

This Our Exile, by James Martin, S.J.

reviewed by [Jonathan Frerichs](#) in the [June 30, 1999](#) issue

This Our Exile: A Spiritual Journey with the Refugees of East Africa.

By James Martin, S.J. Orbis, 205 pp.

The images of Kosovo's Albanian refugees now before our eyes make this book about other, all-but-invisible refugees especially timely. As part of his training to become a Jesuit priest, James Martin spent two years with the Jesuit Refugee Service in Kenya, working with the people of East Africa who were driven from their homes some time ago. Martin encountered people of extraordinary tenacity, unexpected hope and a compelling witness. His book deals with the essence of exile—theirs total and, if we accept Martin's analysis, ours spiritual.

Martin has an eye for the improbable. In the refugee backwaters of Nairobi, New Testament "foolishness" abounds. Firsts become lasts and lasts are first.

The first idols to fall are success, performance and the notion that time is money. Refugees teach the author to value friendship, acceptance and sharing. An American with a business background, Martin must face the fact that his refugee self-help projects fail fully half the time. As an aspiring priest, he meets a veteran priest who concludes that his life's work in Rwanda has been a waste of time because of the genocide in that country. Yet Martin sees mustard seeds growing into trees. He is sure that in Africa he has met God. His book makes us ponder one of the greatest of all foolishnesses—the assertion in Luke's Gospel that the poor are in fact blessed.

Martin's sustained and soul-searching effort to bridge the gap that separated him from his African neighbors will resonate with many who have lived as expatriates and, like him, held the lion's share of earthly power in their relationships with local people. He lives in a way that forces him to face the world on their terms. He discovers that half the battle—for anyone from the busy, rich "First World"—is simply to give them his time. That wholehearted giving further shapes his calling and his life. Martin's approach usefully redefines the word "missionary." He says he did not go overseas to bring God to another people. He went to find God among the people he joined there. And he not only found God, but is now in a position to bring God

back to us.

I read Martin's book on my way to the Kosovo refugee camps in Macedonia. Perhaps jet lag was the culprit, but the book did seem too long—not for the message it carried but for the limited evidence it presents. It is also episodic in parts, and packed with stories. Martin's forbearance toward refugees and his host continent seemed to inoculate him from attempting even a passing political analysis—for example, of the Rwanda genocide that occurred next door while he was in Kenya. Pondering that holocaust in his keen heart might have deepened his analysis. But he takes his time for people on paper the way he took time for them when he was with them. He demonstrates that we have more to receive from Africans than we have to give to Africa.