



Reaching the heights for the rights of the child

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Statements

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Ladies and Gentlemen.

I come from the island of Lesvos, Greece, one of the main European gateways for refugees fleeing their war-torn homelands, from an island that had and still has the fate to cope with a huge influx of souls at a time when its economy was and still is severely strained. Arrivals on Greek territory from Syria and Afghanistan increased by 408% during 2015 surpassing by far the 500.000 mark by October. There was a day when 7.000 battered refugees, families, women and children, old and sick people landed on the shores of the island. During 2015, according to the latest data provided by port authorities, more than 700 unaccompanied children and adolescents reached the island. Now, only for the first months of 2016 the number of unaccompanied children and adolescents has surpassed 500.

Amidst this dire situation, the key frontline response in Lesvos has been led by volunteers, by self organised groups with limited resources but enormous generosity. Among other great initiatives such as the Starfish Team in Molyvos, the Platanos team in Sykaminea, the PIKPA in Mytilene, “Agkalia” our small, local NGO did its best to provide front line assistance to refugees irrespective of the origin, their religion, their gender, irrespective of anything but their need and rights as asylum seekers. Unofficially operating since 2006, the organisation was officially established in



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2009 by Father Efstratios Dimou, and three other volunteers in Kalloni, myself and Katerina and Eleni Efstathiou-Selacha. Under the mentoring of the iconic figure of “Papa-Stratis” and without funding from the European Union or the Greek governments, Agkalia, practically a handful of volunteers, gave shelter, food, medicine and transportation to more than 17.000 refugees from May 2015 to October 2015, not to mention its other actions affecting thousands of other people and activist groups as well as NGOs all over Greece and the world. For its efforts, our NGO received the Raul Wallenberg prize of the Council of Europe for 2016.

In this brief intervention I will talk to you about what we have seen and what we still see. It is our duty to talk about that. Because what we have seen and what we have lived is not presented by mainstream media and is almost universally silenced or downplayed by politicians. Refugees do not have a voice. Between our societies and them lies the great language barrier, their outlandish, worn out figures and ways which here in the West have been demonised, discrimination and racism. These things deprive them of their voices. And from these thousands of muted individuals, each one of them a human as each one of us, children are even more mute. I will talk to you about what we have seen and still see daring for even a brief moment to try to speak out for all of them.

The children we have seen passing by our small shelter in Kalloni were in a tragic situation. They were severely exhausted by a long journey through mountain and waves, a journey still organized by smugglers that count childhood for nothing. Children were ill-nourished, dead cold by the sea from which they barely escaped on these death trap-dinghies, struck by the sun, sick. They reached our shelter after miles of walking in the night cold or in the unbearable summer heat. Their small bodies thin, their parents were holding them tight as if their love and affection could heal bodily wounds and maltreatment. We saw illnesses and symptoms we could not ever describe to the volunteer doctors we had on the phone. We transferred children to the local Health Center where doctors did their best at a time when they were sort of even the basic supplies. We have seen children with swollen bellies, with terrible skin infections, children in need of blood transfusion, children with war wounds still open, not to mention hundreds of children that were sun stroke, exhausted and lethargic or suffered from diarrheas and many more. We have seen children crying until they fell asleep with exhaustion, children with erratic or violent behavior that betrayed nothing else than war traumas on their delicate psyche. What have these children seen back home? What have they faced through their journey as refugees? And from these children, hundreds were unaccompanied. We asked : who are you with? The child showed us a random person saying : with my uncle. One hour later when we asked again, the child would show us another person, another so-called “uncle”.

But these were not the most difficult questions we had to ask. The most difficult question still is : where do these children go from now on? It is a question that sometimes we do not even want to think about because we have to somehow, sometimes, preserve our sanity. We know the terrible answer, though, and it haunts us. These children survived war, they did not die in the journey through the mainland, they passed the treacherous sea and a thousand other perils only to come to Europe where fences, closed borders, muddy camps of disgrace, malnutrition, poor sanitary conditions and even beating for them and their parents await them. And now something ever

more disgraceful. After the so called “agreement” between European leaders and Turkey, children and their families are kept as prisoners in malfunctioning hot-spots. No one can foretell the end of their Odyssey. Nothing is certain for them. An something else. What is happening to the children that after all managed to reach European cities? Is there a fair chance for them to integrate? Do they live in human conditions, do they have a fair chance to be educated and to grow up as European individuals? The messages we receive from refugees that are indeed now in Europe are disappointing. The great majority of children lack fundamental rights. What is Europe doing? Is it not thus creating a ghettoed population out of which a next future wave of extremism might rise? Is it not creating its own demons? And as if there is not enough despair in such questions one might feel that hell has even more dungeons. Where did the unaccompanied children go? Where are they now? Will Europe answer this?

From Agkalia we face the recent choices of the European ruling elite with extreme disappointment. Such questions cannot be answered by the deployment of mechanisms of war, of prisons, of any kind of violence and neglect of fundamental human rights upon which this Union of People was founded. It cannot be imposed by neglecting conventions and decrees of democracy such as the Geneva Convention. Great humanitarian organizations such as the UNHCR are backing away from hot spots in Lesvos and elsewhere recognizing what was just mentioned. Refugees are not criminals to be thrown in detention of any kind, children are not criminals. There is no greater disgrace for a society other than keeping innocent children under lock and key. Europe must find ways to solve the refugee crisis not by imposing a fortress in front of all those that flee from death and poverty – death and poverty for which Europe is not innocent. By choosing militaristic ways of coping with humanitarian problems we give credit to violence. This affects our common world-view. European citizens must not think that they are safe by turning their guns towards people that flee war. This way they might “keep refugees out” but truly let us wonder what stays “in” ; distrust in common European democracy paths, trust in war and violence mechanisms – utterly, the rise of fascism. That is not the Europe that has learned its lessons through two world wars, that is not the Europe we are fighting for.

Let us all agree in one thing. Let’s suppose that adults have made their choices. They have not, in true, but let’s suppose they did. Right or wrong, they made their choices. But children have not. Children are innocent they have made no choice to flee, to stay, to come, to go, even to be born. Let us all agree in one thing after understanding that we cannot demand from children to stay in the Middle East and to die a silent death or their parents to watch them doing so. Children must be protected no matter the cost, no matter our underline ideology or political affiliation, no matter what.

All these years in the field we face the same phrase. There are indeed some structures and procedures to protect refugee children but they are “never enough”. We feel this is but an excuse and rather a poor one. It is as if we can accept some children to be helped and some other to suffer. This same phrase all these years wherever we look, in asylum procedures, in structures for the unaccompanied, in integration procedures. “Not enough”. Every “not enough” we face equals to innocent children suffering in silence or lost forever. This, as Europeans standing for humanism and enlightenment, is our greatest common shame.

The last years we have seen hundreds of citizens flocking to Lesbos to help us in our most difficult moments. They stood there –and still stand- before a great catastrophe in solidarity with the refugees. They stood there earning their right to be called humans. The last years we have spoken with European officials, with artists, with activists, with plain folk that still give us hope. Europe does not lack the human, technological, scientific or ethical elements for a common progress. But it lacks in faith, unison and is again torn apart by a struggle that really counts millennia. A struggle between our better common face and the decay of egoism, a struggle for power that uses the weak of the world either as cheap work force, as soldiers, as numbers. We must really choose sides. We know that even in this convention, this very moment many people here stand for values that are the opposite of fascism, the opposite of egoism, that are the basis for global peace and prosperity. These values cannot accept on single child that could easily be helped and is not. We believe that as citizens, as activists, scientists, we must demand and truly do our best for some key factors that hopefully the Council of Europe will try to stress in the most dramatic of ways in the face of the recent –totally unacceptable and utterly inapplicable in our opinion- recent E.U. decisions.

- 1) Children and their families fleeing war and persecution are not criminals to be detained under lock and key, and behind barbed wire, in camps of mud, with “not enough” doctors, “not enough” healthy food and with very little information as to what will happen to them. This purgatorium mirrors our own worse image.
- 2) Asylum procedures for families and children must be given high priority – all children fleeing from war, hunger and instability must be granted asylum and must, until their application is filed and reviewed live in conditions fit for children. No camp until now fits these perquisites.
- 3) A large scale integration program must swiftly begin for the refugees and especially children that are already in European soil. Refugees and especially children must have access to shelter, food, education and in the long term fair working conditions under which they can thrive. We must be extremely cautious not to create even more marginalized individuals and communities out from which only extremism can rise. All these will or course have to stem from a more humane policy even for Europeans. Austerity that does not work, we see that daily, cannot be part of this solution.
- 4) Fences, ethnic autism, racism, discrimination, violence, surveillance, pushbacks, all these terrible diseases of the human mind and human practice cannot give any answer to any such great population movement. It has never given, it will never give. These things only serve a conservative ruling elite worldwide, an elite with no faith in anything that must be overthrown if we seek a brighter, common future. Thus we reach the issue of war. The Council of Europe must never cease to raise the issue of peace in the Middle East as a great humanitarian need. This peace cannot be achieved by an all-wanting, self indulging, rapacious West. And it cannot be built in the Middle East by extremists, or dictators and their unholy global alliances.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is easy for one to be seated on a podium reading a speech such as this one. It is true that each one of us is exposed when speaking the truth but to be honest, the truth has become mundane. I am sure I told things you already know and things that you probably might consider extremely hard –if not utopian- to achieve. I promised to speak about what we have seen these years and with some more images I will conclude my intervention.

When this convention is over we will return in Lesbos. We are better in acts than we are in words. We will go back and do what we do best. We know what is the right thing to do but we have limited powers over reality. All these years and in the face of the hard reality we did one simple thing. We chose to love instead of hate, we chose to think instead of doing what we are told. Back home my five years old son is waiting. And when I think of my life I finally think of what scares me the most. It is not reality, it is not the cruelty of the world and my limited powers over it, it is not the game that is lost before it even begins. It is a question that my son, our children, the citizens of the future will surely ask. I have asked it before against my father and I didn't like the answer. I still remember him lowering his eyes to the ground. In every age children ask it. What did you do? Did you do your best?

What is our best? Will we simply answer "well it was extremely complicated!". This will not suffice at all, posterity, our children in the future will not accept such an excuse. Ladies and Gentlemen before we answer this question we must travel to the camps in Eidomeni as they are this very moment, we must live in the camps of Peiraius port or in other refugee camps, here in Bulgaria or other parts of Europe. And while answering we must look into the eyes of the children. Do we do our best?

From Agkalia we believe it is our historical obligation to have our voice united with other voices from all over Europe and the world. We must network together, all of us that truly believe in democracy, tolerance, co-existence and humanism as ideology and practice. If all other things are utopian no one can persuade us that the hundreds of volunteers we had by our side, the thousands of Europeans we interacted with all these years and who dare speak the mundane truth, do not exist. We have seen solidarity stemming from the people without interventions, we have seen groups being created from nowhere, people leaving their cozy sofas and getting out in the streets, in the beaches. No one can say this never happened. It still happens as a vivid remarkable social phenomenon. And if all other powers of hate, of racism, of fundamentalism, of plundering and of ignorance are dominant no one can persuade us that at least a good struggle against them is not worth it. What else has remained?

This is a convention about children. About the rights and lives of children. About the perfectly innocent ones. I wish all the best to the participants, I wish the Council of Europe through this meeting to find voices and methods to stand against the darkness that threatens to dismantle Europe once more. Europe has only to learn and to be enriched by "otherness" on the same time providing safe haven and opting for peace rather than war. It can be done, it must be done and if not we have but to struggle for it. We can set an example by creating out of the refugee children alongside our own children the next generation of European and world citizens that will promote future understanding, tolerance, co-existence, multiculturalism and progress for all. What some media and some politicians present as "curse" is truly a blessing. It is up to us to work to this

direction. I wish we stand up to the occasion of this convention, finally to the occasion of our limited human lives and we do our very own “best”.

Thank you, Tyrikos Ergas Giorgos on behalf of “Agkalia”.