

Bishop McAleenan's Address to the London Churches Refugee Fund 'Love the Stranger' event

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to join you this evening and for all you do for refugees and asylum seekers. The London Churches Refugee Fund is very aware of the plight of refugees, dedicated as you are to alleviating their hardships.

You may also be aware that I was not the original choice to address you this evening. That honour was for the former Papal Nuncio, the Pope's Ambassador to Great Britain, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti. He received another appointment and now resides in Rome.

While here, he asked me to arrange a visit for him to Napier Barracks in Folkestone. Part of the day's programme included a gathering with those who were housed there so the Nuncio could meet them collectively. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from several different countries who made their way here by various means were all assembled. Archbishop Gugerotti addressed them asking an open question, 'what do you want, what would you like for yourselves'.

All the non-refugees present suspected the answer would be, 'I want to be free to work, I want to earn some money'. Instead there was silence – no answer. So the Archbishop repeated the question. A young man put his hand up and said, 'I would like to see my mother'. There was total silence. You could see that everyone was sitting with their own thoughts.

I spoke to that person afterwards. He was from Iran. He described his journey, first across the Mediterranean, then through Europe and eventually across the Channel. He had lost everything – if he ever had anything. Whatever material possessions he had were gone. But as you can see from the answer he gave, he had not lost what is truly important. In the different experiences I have been privileged to have had with refugees and asylum seekers, the most attractive and captivating aspect is the manifestation of their humanity.

THE ENCOUNTER

In the encyclical '*Fratelli Tutti*', Pope Francis speaks about what he calls 'The Encounter'. He encourages engagement with all in need and to have faith in the common humanity which lies behind any obvious divisions. The encounter reveals, among other things, though migrants and refugees are from other cultures, with different life experiences and have lost all that is important, they still possess all the human qualities that are integral to the person – free will, understanding, emotions.

However, as has been observed by those who encounter them, that is 'encounter' in the full sense of the word, the common experience of many migrants and refugees is one of meaning nothing to anyone, or else they are treated with suspicion, presented with insurmountable obstacles.

No one will openly deny, as *Fratelli Tutti* says, that migrants and refugees are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we believe they are less worthy, less important. When that happens we can say that a superficial meeting has taken place but not what we call 'The Encounter'.

Occasionally I get correspondence from people, who I am sure are very good and upright, who are clearly opposed to welcoming migrants and refugees. Those coming, they tell me, are criminals and are a danger to society. The first thing I can see is that 'The Encounter' has not taken place.

In the face of opposition from government, and some of the populace, some things are essential; The **truth** of the situation, that is the reality of the afflictions of refugees and asylum seekers; the need for **advocacy** on behalf of those who are suffering these afflictions; **practical support** (which can take many forms) is required and, fundamentally, the **basis of our position** – why we advocate, why we support.

IMAGO DEI

Immigration systems divide people into categories attaching different rights to each category according to their legal status. Public policy concerning migrants is consistently changing; in the last three years we have seen:

1. The end of free movement from EU countries;
2. The Rwanda plan;
3. The Illegal Migration Bill;
4. The Hong Kong BNO visa scheme, and
5. Homes for Ukraine.

All of these are unprecedented developments.

Christian faith, on the other hand, places an emphasis on the equal human dignity of everyone whatever their origin, *not* depending on whether that person is a citizen, a migrant, a refugee or an asylum seeker. Our starting point is the innate dignity of each person created in the image and likeness of God. Everyone is unique and each has infinite worth and value therefore supporting the cause of migrants and refugees is integral to our faith.

The sources of their present condition is well known – war, persecution, economics, the climate emergency. Our objection is that their poverty and vulnerability is perpetuated and reinforced through the reception they receive including threatened or existing legislation.

Asylum seekers have had to abandon things that one has the right to expect – stability and security, homeland, family, familiar customs – and they are met with rejection. Not surprisingly there are consequences which impact on their mental and physical health.

In that situation, faith comes before what is politically expedient. Christian faith demands that we respond generously to asylum seekers whose dignity must be protected and upheld. Going to the aid of migrants, refugees, displaced people, asylum seekers is not simply almsgiving or an act of kindness but an act of justice. Our solidarity with them comes from this basic belief that we have a duty to share common resources. For the Christian, supporting refugees and asylum seekers is not a hobby or a niche interest.

The purpose of the law is to uphold justice and mercy. When the effect of law compounds trauma and increases the suffering, justice and mercy are not being served. The theological approach keeps the human issue at the centre.

Regardless of citizenship, visa status or even how they arrived among us, human dignity and human rights must be honoured. It is always human dignity which takes priority, not what some choose to call 'the national interest'. Though actually using those words is a misinterpretation as the national interest is often served by the presence of migrants.

In Isaiah, a verse describing the manner of the Redeemer in his pursuit of justice says of him, 'He does not break the crushed reed nor quench the wavering flame'. If someone has fled their homeland, crossed a desert and a sea, negotiated countless obstacles, struggled to find food for themselves and their family and is then detained, denied the right to work and threatened with deportation, is it likely that the flame of hope which they managed to keep alive is going to be extinguished.

One of the most important things charities, agencies and communities can do is to accompany – to give hope. The dignity of a person is so sacrosanct it needs to be protected and promoted; it involves relationship. Therefore, even though we may never have met a particular person, not had that 'encounter' which I spoke about earlier, we can still advocate on behalf of migrants and refugees – we can still oppose laws and attitudes which deny dignity.

That, too, is a statement that we believe we are brothers and sisters. So what do we do? The value we attach to each person and the show of compassion they need to thrive demands that we welcome asylum seekers, treating them justly and honouring their dignity as human persons. The plan to deport to Rwanda, for example, does not achieve that. The scheme is presented as being humanitarian, the reality is different. It will increase the difficulties of those hoping for a new beginning while doing nothing to address the factors which we cannot ignore if we are to build a global family.

In his 2020 *World Day of Migrants and Refugees* message, Pope Francis writes that the task of receiving communities is to enable migrants and refugees 'to be agents of their own redemption'. The same could be said of other groups as well. In other words, our task is to empower them to give them opportunities to grow, to forge their future by making their own decisions. Enabling is vital work.

LOCAL RESPONSES

Applying the principles of the Bishops' Conference document *Love the Stranger* does not only rest with the government. We must engage with policy makers, that is essential and cannot be neglected. Though we *all* have responsibility.

As we witnessed during the Pandemic and during the Vaccination programme, the Church and its partners are uniquely placed to make a difference. Many British people have given witness to justice through hospitality, providing a compassionate welcome, and campaigning on behalf of refugees. It is impressive the number of charities and agencies that are involved in providing welcome and support.

I am aware of a project in Hertfordshire where a hotel houses 150 refugees. Another example of the importance of 'The Encounter'. Volunteers from local churches working ecumenically began providing English Language conversation classes. The scheme developed. To enable the refugees to be independently mobile and not to use the small amount of money they receive each week, an appeal was made for bicycles in the local area. They were given 55 bikes. An account was then opened at a bicycle repair shop where punctures could be repaired. A church arranged a barbeque to which all local refugees were invited. It was like the Gospel parable, go out to the highways and byways and invite all you can to the banquet. They responded.

The attitude of many towards migrants and refugees is very much at odds with the government's approach.

SOLIDARITY

There was once flourishing Christian communities in Iraq and Syria. Many were forced to flee their homelands and are now in Germany, the United States and Canada.

In 2018, I went to visit the reconstruction project close to the Nineveh Plains. It is being led by the Church. Homes that were destroyed by ISIS are being rebuilt by the Church. The Chaldean Church has so far built a library, a state of the art hospital and a university. It is the Church that is attempting to attract investment to the area to bring employment and to discourage young people from emigrating. It is projects such as this which should be supported. Yet we never hear of such efforts. I met some young people there who told me that they had no intention of migrating, they were content.

Everyone has the right to migrate to seek fulfilment and security – economic and physical – for themselves and their families. Included in the inviolable dignity of every person, which is often overlooked, is the right *not* to migrate.

I stayed one night in a Syriac Orthodox monastery about 20 kilometres from Mosul, Iraq, which overlooked the majesty of the Nineveh plains. I believe that if one's basic needs were supplied no one would ever want to leave, such a magnificent sight it is. Ukrainians who have fled the war in their homeland tell me that it is their intention is to go home when hostilities cease. Outreach and concern for all need in need no matter where they are is our mandate.

Borders, we have to remember, are not for the exclusion of people, they are for the protection of people. A community must be protected, their welfare must be safeguarded, but borders are not for the exclusion of people who are seeking the protection we *all* want.

Nowadays, it seems we begin with sealed borders and facilitate immigration when we require doctors, nurses, engineers, seasonal workers and reject those who are forcibly displaced and do not

migrate through accepted channels. Yet it could be argued their need is greater. A government can regulate and initiate policy, but it must include a concern for the humanity of each person. Solidarity with those countries witnessing the departure of their compatriots is an essential component of the equation when speaking of migrants and refugees.

To understand fully why people come to ask for asylum in this country we need to be aware of the factors which initiated their movement. As long ago as 1891, it was written 'no one would exchange their own country for a foreign land if their own afforded them the means of a decent and happy life'. Migration is not a new phenomenon.

As well as understanding the reasons, there is a need to assist countries from which migrants and refugees leave. Pope Francis speaks of 'Globalised Indifference', we advance solidarity as a necessary alternative. Nations need to support each other through solidarity and cooperation in order to avert, if possible at an early stage, the flight of refugees as a result of poverty and persecution.

There is a principle known as 'The Universal Destination of Goods'. The application of this principle demands that the goods of the earth are to be shared for everyone's benefit. And to be clear this does not interfere with the right to private ownership and private property, simply the earth, its resources, the fruit of human labour is for the Common Good as well as individual needs and rights.

Sovereign nations have a right to control their borders but it is not an absolute right. They also have an obligation to bring about the Universal Common Good, an element of that is seeking to accommodate migration to the greatest extent possible.

I find it remarkable and humbling how, in the midst of suffering, the faith of refugees in God and his goodness remain strong. I remember meeting a refugee from Mali who began or ended all he said with the words inshallah, which as you probably know means, *If God wishes*. God has made a wish that we assist our brothers and sisters in need and oppose all that would deny them that assistance.

PRINCIPLES

How do we do that as a nation? How do we today observe the principle of everyone's equal dignity? I suggest that those seeking refuge in the UK should be provided with three things.

1. Safe routes for travelling;
2. The opportunity to tell their story and be listened to;
3. Just and rapid procedures to determine each person's claim for protection must be implemented and have their cases assessed.

When an asylum seeker's case is presented, it is important that their claim is treated justly and as quickly as possible. What is needed is an asylum determination system that hears their story and strives to offer them protection, an asylum system that allows them to flourish and rebuild their lives. Even when a person enters a country without permission they should be treated with respect and dignity, not detained in unsuitable conditions or abused in any manner. It is necessary that they afforded due process of the law and allowed to articulate a fear of return to their homeland before

someone who is qualified to judge. Asylum seekers should not be blamed for any social ills the country they enter are experiencing.

Everyone agrees that asylum seekers are not commodities for traffickers to profit from. Neither are they to be seen as a problem to be rejected or deported. To banish them for seeking protection is wrong. It seems that the system is more concerned with refusing asylum claims rather than ensuring that people in need of sanctuary are offered protection and given a chance of a new start.

Guided by our belief in the dignity of each person, we should ask overarching questions such as:

Is the right to migrate being upheld?
Is the Common Good being properly considered?

And specific questions, like:

Is family reunification being facilitated?
Are our obligations under the Refugee Convention being honoured?
Are unacceptable practices like detention and arbitrary removal being avoided?

Taking this approach, we can identify policies that are broadly deserving of support, for example, the Hong Kong Visa Scheme and those which are incompatible with what we believe such as the Rwanda Plan.

CONCLUSION

Jesus himself was a refugee who, along with Mary and Joseph, fled the terror of Herod into Egypt. In His public ministry, Jesus was itinerant, moving from place to place, 'with no place to lay His head...' In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs us to welcome the stranger: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me.' As we welcome the stranger into our midst, we welcome Christ Himself, for in the face of the migrant, immigrant, and refugee, we see the face of Christ.

Our appeal for refugees and asylum seekers to be welcomed and respected is based on the fundamental principle of the dignity of every person, created in the image and likeness of God. Irrespective of their legal status, human dignity must be upheld, protected and nurtured. Structures for refugees and asylum seekers need to be created. Drawing on these principles and remembering the experiences of asylum seekers, we need an asylum system which is designed for the welfare of refugees and not for their harm.

When an immigrant arrives in another country, and this is true whether one comes in what is regarded as an 'approved' way or comes undocumented, you do not leave everything behind. By necessity you carry with you all that that you are, including your fears, traumas and painful experiences. In some communities of migrants and refugees there is a lack of trust of authority. Many come from war-torn countries where they have been subjected to police brutality. That lack of trust of the system, and of police, means that they may not report crime, cannot be protected. Others are isolated and fearful to ask for expert advice.

Our topic is not just academic, it is real. The reality impinges on the everyday lives of migrants and refugees, those in most need of support can be put beyond reach through policy. Therefore, we need a system which is transparent and allows asylum seekers to be seen and heard. A system which allows claimants to engage and participate fully in society in all the ways we take for granted. And we need to foster a society that welcomes, protects, promotes, and integrates those in need.

The plight of migrants has been described as a great wound that cries to heaven. Note it is not migration itself which is a wound, certainly not, it brings benefits to both the migrant and the host community.

It is the plight and suffering of those who are forced to be on the move that is the wound. The wound is not going to be healed by raising barriers, fermenting fear or denying assistance to those who legitimately aspire towards a better life.

So the work of London Churches Refugee Fund, and all who support its ideals, must continue.