

WORK IN CRISIS

— Tony O’Riordan SJ

Thank you for inviting me to IJI’s 80th birthday celebrations. It’s truly a joy to celebrate this milestone and reflect on the incredible journey of IJI. Recently, I discovered that another beloved institution is also celebrating 80 years this year—Thomas the Tank Engine. Like IJI, *Thomas the Tank* turns 80 in 2025. From his humble beginnings as a railway-themed children’s book, Thomas has become a global sensation on TV, teaching generations of children valuable lessons about friendship, responsibility, morality, perseverance, and resilience. He continues to captivate young minds, evolving through animation and social media to embark on new adventures.

What I find most enchanting about the story of *Thomas the Tank Engine* isn’t its corporate success or its dominance in the toy and merchandise markets. Rather, it’s the heartwarming origin story. It all began with a father caring for his sick son, who was bedridden with measles. To comfort his child, the father and son imagined an animated railway engine, creating this wonderful story long before it became marketable or monetised. It was a beautiful moment of a father’s love and a child’s imagination coming together.



Bio: Tony O’Riordan SJ is a Jesuit from the Irish Province. From 2018 to 2024, he was part of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) teams in South Sudan and Syria. In South Sudan, Tony served as Project Director in Maban, one of the world’s most remote refugee camps, hosting 200,000 refugees from the Blue Nile region of Sudan. He also held the position of JRS Country Director in Syria, where he was present during the devastating earthquakes of February 2023. Both roles were with one of IJI’s main partner organizations. Tony continues his work with JRS Ireland, accompanying those seeking international protection in Ireland. He is a member of the Iona Jesuit Community in Portadown, Co Armagh.

The way we tell stories matters. If I were to recount the story of *Thomas the Tank Engine* by presenting spreadsheets of toy and merchandise sales, it would steer your imagination and emotions in a particular direction. However, when I share the story of a father's resourceful imagination in caring for his sick child, it evokes a different set of emotions and sparks your imagination in a unique way. Similarly, in our missionary and humanitarian work, our storytelling can quickly shift to metrics, figures, logical frameworks, and key performance targets. While insights and tools from the corporate world have their place, we must be mindful of when we are telling our story through those corporate lenses. The beauty

and challenges of human interactions, which are integral to the motivation and daily reality of missionary and humanitarian endeavours, can easily be overshadowed by more corporate language and imagination.

Currently, I'm part of a team of 12 at Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Ireland. Though JRS is still in its 40s, making it a junior sibling to IJI, it has a significant impact, in part due to its partnership with IJI. JRS Ireland seeks to accompany, serve, and advocate for over 33,000 children, women, and men who have come to Ireland seeking international protection, living in over 330 centres across the country.



Tony O'Riordan SJ, JRS Ireland and Emer Kerrigan, IJI Deputy Director

One of the young people I accompany in my work with JRS Ireland is a young man from Syria. He came as an unaccompanied minor, and we have formed a bond. Now over 18, he lives in adult accommodation, attends secondary school, and works hard despite his limited English, often relying on Google Translate in his classes. Like many teenagers, he is concerned about fitting in with his peers. He is particularly self-conscious about his teeth, which he feels need braces—a treatment he cannot afford.

Living on a weekly social welfare payment of €38.50 for personal items, he finds it challenging to keep up with his peers, especially when it comes to clothing. While his accommodation and food are covered, €38.50 is not much for an 18-year-old. Understanding his situation, I applied to the hardship fund of JRS Ireland and secured a €120 voucher for him. We went to the shopping centre, and I handed him the voucher, telling him he could spend it as he wished. To my surprise, he wanted to use some of it to treat me to food. His generosity was touching, especially given his circumstances.

This experience highlights the often-overlooked human side of migration. Public debates on migration frequently focus on numbers, costs, and slogans like “Ireland is full,” which dehumanise the individuals involved. These discussions miss the essential qualities of human dignity, worth, and the potential contributions of asylum seekers. The young

man I work with exemplifies generosity, moral character, and creativity—traits that enrich our society.

Focusing on human stories and interactions changes the narrative. When I share this story, it shifts the conversation from numbers and problems to the human dimension. Asylum seekers and refugees have immense potential to contribute positively to our communities. Instead of seeing Ireland as “full,” we should recognise how it is expanding in wonderful ways through the inclusion of diverse and talented individuals.

When it comes to sharing my stories from my time with JRS in Syria and South Sudan, I could tell you about the number of schools we built, the teachers we trained, and the targets we achieved. **But what truly stands out for me are the extraordinary ways in which ordinary people live their lives and the mutual enrichment that occurs when JRS and these communities encounter each other.**

I think of Miriam, our neighbour in the compound in Maban. Separated by a chicken wire fence, we could hear everything that happened in her crowded home, filled with children, pigs, and chickens. Miriam lived on a meagre income from JRS and tried to raise eight children. Despite the occasional boundary issues, we held her in high regard.



Fr Tony O'Riordan SJ stands among the rubble left by the 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck Syria in February 2023, affecting tens of thousands of people in Homs, Al-Kafroun, Damascus, and Aleppo. In response, IJI's earthquake appeal delivered emergency aid and protection to thousands of families impacted by the disaster.

When Miriam's female cousin died, leaving six children, Miriam didn't hesitate to take them in. She could have found excuses to pass the responsibility to someone else, but for her, welcoming the orphans came first. [This extraordinary self-giving and open-heartedness was typical of the culture in South Sudan.](#) I often wondered who was evangelizing whom, as I had much to learn from these people. It was a two-way street, sometimes straightforward and beautiful, other times difficult and messy, but always rooted in human connection.

In Syria, I witnessed something similar. After the devastating earthquake in February 2023, which killed over 60,000 people, including 5,000 in Syria, the JRS team in Aleppo was deeply affected. Despite being displaced and having their homes damaged, their overwhelming impulse was to help those in greater need.

[One key member of our response team was Shafi. Although he had a Canadian passport and could have easily left Syria, he chose to stay and support his people through the crisis. His commitment was inspiring.](#)

Miriam and Shafi are central to my memories of South Sudan and Syria. They, along with many others, turned the tables on my role as a missionary and humanitarian. They witnessed to me, accompanied me, and made me a better person and missionary. While I hope I contributed to their growth, I know I returned enriched and perhaps a better human being and disciple.

When sharing the story of missionary movements, it's crucial to emphasise that IJI and similar organizations don't go as mere givers to passive recipients. We go to engage with people who are already valuable resources. While they often live in situations that threaten their existence and potential, we must approach them with openness to encounter and transformation, just as we aim to be changemakers in distant places. All good Christian missionaries and organizations should be receptive to the profound changes that come from interacting with people who live, love, and strive amid poverty, war, and displacement.

The final document of the Synod on Synodality reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist. At the beginning of my remarks, I mentioned the story of Thomas the Tank Engine, born from a father's loving care for his sick son. This image is worth reinforcing as it parallels the essence of missionary and humanitarian work. When we engage in these activities and when we tell our stories, it is good that we envision a caring God

tenderly watching over His suffering children. This God longs for just and right relationships among the human family, freeing millions from suffering.

Missionary activity from the wealthy Global North serves dual purposes: alleviating suffering and fostering conditions for human flourishing, while also challenging us to break free from our consumption-driven lifestyles that perpetuate global injustice. By focusing on and inviting others to recognise the presence and work of the loving Father, Son, and Spirit, who both send us on mission and send mission to us, we can contribute to the urgent transformation of hearts, minds, and wills needed in our time.

Happy Birthday IJI, may we continue to grow in God's love, wisdom and openness to encounter.