



‘WE ARE ALWAYS SUMMONED TO BECOME DIFFERENT’

MARY JO LEDDY ON REFUGEES,
OTHERNESS, AND BEING ‘HERE’

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The Life of Jesus by William Brassey Hole

By Tali Folkins

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Much of Mary Jo Leddy's work has involved the building of bridges. In the mid-1960s, while still in her teens, Leddy joined the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion, a Roman Catholic group aimed at fostering Jewish-Christian relations. (By 1980, she had [completed a PhD](#) dissertation at the University of Toronto dealing with the Holocaust.) In 1991, while on the board of the *Catholic New Times*, a publication of which she was founding editor, Leddy helped found Romero House, a Toronto home for refugees which she has served as director of ever since. (In 1994, Leddy announced she was leaving Our Lady of Sion, [explaining](#) that it was with Romero House that her true vocation lay.)

Through much of that time, Leddy has found time for teaching theology at the University of Toronto's Regis College and for writing numerous books, which have explored themes such as gratitude (*Radical Gratitude*, 2005); the role of newcomers in bringing us to a deeper knowledge of Christ (*The Other Face of God*, 2011), and most recently, Canadian identity (*Why Are We Here?*, 2019).

Epiphanies spoke with Leddy about her vocation and the role that difference can play in our lives.

This interview has been edited for length.

It seems a prevalent theme of your life's work has been the "other." Why is that?

I don't think I would have put it that way at that time, or even now, but it's a convenient way of describing, I guess, a widespread interest in other people. Maybe I could say if you go back to my thesis, my first breakthrough in terms of how I saw the world was when I began to see it through the eyes of Jewish people, like what it meant to look on the cross and say, "This isn't just a wonderful Christian symbol; it's also had a very sad history with some Jewish people." So as I began to see the world through the eyes of Jewish people, many of whom became friends, certainly some of whom became very significant mentors for me—I think once you make that first breakthrough to a different way of looking at the world and seeing that as a very good thing, everything else gets easier. I really feel that. If you are able to cross



Mary Jo Leddy, director of Romero House in Toronto

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that bridge to another person who's quite different, it's much easier with everybody else.

Why do you say that—how does it get easier?

Well, I don't know—I mean I don't have a recipe for explaining why it's true. I just know it's true, that once you see the world through a different set of eyes it's not as big a leap to see it then through another set of eyes. You know that it's valid, that it's important, that you really can see the world differently.

What do you teach at Regis College?

They're very kind; they let me teach whatever I want to teach, so it's a pretty big spectrum. Right now it's Christian theology after the Holocaust. I do a course on Wendell Berry, I do a course on doing theology in the Canadian context, and I've just written a new book [*Why Are We Here?*] on that. I'm doing a couple of courses in the area of the literary imagination and theology, and then in the past I've done things like spirituality and culture. A lot of what I teach would come in under that.

You've said that the biggest gift refugees bring to Canada is their hope. Can you tell me a little bit about what you mean by that?

Well, I think that any of us that are involved in social justice work have a lot to complain about this country. I think right now about the Indigenous peoples and their struggle for a measure of justice and respect. We have a long way to go on a lot of things. But I do treasure the basic insight of refugees that this is a place where you can hope, and it's very, very touching to me.

A woman arrived with five children under eight and a little overnight case; she had taken a plane from the Middle East to New York, and then went in to Port Authority, got a bus to Buffalo, and then walked across the bridge, not speaking a word of English, on her own, and she said as she crossed that bridge, she felt she was going to a place where she could hope again. So that is so important to remember, for all of us—that no matter what, this is a place where we can hope.

Is it your experience that refugees retain this sense of hope?

No, I think it's an initial thing many of them come with. And then they can have many discouraging experiences. The immigration system is not kind. Finding jobs, finding housing is a big struggle, so some of them, their hope is dimmed a bit. But I think most of them, regardless of negative experiences, even negative experiences of racism, they really still say this is the best country in the world to be in. And that's a bit shocking to me. And it's an important shock.

Why do you say it's a bit shocking to you?

Well, because I take this country so for granted, as I think many of us do. And that's sad. We should never take it for granted.

We don't appreciate—

Where we are.

You mean, in a way, how good a country it is to live in?

No, not that. That's a bit Pollyanna for me. But it's—I'm just trying to think of how I can say this. It's so simple: that this is a place where even if life is difficult, you can still find reasons to hope. And that's amazing, really.

In your book, *The Other Face of God*, you write that fear of the stranger and the foreigner is symptomatic of an aging culture. Do you think that applies to Canada?

I don't think we can generalize about this. And there is a very interesting and important dynamic that takes place, in the nature of a self-fulfilling prophecy: if we expect and anticipate that Canadians will not welcome strangers, that in fact becomes the case. And if we think of Canadians, if we think of church groups, as open, welcoming people, in fact, that's what they become. And I know this from giving many talks about refugees and often being onstage with a politician who's very anti-refugee, and the politician will say, you know, "Our country's being overrun by immigrants and they're taking our jobs, they're breaking the queue," and people will say "Yes, yes," and they clap. And then I begin to speak and talk about people's hopes in the country, what it's cost to leave their own country, and people clap and say, "Yes, that's true," and I say, "You too could welcome people," and they say, "Yes." So there's something important in that.

If you expect the worst in people that's really what you get, but if you expect the best—and at this point I do expect the best from church groups. I think now over 30 or 40 years since we welcomed the Vietnamese boat people, thousands of Canadians, grassroots people at their local parish and congregational level, thousands of people have spent thousands of dollars sponsoring refugees, welcoming them. There is an extraordinary base of support that has been created through the church sponsorship networks. That's really important to remember. Thousands of people now know there are reasons why people have to leave their country.

Something else that you wrote in that book intrigued me: You talked about the importance of not assuming God to be like us. Do you think that difference or otherness plays an important role in human salvation?

Yes, otherness for sure. You know, we are always summoned to become different than we are now, more than we are now. It's a great religious temptation going way back to what the prophets said about idolatry—the

temptation to make God like us, whereas the summons is for us to become more like God. It's that simple. I mean look at the artwork, the way in which we paint Jesus, God. God is always more than what we make of God. That's basic. That's fundamental.

Do you think God uses otherness among humans as a way of teaching us the nature of himself?

Well I don't know how God does things—I wouldn't presume to pontificate about that! I do think, in my experience, it's just a blessing to know people who are different from us. And they call us to become more than who we are right now.

What led you to write your most recent book, *Why Are We Here?*

Well, it's a bit of a long story. It actually is a book that took me almost 30 years to write. Many years ago, I was the editor of an independent Catholic newspaper with a focus on social justice, and through that work I became very aware of liberation theology in Latin America and how powerful that was, when people began to think and pray in ways that were coherent with their context. And it would be a much longer story, but suffice it to say at some point I realized that while I was writing about the Latin American context and the theology that grew up there, I had no real articulation of my context, which was Canada. And I began to wonder, "Why is that so?"

As Canadians we think our context is boring, same, not of great interest, not as interesting as Latin America or the theology that developed out of Europe, for example. And I began to see that that is what happens when you live in a colonial context. And Canada has always been a colony—of France, of England, of the U.S.—and what happens when you live in a colony is, you always think about what's happening elsewhere, how it affects you, what it means, and you have no real insight into *here*. And as I began to ask that question I really began to read books on Canadian culture, Canadian literature, and began to teach courses on this.

And I knew the students found it helpful. It shaped the way I was beginning to look at what I was doing.

So finally, after 30 years, I thought, "Well, I'd better write this out, and hopefully it will be helpful to other people." It's a small book—it's just 100 pages—but it's very condensed. It's something I've thought about for a long time.

How do you think the world is doing now when it comes to reconciliation with the other? Have divisions between people been increasing or decreasing in recent decades?

That's a really important question. I don't know. Obviously at times there are outbursts, not just of racism but of genocide, and I know that because the minute this begins to happen, we begin to get refugees that are fleeing. So I know it's real, and it's terrible when the differences become really destructive.

On the other hand, there are many things that are just so much better. The whole ecumenical movement, with Catholics and Protestants—I mean, there are extraordinary things that have happened, and somewhat quietly, you know—how comfortable we are to go to each other's services, for people to marry people from a different Christian church. It's done so simply, so normally, and yet when I think of it, in my lifetime, so much has changed. I think of my mother's family, which was a mixed marriage of wealthy English landowners with a Catholic girl, and how they had to flee because of that. That's gone. So I guess it depends on what you look at. I can't generalize, really.

What gives you hope these days?

Well, I certainly always find hope in what's happening at Romero House, in the people here. Every day—this sounds very simple, but you see good people doing good things, and you have a choice to notice that or to just pass it by. You know, you can miss a lot of goodness every day. But if you're looking for goodness, you will find it. You will. You will find it. ■