

Q&A: Deacon Steve Swope

If you want a glimpse at a deacon working in the margins, look no further than Deacon Steve Swope from the Archdiocese of Atlanta.

Deacon Steve is a Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Global Fellow Educator, who earlier this year spent several weeks working with refugees in Greece.

He wears many other hats, too.

He serves the Archdiocese of Atlanta as the chair of the Diaconate Scrutinies and Evaluation Committee, a member of the Deacon Personnel Board, and the lead Master of Ceremonies at the Archdiocese of Atlanta Eucharistic Congress. He formerly served the Archdiocese as the Associate Director of Formation for the Permanent Diaconate for the Archdiocese of Atlanta and the CEO of GWTW Partners, which has oversight of the use and intellectual property protection of Margaret Mitchell's award-winning novel, *Gone With the Wind*.

He was ordained to the diaconate in 2008 and serves at St. George Catholic Church in Newnan, Georgia. Deacon Steve and his wife Marie live on a small farm just outside of Newnan, where they raise chickens, grow vegetables, and find time to relax. They have two adult children, Jennifer and Matthew.

I was curious to learn more about his work among refugees, and he agreed to answer a few questions via email.

Q: How did you become interested in ministering to the refugee population?

A: After my ordination, I applied to become a CRS Global Fellow. During my formation, I had learned of the work being done by CRS. As you know, CRS is the official international humanitarian aid agency of the American Catholic Church. Being a Global Fellow enabled me to connect with the Church's work for the poorest in our world. The CRS Global Fellows, who are all deacons or priests, go abroad to witness the work being done by the Church and then return home to preach and share information about what is being done. The European Refugee Crisis is one of the many

humanitarian areas being addressed by the Church. My particular interest increased last summer when I saw frequent news reports about those fleeing ISIS and civil war in Syria. When CRS offered me the opportunity to participate in a delegation to witness the work being done to address the greatest refugee crisis since World War II, I took advantage of that opportunity.

Q: What was the experience like?

A: Our CRS delegation traveled to Greece and Serbia in January of 2016. We spent four days in Athens, Greece, where the refugees were arriving from their trip across the Aegean Sea from Turkey, and then four days in Serbia, where the refugees were transiting from Serbia into Croatia.

It was a powerful experience. Roughly 60 percent of the refugees are intact families. Most refugees are well educated, middle class, hardworking people. The primary concerns of the parents were the safety and education of their children. It was clear to me that these parents were just like most of the parents in my parish; just a few years ago, they helped their kids with homework, went to soccer practice and dance lessons, and lived quiet, happy lives. Now they are on the run for their lives—heading into the unknown while hoping and praying they will eventually return home. The refugees are not the “other,” in a real way they are simply living human beings doing just what we would do in their circumstance. Encountering them gave me a greater understanding of what “solidarity” really means.

Q: What is your most powerful memory from the trip?

A: I don't have a single memory of the trip; I have three and they are interrelated.

In Athens, I met a young widow named Hiat from Hama, Syria, who had six children. Hiat's husband had been killed on his way home from work, simply because he turned down the wrong road when battle was erupting. Hiat spent all of her limited money to transit across Turkey and the Aegean Sea to find safety for her family. When we met, she was in a safe hotel run by Caritas Athens.



She told us she had little choice but to flee her home. She then asked us, “Why should my children die, they haven't done anything wrong, why must they die?” Caritas and CRS were helping to ensure they wouldn't die.

Then, in Serbia, I met a wonderful man named Ahmad Feres. Ahmad and his family were at a refugee rest stop run by CRS and the Balkan Centre for Migration (BCM) just outside of Croatia. There he received food, clothing, and medical treatment for his son who had the flu. Ahmad has two degrees in engineering, is fluent in four languages, and was a professor at the University of Aleppo before it closed. His family had been bombed out of four houses and almost killed in the last bombing. To escape the constant battles in Aleppo and ISIS incursions, he made the decision to save his family by fleeing Syria. Ahmad is a proud Syrian who told me that when peace finally arrives, he would return home to help restore his country.

Finally, right at the Croatian border, I met a young CRS/BCM translator named Tadia Rastic. Several months ago, she encountered a woman who was seven months pregnant and in distress. She referred the woman to the CRS/Doctors Without Borders Clinic and from there the woman was taken to hospital in Belgrade where her ailment was treated and she eventually gave birth. Weeks later, she reappeared at the Croatian border with her newborn daughter. By mere chance, in the throng of hundreds of people she saw Tadia. She told Tadia that without medical help her baby and she would have both died. She also announced the name of her daughter—Tadia!

The power of these stories is twofold. First, in them I see the solidarity and resilience of

our human family. These refugees are no different from me or any of the people I know. They will do what it takes to save their loved ones and will accept any hardship in doing so. They also showed great appreciation for any and all acts of help and kindness since each act respected their innate human dignity. Second, the assistance being provided is coordinated by the Catholic Church through CRS, but involves interdenominational and secular organizations and people of all ages and nationalities. Genuine solidarity exists between the refugees and the aid workers. Nothing I have ever encountered demonstrates to this extent that we are indeed one human family.

Q: What is the most important message you want to convey about the experience?

A: It is so easy for those of us in the United States or generally in the West to say, “The refugees are different. They’re not like us, they look different, they are Muslim, they speak a different language.” We think that it gives us an out—we can turn our backs and walk away. It’s what many people do

these days with the situation in Syria and its neighboring countries. When we do that, we turn millions of innocent people affected by this tragic situation into the “other.” We build a wall between us and them. But this is not the Christian response, it is not a Catholic response. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan serves as the model we are to follow.

Q: How did this impact your ministry after you returned home?

A: I have been asked to give numerous presentations about the refugee crisis, each of which has enabled me to share unique, eyewitness stories about the refugees. It has also enabled me to weave into my homilies, presentations, and discussions the need for Catholics to become and remain engaged in this crisis through prayer, action, and advocacy.

Q: What would you say to other deacons who might be considering this kind of a ministry?

A: Serving the poor and the Church as a CRS Global Fellow is an essential ministry.

Like many other ministries, a deacon will discover that this requires dedication and sacrifice; but in the end, he will discover how very satisfying and rewarding the ministry can be.

First for my brother deacons, don’t read this article and think, “My, he is doing nice things.” Pray for the refugees, learn more about what is really going on, act to inspire those in your parish to do the same, and finally give of yourself, your time and resources to help alleviate this tremendous humanitarian suffering. Secondly, if you want to learn more, to hear other stories of the refugees and our time in Greece and Serbia, you can check out my website www.DeaconsView.com for more of those insights and stories. †

Deacon Greg Kandra, a member of the Deacon Digest Editorial Advisory Board, serves the Diocese of Brooklyn, and is the Multi-Media Editor for Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA). A popular blogger, you can find the writings of Deacon Greg at: aleteia.org/blogs/deacon-greg-kandra



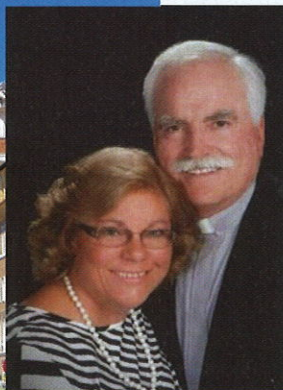
Proximo Travel



Pilgrimages for Catholics and people of all faiths



Proximo Travel would like to thank the more than 100 Deacons and family members that attended the Jubilee in Rome with us! We had so many positive comments. I worked closely with the company to come up with 6 different itineraries for those that attended. Now, let me work with you on your next tour!



Remember Deacons travel FREE when only 4 people sign up to go with you, and when eight sign up, your wife goes FREE!

Deacon Joseph and Virginia Bland
1-855-842-8001
www.proximotravel.com