RCA Global Mission

Update from

JJ TENCLAY

September 2026
With Love from Rome

Dear Friends & Supporters,

I'm writing this letter to you today, having just returned from a much-needed family vacation, which ended with a few days in Rome, Italy.

During my time in Rome, I had two experiences with the theological ideal of *philoxenia* that served as profound reminders of why this calling is so important to me, and why I feel compelled to invite others into this sacred space of loving immigrants and refugees in the name of Christ.

Angels Unawares

In September 2019, a new piece of art was installed in St. Peter's Square in Vatican City to commemorate the 105th World Day of Refugees and Migrants.

The title of this piece: Angels Unawares.

It is a life-sized bronze and clay statue of 140 people in a raft, depicting diverse groups of people through diverse times in history who have experienced forced or mass migration. A Polish woman fleeing communism. An Irish boy fleeing the potato famine. A Jewish man fleeing Nazi Germany. A Syrian child fleeing the civil war. A Cherokee man fleeing the Trail of Tears. All accompanied by the Holy Family, fleeing persecution themselves. And then, in the middle of the statue, there is a pair of angel wings visible above the tightly packed crowd, symbolizing the sacredness of the lives of each and every migrant and refugee, and their roles as messengers from God to us. The inspiration for the statue comes from Hebrews 13:2:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

In this passage, the word used in scripture that we translate as "hospitality" is the Greek word *philoxenia*, which means "love of the stranger." A familial type of love that says, "you may have arrived as a stranger, but now you are one of us." And the word for "angels" used is *angelos*, meaning "messenger."

The statue is imploring us to see both the people who have experienced forced displacement and/or migration AND the biblical call to welcome them with Christ-like love and compassion.

I love this Bible verse and this statue. Both are prominently displayed on my business cards and on my desk. But this is the first time I've spent time with the statue in person, and what I experienced was a holy moment. I left St. Peter's Square with a renewed sense of both the urgency and the sacredness of the call to love immigrants and refugees in the name of Christ.

Would you like to receive these updates digitally? Please email Kelli at kgilmore@rca.org to be added to the email list. You will receive more timely updates from the missionary you support and help us be good stewards of our resources.

My daughter, Sophia, is becoming quite the amateur photographer, and took these amazing photos of the statue. Who do you see in the faces represented? What messages might God be sending you as you look at them?

Philoxenia Over Pizza

In previous missionary updates, I've shared stories of Eliah, A Syrian man who fled Syria during the civil war and was living in Lebanon. He remained at risk of harm—both because he was a Syrian refugee and because he had converted from Islam to Christianity. By the grace of God and the hard work of so many people who walked alongside Eliah on his journey to refuge, he arrived in Rome, Italy, in October 2024 through the Humanitarian Corridors program led by Mediterranean Hope (one of the mission partners I worked with while living in Italy). Every individual involved in the Humanitarian Corridors program is pre-screened by the Italian government and arrives with a humanitarian visa, but they are not given full refugee status until they undergo a final asylum interview with a local tribunal. This process typically takes 6-12 months. For Eliah, the wait was almost two full years! Why? Just two months after Eliah arrived in Italy, the Assad regime fell in Syria, and countries all around the world suspended processing of Syrian refugees, waiting to see if Syrians could now return home safely. Unfortunately, Syria remains in turmoil, and, as I mentioned in my last missionary letter, people in parts of Syria are experiencing some of the worst conditions imaginable since the beginning of the civil war in 2011 (15 years). After months of advocacy by Mediterranean Hope and other non-governmental agencies, the Italian government decided to move forward with the asylum applications for Eliah and approximately 300 other Syrians who had arrived in Italy and

were living in limbo. After a five-hour interview (yes, five hours!) with the tribunal, Eliah was finally granted refugee status in Italy.

I was first introduced to Eliah in May 2022 through a video call, but I had never met Eliah face-to-face, until this vacation trip to Rome. Tim and I were blessed to meet Eliah for dinner one night, and while sharing a meal of Neopolitan-style pizza (still our favorite after living in Naples!), we talked about life, and love, and hope, and faith, and Jesus.

And friends, you were there with us, practicing *philoxenia* by proxy. Even though you weren't in the room, and you have not had the opportunity to meet Eliah in person, it is your ongoing love and support for me and this ministry that allowed this meeting to happen.

As you and your families, churches, and middle assemblies review your budgets and missional giving for this year, and begin setting new budgets and missional giving goals for the next, it is my hope that you will continue to partner with me to share the good news of God's love for people seeking refuge around the world.

In deep gratitude,

JJ TenClay
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