia. Can we have the audacity to dream that women and men working together will bring peace to these countries? I think these impossibilities can come closer to reality if women play a greater role in the conversation.

I am not surprised that Angela Merkel has been the most courageous and visionary leader in Europe during this time of phenomenal forced migration. She had the compassion to look at those who were in need, and the vision to see that they would make a contribution to Germany and Europe.

Another extraordinary leader is Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the President of Liberia. Through her single-minded dedication and vision, she has brought peace and reconciliation to her war-torn country in a way that most men thought would be impossible.

At the same time, the widespread reality is that women are not paid for the work they do, or are paid less than men for the same work. In the West, women earn on average 70 cents for each dollar or Euro a man earns. The gap grows larger in developing areas of the world

Many of us are looking at the world through the prism of xenophobia and narrowmindedness these days, a prism which seems to feed on discord and marginalization. In the Jesuit magazine *America*, political commentator Cokie Roberts, the daughter of two former members of the US Congress, puts the reality succinctly: "...Congress needs more women. Then maybe, just maybe, Washington would work again."

We can listen carefully to the experience of women in the public sphere, hear how they work together, and be inspired by their courage. These are stories of doing the impossible.

The Catholic Church: inclusion

The role of women in the church can be, and has been, described in many ways: keepers of the faith, the backbone of the Church, the image of Mary alive among us. We Jesuits are deeply aware of the roles that women play in our ministries: lay and religious women serve as presidents and headmistresses, retreat center directors, teachers, and every possible role one can think of. As you probably know, the Spiritual Exercises, the foundation of Jesuit spirituality, were first developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola before the Jesuits were founded. Our spirituality is open to all, women and men that want to become women and men with others and for others.

In the broader church, there are contrary currents about the role of women at this time. As stated by Pope Francis, women play a fundamental role in passing on the faith and are a daily source of

strength in a society that carries this faith forward and renews it. Church teaching certainly promotes the role of the women within the family, but it also stresses the need for their contribution in the Church and in public life. It draws upon the text of Genesis, which speaks of men and women created in the image of God and the prophetic praxis of Jesus in his relationship with women.

Pope Francis has been quite outspoken about women in making decisions and holding responsibilities in the church. He has also created a "Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate" to explore the history and role of women in this church structure.

But if we are honest, we acknowledge that the fullness of women's participation in the church has not yet arrived. That *inclusion*, which would bring the gifts of resilience and collaboration even more deeply into the church, remains stymied on many fronts. One aspect has been mentioned by the Pope: we have to work harder to develop a profound theology of women. I would add that an ecclesiology...the study of the church...that includes women is equally needed if women's roles are to be included as they should.

Indeed, the inclusion of women in the Church is a creative way to promote the necessary changes in it. A theology and an ecclesiology of women should change the image, the concept and the structures of the Church. Should push the Church to become the People of God, as was proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council. Women's creativity can open new ways of being a Christian community of disciples, men and women together, witnesses and preachers of the Good. News.

But perhaps more importantly, the inclusion of women will also be an outcome of the key concerns of the Pope. By bringing Vatican II to life and incorporating the poor into our church, Francis is giving women's voices more opportunity to speak and be counted. No one is more resilient than women building and supporting the church in the poorest parts of our world.

In his efforts against clericalism and the elitism and sexism that come with it, the Pope seeks to open our future to voices outside of the Vatican, to bring the experience of the world into forming that future. The opposite of clericalism is collaboration, working together as baptized daughters and sons of God.

These efforts have begun the process of deeper inclusion of women into the core of the Church. As challenging as the refugee crisis or other world issues are, to some of us, this might be truly, the impossible.

St. Francis of Assisi himself said: "Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible." In that spirit, we are here today to listen to Voices of Faith, to hear stories of resilience, collaboration and inclusion. We have more than started. We will not stop.

Thank you very much.