

Parishes in Solidarity with Refugees

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions held its annual General Assembly and International Workshop in Denmark and Sweden from 25 to 28 September 2015. The theme was 'European models of living together', looking at responses to migration and the integration of immigrants and refugees, with a particular focus on responses to the current refugee crisis. The experience of participants highlighted the vital role of churches and faith based organisations in creating welcoming societies. The moral leadership of Pope Francis was welcomed by representatives of non-Christian faiths, who appreciated his unifying vision, with its emphasis on the rights and dignity of every human person.

Pope Francis challenges the 'globalisation of indifference' with an appeal to fraternity, calling us to see all those who suffer as our brothers and sisters. Faced with an overwhelming global crisis, he brings the focus back to real connections at local level to show what can be achieved with generosity of spirit. In this way he reminds us not to underestimate the leadership potential of our own parish community. The response to his appeal from parishes across Europe has sent a strong message to governments about our commitment to the common good and our solidarity with the most vulnerable.

Last June the European Union marked the 30th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement for borderless travel between participating EU states – a significant milestone for integration. Now border controls are being reintroduced in some areas, while fences are being erected along some European borders. The vision of the European Union – rooted in the Christian faith of many of the founding fathers – is one of integration and collaboration to promote peace and wellbeing across member states. Today that vision is under threat. As citizens we have a responsibility to ensure that our political structures reflect our values. Catholic Social Teaching has an



important contribution to make to the task of shaping a society that is more welcoming, more inclusive and more caring: 'Concern for refugees must lead us to reaffirm and highlight universally recognised human rights, and to ask that the effective recognition of these rights be guaranteed to refugees' (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, No. 505).

The Irish bishops, addressing the refugee crisis at their Autumn General Meeting, praised the leadership of faith-based organisations, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul and Trócaire, in setting an example of Christian outreach. This is Catholic Social Teaching in action. Another example is the way in which volunteers in parishes have been mobilising to offer skills and other resources to support the integration of refugees. These include parish friendship and welcome schemes, English language classes, trauma counselling and medical services, and legal advice services. Bishops emphasised that there are many people seeking asylum who are already here and in need of a range of supports; many have been waiting for over five years to have their asylum application processed, with very little to live on in the meantime, supported by organisations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service. It is important to begin by asking whether there are any refugees already living in our community and reflect with them on how successful their experience of integration has been to date. Are there

obstacles to integration that we could help to address? What training might be available to assist us in making our local communities more inclusive?

Spiritual solidarity with the plight of refugees is another important contribution we can make. During a meeting with the Irish bishops in June 2015 the Archbishop of Mosul in Iraq stated that the prayers of their fellow Christians meant a great deal to his refugee community as they faced a frightening and uncertain future. As we approach the season of Advent, we are reminded that the plight of refugees has particular resonance for Christians. As we reflect on the journey of the Holy Family we keep in mind all those families in need of welcome and protection.

A Prayer for Refugees

Almighty and merciful God,
Whose Son became a refugee
And had no place to call his own;
Look with mercy on those who today
Are fleeing from danger,
Homeless and hungry.
Bless those who work to bring them relief;
Inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts;
And guide the nations of Europe towards that day
When all will rejoice in your Kingdom of justice and peace.
We make our prayer through Christ our Lord, Amen.