



# A Human Future

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Mary Jo Leddy is founder of and lives at Romero House, a community for refugees in Toronto. She lectures widely, is the author of several books and the recipient of many academic and humanitarian awards including the Order of Canada. She is active in the Ontario Sanctuary Coalition and in PEN Canada and is a Senior Fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto. Her Ph.D work was in the philosophy of religion and political thought with emphasis on Hannah Arendt's approach to the Holocaust.

## Encountering “The Other Face of God”

### An Interview with Mary Jo Leddy

Mary Jo Leddy is a font of wisdom distilled over years of helping hundreds of refugees through post-traumatic stress and through the dehumanizing maze of red tape and bureaucratic abuse that too often makes their settlement and recovery even more difficult. Her beautiful new book, *The Other Face of God: When the Stranger Calls Us Home*—part poetry, part theological reflection on the discovery of life's meaning—offers a practical spirituality that can sustain us in our day. —Beth Porter, ed.

**Beth Porter:** Your new book is coming out this October. What is it about?

**Mary Jo Leddy:** When I wrote *At the Border Called Hope*, several years ago, I wanted the general public to know some of the stories of refugees and that they are real and complex people, like the rest of us. I also wanted to convey the dehumanizing nature of the legislative world they face, and I wanted to tell the story of the Sanctuary Movement as it began in Canada. So that book had a certain social and political purpose. This new, shorter book is a kind of a poetic reflection on the experience of meeting refugees and the implications of that, spiritually, theologically, and even for how churches understand themselves. After twenty years there are some things I know for sure. But the starting point for this new book is still the experience of meeting someone who turns to you and says, “Please help me!” When someone, in fact, summons you.

Early on, I was faced with several women from the Horn of Africa, all were Muslim, who in one way or the other summoned me and said, “I need you to do something! I need your help!”

When you experience being summoned, you actually don't know what to do and you aren't even sure who you are, but in responding you find that out. I call it an about face or conversion.

There's one whole stream of spirituality that says that first we must become a good person and then we will do good. Or, first we must know Jesus in order to follow Jesus. And this book is pointing to another stream of spirituality, some of it is post-modern and some very ancient, that

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understands that in caring for another person and doing good, doing justice, you become who you really are. You become good by doing good. And it is sometimes people very, very different from ourselves who summon us to become who we really are.

### How did you choose the title?

I think we all have images of God that are familiar—images that we grew up with, that are part of our culture. That's the familiar face of God. But the other face of God is the one that we don't know, that often comes to us through the one that is extremely different from us. The ancient Hebrew tradition says that if we make God too familiar, too friendly, it becomes idolatry, and that we constantly need to remember that God is not what we imagine, not the same as us. The stranger reminds us of this. So in a way the stranger calls us home to ourselves, to the essence of our own faith and culture. I have lived for years in a house full of Muslims, where I was the only Christian. I feel that I became more of a Christian, a better Christian, living with those people. And I think they would say that they became better Muslims. We each became deeply conscious of who we really are. People often confuse ecumenism or interfaith work with finding some middle muddle that we can all agree on, but in reality it has to do with living your own faith with integrity and openness to those who are very different. In doing this you become more fully who you really are.

### How do you see the situation for refugees in Canada as you look to the future, especially given the backlash against the Tamil boat people who arrived in B.C. last year?

I actually know a journalist who was on the first boat, "The Ocean Lady." I am working with him, learning his story, and it's absolutely appalling. He was considered a journalist with immense integrity who owned a large media news outlet that was used by the BBC for information about Sri Lanka's war. He came on the

## The Other Face of God, an extract



St. Augustine wrote that God is nearer to me than I am to myself but different enough to make me more than myself. In the pages that follow I want to describe this mystery as I have experienced it—of how we are drawn from a familiar sense of God to an experience of God who is different enough to summon us to become more than ourselves. And the mystery of how the stranger and newcomer, if we stay with them long enough, lead us to a new sense of the nearness of God—to affection and friendship and companionship with God. Living in the shelter of each other, we begin to live in the neighbourhood of God.

From Mary Jo Teddy's Introduction to *The Other Face of God*, Orbis, 2011, p. 8

boat because when he went to the Canadian embassy in Thailand he was told to wait for 14 years and then come back. This is the reality that people face. So he took this boat, and they barely survived the storms on the ocean. You know the kind of public stereotype: "Oh well, they are terrorists. They are violent." But on the boat were children, orphans, women who had been raped, people filled with shrapnel, two priests, and some NGO workers. And they were put in jail the minute they arrived on Vancouver Island. The journalist said to me, "Is it a crime to want to live?" That's all they wanted!

The question is, What is the fuss about this little group of Tamil people, about 97 people? I feel that refugees are the contemporary scapegoat for the pervasive fear that we are losing control of our national borders. Otherwise, the intense preoccupation with this does not make sense; the numbers do not justify it. To this fear, I say, "Excuse me, we lost that control a long time ago!" Free trade deals, the multi-channel communications universe, the global swirl of capital, the whole process of globalization has destroyed most national



boundaries. It seems we are making this one last desperate effort trying to prove that we still have control over people who come into the country.

Bill C-4 is not about punishing smugglers. It's about punishing refugees. What it says in the Bill (and most Canadians just don't see it) is that when refugees come, whether by boat, by air, by land, they will automatically be detained for a year. Men, women and children in detention centers! So I think that all these new prisons the Federal Government is building are in fact going to be for refugees. But this is not being said, of course. We are starting to create our own concentration camps, similar to the concentration camps that exist now all over Europe, where unwanted refugees are kept.

**What suggestions do you have for people who would like to get involved in helping refugees?**

Every mainline church has refugee sponsorship agreements with the Government whereby they bring some families every year. If the local church is not doing that, they could contact the Anglican Diocese or the Catholic Diocese, United Church, Presbyterian Church, where they are living. Or they could contact a group like Romero House to volunteer. Some synagogues also sponsor refugees. Mosques I think are just barely coping with what they have in front of them—

**The Other Face of God, an extract**

As I lived with Teresita and Jose [her young son] for two years, poverty no was no longer an issue for me, one of my concerns. Poverty had a face and a name. I realized how wrong it was to refer to people as "the poor." They were persons who were at this time in their lives, in economic distress. Their immense complexity and the particular story of their lives could not be reduced to a social problem called poverty, to a category of concern or contempt. My desire for justice became focused, and I knew I would be faithful. It was no longer a hobby, a part of my life, an issue that I could walk away from when I wanted to. It would mean giving press conferences to empty rooms, being crushed by the casual indifference of political leaders, dismissed as easily as Teresita had been. Justice has a face and its name was Teresita.

Mary Jo Leddy, *The Other Face of God*, p. 18

people arriving every day—and they are just swamped. The Government should be giving time and attention to the sponsorship program as it costs them nothing. The churches pay all the refugee expenses. But the processing of applications is just so slow, and this is very discouraging. ■

**Andy Lamey**

The modern institution of asylum arose after World War II, when European nations had to contend with millions of people displaced by the conflict and redrawn borders; hundreds of thousands remained trapped in camps for years. International efforts to solve the problem resulted in the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which committed signatory states to recognize that refugees have the right to "non-refoulement," that is, to not be returned to a place of danger.

Today, however, they are routinely refouled by countries that have vowed not to do so. The 9/11 terrorist attacks

escalated the poor treatment of immigrants and refugees, but the most exclusionary actions predate 2001....

Canada's record is far from spotless. We engage in our own form of interdiction, albeit one conducted at foreign airports..., by trying to prevent the departure of anyone on their way here to seek asylum. But a close inspection of Canada's asylum policies reveals intimations of a better alternative.



From: Andy Lamey, "Glorious and Free: Making Canada a Model Nation for the Treatment of Refugees," *The Walrus*, October 2011. Read entire article ([Click here](#))  
Dr. Lamey teaches at Monash University in Melbourne.

## For Your Information

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### Links

- Canadian Council for Refugees
- About Bill C-4 (Originally introduced last spring as Bill C-49 but not passed, this bill has been reintroduced in the current session of Parliament as Bill C-4):
  - Klaus Gruber, “Punitive Laws Wrong Approach to Refugee Claims,” Sept 8/11
  - Nick Van der Graaf, “A Risky Move to Securitize Immigration,” Oct. 6/11
  - 10 reasons why Bill C-4 needs to be defeated
- Amnesty International website for Refugees
- Bill C-11, the Government of Canada’s new “Balanced Refugee Reform Act”
- On Supreme Court’s recent overturning of a refugee decision: Adrian Humphreys, “Adjudicator Rebuked by Court for Refusing Man who Failed Catholic Trivia”
- Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
- Stephen Bede Scharper, “Living With Toronto’s Multicultural Reality”
- Books by Mary Jo Leddy:
  - *The Other Face of God: When the Stranger Calls Us Home*, Orbis, 2011.
  - *Our Friendly Local Terrorist*, Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2010. (A true story about a young Kurdish man pressured by CSIS to spy on fellow members of the Kurdish community in Canada.)
  - *Radical Gratitude*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002
  - *Say to the Darkness, We Beg to Differ*, Lester & Orpen Dennys, 2002.
  - *At the Border Called Hope: Where Refugees are Neighbours*, Harper-Collins, 1997.
- Andy Lamey, *Frontier Justice: The Global Refugee Crisis and What To Do About It*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2011.
- Kathleen McAlpine RSM, *Ministry that Transforms*, Liturgical Press, 2009. (A book on the contemplative model of theological reflection based on sessions she held with Romero House interns over the course of a year).
- Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger; Welcoming the Other*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.

[www.larche.ca/en/inspiration](http://www.larche.ca/en/inspiration)



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

*A Human Future* is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.