

To Poland and Back

A sudden inspiration led Thais and Sonsoles on an adventure that took them to Poland and back to rescue refugees from Ukraine.

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In his 25 September 2020 general audience, Pope Francis said that the worldwide crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic means that “facing an exceptional situation we cannot respond in the usual way, but rather a new and different approach is needed.” Likewise the tragic war in

Ukraine requires a response that employs the “creativity of charity” in the service of those most in need.

A sudden idea

“Sonsoles, I just had a sudden idea. Would you like to go to Poland with me to bring humanitarian aid and pick up some refugees?” Thais was speaking to Sonsoles as they were leaving Mass on Sunday at the Shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe in Hondarribia, near San Sebastian in northern Spain. Her reply was almost immediate. “Yes, of course, I’m with you.” Thais, happy with her quick reply, said: “Good, but think about it and ask some sensible people about it first.”

By “sensible people” she meant the rest of the Numeraries and Numerary Assistants with whom Sonsoles lives in the Administration of Colegio Mayor Ayete. Thais has attended the means of Christian

formation there for years and takes part with her husband and children in the activities that the Oriaberri Association organizes for the education of children, catechism classes, volunteer work, etc.

Sonsoles, like the rest of the people in Oriaberri, had been considering what could be done to help all the people who, from one day to the next, had lost everything in Ukraine. And Thais was offering them the opportunity to do something very specific. So, forward!

Preparations

In those connected with Oriaberri, news quickly spread through social media and among families, friends and acquaintances that within a week some people were leaving for Poland to bring humanitarian aid and return with some refugees. Thais and her brother Iago both work in a large store in San Sebastian. Iago

created an Instagram account about preparations for the trip and items that were needed.

The next day packages began arriving at Thais' store from people she didn't even know: food, warm clothing, diapers, medicine... And the same happened in Oriaberri; items began to pile up and people offered to help in any way they could: to package the goods, to arrange a van for the trip, to open their homes to refugees, etc. Thais and Sonsoles were overwhelmed by the response they were receiving from so many people.

So many items were arriving that one van was not going to be enough to carry everything. So Thais' father Diego offered to get a second van and her brother Iago said he would go with his father, taking turns driving, while Thais and Sonsoles would drive the other van.

Andry and Galyna and Fr. Kristof

But where were they going to leave all those packages? And who were they going to bring back with them from Poland to San Sebastian? Thais is a good friend of Andry and Galyna, two Ukrainians who came to Spain ten years ago and who send their children to the same school her children go to. They had a friend who was trying to leave Ukraine with her children, and they wanted to welcome this family into their home. Through them they contacted other friends. And soon they started receiving calls from several associations that had found out they were going to Poland to pick up refugees, to see if they had space in the vans to carry more people.

The return passengers kept on changing throughout the week, because some had already found other means of transport or had

changed their mind, or even their destination. But others stayed firm. This was what finally convinced them to go: the fact there were specific people waiting for them in Poland who were trying to escape the horrors of war and begin a new life, although always hoping that the situation could improve and they would be able to return home to their family members who had stayed behind.

In addition, Thais knew a Polish priest, Fr. Kristof, who years before had been in Hondarribia as chaplain for a convent of Carmelites while he was writing his doctoral thesis. Now he lives in Katowice, a city east of Krakow, and provides assistance to Caritas there. The seminary and the archbishop's chancery have become reception centers for refugees. Hundreds of people were arriving each day after fleeing and had to decide what to do: go to another

country if they have family or friends there, find a place to live in Poland through Caritas or a family to take them in. Fr. Kristof was keeping them up to date on their needs and the refugees interested in going to San Sebastian.

From San Sebastian to Poland

Four days before leaving they still didn't have the vans since no one was willing to rent them out. The insurance companies raised difficulties and took no responsibility for the trip. But with the prayers of many people and the network of contacts set up, they finally were able to rent the vans for free.

Saturday in Oriaberri was a continuous coming and going of people who wanted to help. Boxes, bags, packages, food... Everything had to be labeled in three languages (Ukrainian, Polish, and Spanish) to make it easier to distribute the

material once there. On Sunday they finally departed for Poland, with 22 hours of driving ahead. But between calls, arrangements, songs, stops to eat, and times of prayer, the time flew by.

In Katowice

It never stopped raining during the trip, but when they reached Katowice the rain finally let up, which made it easier to unload the packages. People were waiting there to assist them, and they could see how everyone in Poland had opened their hearts to help the refugees.

They were impressed with the organization there and the quantity of containers with medicine, clothing, and humanitarian aid coming from every corner of the world. They also met the people in charge of Caritas, and visited the site where refugees could find shelter for longer or shorter stays.

The Ukrainian refugees

There they met the friend of Andry and Galyna and her children, and the rest of the refugees they were going to bring back. Iago and Diego had to drive to Krakow to pick up a group going back with them who hadn't been able to make it to Katowice. On the way back to San Sebastian they would also stop in Prague to pick up another refugee. But they still had two places open in the van. So they went back to Caritas to see if any recent arrivals were interested in traveling to San Sebastian.

There they met Irina, a retired doctor and widow, who had been saved by her son from the fire caused by the explosion of a bomb in her building. She escaped with only what she was wearing and arrived exhausted in Katowice. The wounds and burns caused by the explosion were easy to see. Although grateful for being alive,

she was saddened by the thought of her children left behind, who hadn't wanted to leave Ukraine.

On seeing the smiles on the faces of the people they were bringing with them, Irina asked Fr. Kristof if she could join them. Sonsoles and Thais realized they would have to take special care of her, since she was alone and had to rebuild her life. The rest of the refugees had relatives or friends waiting for them in Spain. So they called a supernumerary in San Sebastian, who offered to welcome Irina into her home. Now assured of a place to live. Irina joined the group and later turned out to be the most cheerful person on the return trip and the one most concerned about the other refugees.

Back in San Sebastian

On Thursday afternoon the two vans reached San Sebastian. Now, as Sonsoles and Thais recount, the hard

part began: to help the refugees integrate into a totally different culture and city, teach them the language, carry out all the bureaucratic arrangements and paperwork, help them find work or return to their studies in the case of adolescent children, and accompany them closely so that their new situation would be more bearable.

In Oriaberri, a “little market” with clothing and toilet articles was provided for the refugees free of charge. People there are channeling financial help for the new arrivals, and organizing meetings for the refugees to get to know one another and share experiences. They are also looking for families willing to take in some of the refugees who continue to arrive each day in the Caritas center in Katowice. And they haven’t rejected the idea of returning to Poland if the situation requires it,

now that they have the experience of their successful trip.

Thais and Sonsoles speak in more detail about their trip to Poland and back in the video below (in Spanish):

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