

Ruin or Responsibility

A week ago, a team of young people began a difficult and long journey – a journey to the biggest refugee camp in Greece, Idomeni. This group of young Christians from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina went on this trip to serve and help the refugees. Those people have been sitting on the verge of ruin for the past several months, without food and in terrible conditions. Pope Francis held a special prayer service for them when he himself visited the camp. He urged those in power to take responsibility and start making decisions to benefit the refugees; to stop seeing them as capital and commodity, which is what has been happening a lot lately, but is completely against all Christian and ethical values. Not only that, but it is also against the human rights laws passed by the same people who are now sitting in the EU chairs, and washing their hands of this situation. Pope Francis asked the people in the camp not to lose hope; while at the same time being aware that for most politicians this situation is not a priority, nor is taking responsibility for this situation in the interest of various members of the EU.



(Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina Team)

Faced with deep divisions between European countries, which are especially evident in Idomeni, faced with starved people, with wire and armed forces that are hindering the work of humanitarian organizations, our volunteers were brave and remained in the camp through it all, standing with the people, helping them and fighting for their rights. We never gave people false information about borders opening, but we did give out bread, water and build two basketball courts.

After seeing that, we were invited by government representatives for a meeting in Thessaloniki. The army General expressed his deep gratitude for our humble contributions to Idomeni, and was especially happy to see basketball courts being built, because he himself is

a great fan of the sport. We were invited to dinner and local beer. As a team, we were thrilled with all of this, and are very grateful to God for providing for us in Greece. We were invited back to Greece, to organize more activities, especially for children; activities that would be both fun and educational. They asked us to present a plan of action for these projects.

While speaking to the General, we mentioned that we were Evangelical Christians (Baptists), and he was very happy to learn that. He himself is a Greek Orthodox Christian, but has a very inclusive view of other Christian communities. So, besides talking about projects related to the camps, we also talked about Bible studies as a voluntary educational activity for refugees and volunteers. “Through studying the word of God we can find solutions to all problems, even if it just means understanding those who are different from us.” This was the General’s statement, and it took us by surprise how open and unprejudiced he was. That was very motivating for us.

Filled with enthusiasm and encouraged, we continued serving in Idomeni, a camp with over 15000 people, and other two eco camps (5000 people). Every day we packed sandwiches in Thessaloniki, and drove to the camps, which are about one hour drive from the place we were staying at. All our days began with prayer that we as a team can be ambassadors for the Kingdom of God, and not superficial representatives of political agendas and organizations. Our vision was to give hope – to show Christ the Savior, and God the Father, who provides for us all. We would spend evening hours in conversation and debriefing. Each one of us shared about what they learned that day. When I look back, I can say with certainty that we learned so much through this work.



(Children resting in tents during the afternoon heath.)

I don’t want to put too much politics into this, but I need to say that as a group of young people we are fully aware that politics, in its core, should stand for the common good, and not something rotten. Politicians have become corrupt, not just economically, but in their hedonistic values. They are forgetting that they are in a position of responsibility; responsibility to stand for what is good, and what is in the best interest of the most

vulnerable groups. They have become indifferent towards this crisis, and they are letting this situation slowly, but steadily roll towards ruin. God forbid.

Sometimes it seems that people only take responsibility when everything falls apart. We are, in fact, witnesses of so many of those cases here in the Balkans. People in charge don't step down until everything lies in ruin. That is not a good example of taking responsibility, but it will keep happening while the people allow it. A shocking amount of people in the Balkans are unaware of one of the biggest humanitarian crisis since WWII. This kind of ignorance and indifference of people towards problems leads nations to destruction.

It is a fact that Greece could do much better to help this situation, but it is not just Greece's responsibility – the entire EU is seen through the lens of refugees. Decisions and deals made between the EU and Turkey are violating international human rights. It is so easy to see that the powers at be perceive people as commodity to be traded; and it is even more evident when we see humanitarian efforts – especially smaller church-based organizations - being hindered by governments. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, belief and practice that is in sync with everything that is not threatening to others. We see that statement slowly dissolving in this situation. Everything that matters is being pushed to the margins.

Our work in Greece was limited because of the lack of funds and lack of people. Our team got very tired quickly. There is need for volunteers; people who really want to help, who are able to stay calm in the face of all the suffering. The hungry children, exhausted women, nervous men, it all makes the work much more difficult. We are not just there to distribute food and hygiene, but also to bring a sense of peace and hope to those people. And they recognize that in us and enjoy spending time with us.



(Our volunteers spending time with refugee children.)

For our next trip we need people who are capable of enduring difficult conditions. We want to be involved in more activities. We are the first and the only organization to distribute tea, which is a difficult project. Also, we are involved in projects dealing with infrastructure. We

are planning to build courts for various sports, for grownups and kids. We also want to do projects especially for children. We have a team of people who do clown shows for children, and that has already proven to be a successful project – not just for the children, but also for the police officers in the camp! Another thing we want to do is put up a tent, where we can organize educational workshops and programs in the evenings, but also in the afternoon to keep children away from the sun.

The heat is already a big problem and will become even more so. We are looking for an effective solution to prevent spreading of infections, which could happen due to the lack of hygiene in the camps. All ideas are welcome.

Currently we are working on fundraising for these projects that we want to implement in the camps, but also for an exhibit we want to set up in Osijek, Zagreb, Sarajevo and Belgrade. The purpose of the exhibit would be to inform the public about the refugee crisis, and to educate young people on the importance of volunteer work and helping others. Also, we will do this in cooperation with local churches, to help them connect with their communities. We believe that our engagement in Greece and any other refugee related activity can have good repercussions for the Balkan countries; especially now when a slightly extreme conservative atmosphere can be felt everywhere. As an international group of young people through our work in Greece, we want to show the world, and especially the Balkan countries, that even after years of conflict in our context, we can still live together in peace, and work together for the benefit of others.



(Refugee child helping build the basketball court.)

Our desire is to take responsibility before everything falls apart. We believe politics is for every individual, and it is a question of public good. So, it doesn't matter who is sitting in high chairs, what is important is that the people start discussing issues again, but this time constructively, with a focus on making things better. Our desire is to build a better society, no matter the country or the continent. I will put it this way: we cannot let the four riders of the apocalypse to come and start ruining our society, while we stand by and watch. And we cannot let the fifth rider, whose name in the modern world is Capitalism, to ruin people's lives because of greed. Our initiative to take responsibility is the key in avoiding ruin.

If you want to help us financially with the above mentioned projects, you can do so by sending funds to:

Account Name: Savez Baptistickih Crkava u RH

Address : Radiceva 30, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia

Bank name: Zagrebačka Banka d.d.

Address: Trg Bana Jelačića 10, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia

IBAN HR8823600001101525063

SWIFT ID Code: ZABAHR2X

And if you have ideas or want to join our team, you can send an email to:

croatianbaptistaid@gmail.com

«The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.» *Socrates*