

Happy Christmas for Migrants?

Pope Francis will inaugurate the Jubilee in December. Fr Brian Grogan SJ's six-part series on the Pope's letter begins in this issue.

What does Christmas mean for the many thousands of migrants who are now living in Ireland? The feast itself is meant to be a time of joy for everyone, but the gospel of the day carries the shocking statement that when Jesus, the Son of God, came into our world he endured migrant status: he was not wanted; he was rejected! 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him' (Jn 1:11). He acknowledges that he 'has nowhere to lay his head' (Lk 8:58). He is buried in a stranger's tomb. He readily identifies with migrants.

This forces us to ask what hospitality migrants can hope for from us who have such a long Christian heritage.

'What you did to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did to me' (Mt 25:40). The

History is now challenging us to reciprocate the hospitality given to our forebears nearly two hundred years ago: to do for others what was done for us in our need. Many who arrive here are fleeing violence and hunger.

Irish memorials to the famine of the 1840s remind us not to forget what our ancestors suffered then: a million died, a million emigrated. Most of we Irish can claim relatives abroad whose ancestors had to emigrate – to the USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. Thankfully many found new hope and life, but only because they were given hospitality. One example: the Choctaw Indians had been forced to migrate in 1833, 'a trail of tears and death', but in 1847 they sent a donation here to support our famine victims. A memorial, 'Kindred Spirits' has been set up in Midleton to acknowledge this sacred bond.

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As Christians we recognise that the holy family of Mary, Joseph and their baby suddenly became refugees when they had to flee to Egypt with their scant possessions, thus refugee status becomes sacred because the Son of God himself took it on: the face of a migrant is the face of Christ.

Pope Francis often reminds us of his own origins: 'I too am a child of migrants,' he said, 'who set out in



Migrants walk towards Turkey's Pazarkule border in March 2020

search of a better future. The Church, like Veronica, must lovingly offer hope to those on the Way of the Cross of migration. Migrants represent the suffering body of Christ.' St Paul reminds us too that we are all migrants on this earth: 'our citizenship is in heaven' (Phil 3:20). Migrants, then, are a contemporary icon of the Church. They remind us that in these vulnerable brothers and sisters we can encounter the Lord who asks for hospitality on the way.

There are many unnamed Veronicas – and Josephs of Arimathea – in the cities, towns and villages of Ireland who offer wonderful hospitality and charity to migrants, though we rarely hear their stories. Like Jesus we may experience criticism and hostility in welcoming these needy strangers, but our faith, hope and love keep us

going, as does our culture of hospitality and our memory that we too were once dependent on the hospitality of others. The Church is to be a sanctuary, a place of welcome and safety, which promotes mutual understanding between potential hosts and refugees. Through a smile, a kind word, a handshake, we can acknowledge their inalienable dignity as humans. Migrants are pilgrims of hope: will one of them find that hope fulfilled in me? Today the wounded traveller in the Good Samaritan story represents the migrant. Can we be brave and generous neighbours by reaching out to help such stranded travellers this Christmas?

The articles emerge from an Ignatian Retreat held in Knock in the summer of 2024