



FR ALAN HILLIARD, a member of the Irish Episcopal Commission for Migrants, comments on Direct Provision in Ireland, noting that last September the government announced a commitment to a new Community Sponsorship Programme.

DIRECT PROVISION



I'll never forget the first day in my new appointment as priest of the Dublin Archdiocese. The parish priest brought me to see my new accommodation. He waved his hand and said, 'this is it'. I looked around and asked quite innocently, 'where do I cook my meals?' as I eyed a rather worn toaster and kettle in the corner. He waved the other hand and said, 'I don't know' and deftly left the house! Fortunately, I benefited from the kindness of a local convent where I celebrated daily Mass and received a sumptuous dinner every day. I began to realise that I was facing a long term situation whereby I might

not be able to look after myself as I didn't have the resources to cook. In a sense I was experiencing a form of direct provision that while feeding me, was ultimately disempowering me.

Similarly, the approach of Ireland to refugees and asylum seekers has been one of direct disempowerment though it carries the title of 'Direct Provision'. The report of the Department of Justice and Equality into young people in Direct Provision, known as *The McMahon Report*, went some way to addressing these issues. However, it must be said that our approach to this is lacking when

compared to other jurisdictions. The policy adopted by Ireland runs risks for the future, as disempowerment in any guise is not good for social cohesion and the development of a nation.

The World Day for Migrants and Refugees (14 January) has received greater prominence during the reign of Pope Francis. Underlining the urgency of the situation for displaced people and the largely lethargic response of the Churches of the developed world, including Ireland, Pope Francis' letter for 2018 focuses on verbs not nouns. He asks us, referring to his own address to the international forum on migration and peace, *'to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate'*. The Pope's letter challenges us to reconsider our lacklustre responses.

Ireland chooses to place people in a restricted environment, governing every aspect of life. There is the beginning of a thaw on this policy. Canada, for example, sponsors close to fifty per cent of those who are granted asylum and refugee status through private sponsorship schemes. This has many benefits. I have read reports showing how the support granted by local communities and specifically by the families

that are involved in the private sponsorship scheme helps overcome racism and prejudice.

The project of welcome has largely revealed the insularity of the Irish Church. There have been some wonderful local initiatives but little welcome when we compare the plan of our national Churches to that of other Churches worldwide. We should have an informed vision of a welcoming Church and be actively involved in the sponsorship of refugees and asylum seekers. While we have rightly condemned the limits of Direct Provision and have called for change, we now have an opportunity to cultivate and create a culture of change via the community initiative.

The verbs put before us this year for World Day for Migrants and Refugees challenge our nebulous nouns and seek to propel us to action. *To welcome, to protect, to proclaim and to integrate* provides a framework for a more holistic plan of engagement and evangelisation. We have been very quick to establish and build a hospitality network for those visiting for the World Meeting of Families, and yet we have done little for those fleeing persecution, torture and death. ❤️

