

Some feedback from our 2016 Autumn Conference

Introduction

The words of the nineteenth-century foundress of the Holy Faith Order, exhorting her followers to put their ‘shoulders to the wheel’, heralded the opening of a stimulating conference entitled ‘The Gift and Challenge of the Migrant and Refugee to the Soul of Ireland’ in the eponymously-named Margaret Aylward Centre in Glasnevin on 22 October 2016. Her blessing was invoked in a ‘Gathering Ritual’ at the outset of the conference as the assembled attendees acknowledged that migration, and the plight of individuals and families affected by it, are critical contemporary ethical issues in Europe. The theme of hospitality to ‘strangers’ and tolerance of unique cultures, traditions and belief systems dominated the reflective opening ceremony. Invited guests or ‘story-tellers’ from a multiplicity of different countries placed symbols pertaining to their journey to Ireland in an open space. A protective circle of unity was formed around the guests in an effort to reach across the divide of diversity and fear, and build relationships rooted in shared humanity.

Keynote Speaker

A conceptual framework on the theme of migration was provided by the academic, Dr Anna Rowlands, of the Department of Theology and Ethics in the University of Durham. Whilst the issues of extensive migration to Europe are addressed daily through multimedia, Dr Rowlands’s research highlights two primary shifts in the treatment of the refugee and asylum-seeker in Europe. She posited that the exercise of state sovereignty towards forced migrants is predicated on an ‘enforcement model’ in recent years. The evolution of this model, which involves cruel and draconian powers of detention and forced expulsion by the state, including deportation, is a serious cause for concern. Furthermore, recent legislative powers minimising access by migrants to proper forms of welfare and the law have seriously compromised individual human dignity and the likelihood of proper political protection. A disturbing feature of this attempt to manage the migrant flows is the evolution of detention centres, many of which are operated by private profit-making agencies. The growth of such coercive enterprises has provided a significant challenge for faith-based organisations, who now struggle to offer ‘hospitality’ to migrants, the 700,000 displaced who arrived in Europe, by sea, last year.

In responding to the needs of migrants, faith-based organisations as diverse as Islamic Relief, Roman Catholic congregations and Methodist communities have noted and recognised that religious belief plays a spiritual and psychological role in the lives of migrants. It provides ‘a source of comfort, identity, hope, resistance and challenge at a time when much is in flux’. Religious narratives and heritage are crucial to people displaced and on the move. Dr Rowlands witnessed this first hand in her

work with detainees at the centre in Calais. A temporary edifice or church built by Ethiopians and Eritreans housed iconic religious art-work, including a moving image of Christ knocking on the door of the soul. Another more disturbing image from Revelations depicted the conflict between good and evil, justice and the sword.

Dr Rowlands's considered theological reflection on historic migration both in the Old and New Testaments provides an interesting backdrop for consideration of how faith-based organisations might move forward in support of migrants. Pilgrims on the move through history, she suggests, are at the heart of Christian self-understanding. Muslims, she argues, also re-enact their faith annually through pilgrimage to Mecca. While neither Christian nor Muslim necessarily share a common foundation, both traditions experienced exiles and displacement and both teach practices of mercy and hospitality towards the stranger. There is an urgent need for ongoing inter-faith conversations with religious communities in order that they can engage meaningfully with the public, policy-makers and politicians in relation to the plight of the migrant. The movement of people across the globe requires re-imagining a response to migration, one that will best come from a plurality of traditions which uphold 'a different, more complex and vibrant view of what it means to be human'.

Response

The response of Pablo Rojas Coppari of Migrants Rights Centre Ireland, to Dr Rowlands's erudite presentation gave credence to a number of issues raised in relation to the lived experience of migrants to Ireland. The sustained large movements of migrants into Ireland in the past twenty years has created a multi-cultural society with migrants forming 12.5% of the current population. He argued cogently that they have enhanced the economy, enriched society and helped create multiple identities in a country that clings limpet-like to its 'nationality'. The rise, however, of 'unwelcome rhetoric' relating to migrants is a serious source of concern as is the official commitment to re-settle only 6,000 people from the vast human tide in Europe. This compares very unfavourably with the Netherlands, which have offered shelter to a cohort of 60,000 people.

Mr Coppari, in his advocacy of migrants to Ireland, eschewed the notion of a need for categorisation of refugees and addressed clearly the need for rights of all migrants to be enshrined in law. The existence of Direct Provision Centres acts as an obstacle to social justice and create extreme marginalisation. Migrants placed in such surroundings are precluded actively from integration into society, can become isolated and in many instances experience serious mental health issues. His insights into the impact on family life and the lives of children were both moving and thought-provoking. He believes that education of the next generation is proving to be 'a powerful tool' in providing a counter-balance to poverty and discrimination for many migrant families.

Dialogues

A number of 'story-tellers' gave testimony to many of the issues raised by Mr Coppari, as they shared their narratives in 'conversation circles' or small groups with conference participants. Women from countries as far-flung as Romania, Uganda, Benin, Nigeria and Morocco gave witness to their extraordinary human courage, resilience and, in many instances, faith, as they traversed many countries and overcame unprecedented obstacles on their journey to Ireland. Social integration, they agreed in unison, requires a mastery of the indigenous language. Cultural integration requires mediation, and human integration requires welcome and understanding, 'making me feel a human and that I matter'. Respect, it was agreed, was at the heart of assimilation. Several of the women experienced enhanced integration through their children, visiting their schools, becoming actively involved in after-school activities and standing on the sidelines at G.A.A. matches!

Tribute was paid in the plenary session to those both lay and religious who alleviated the burden of loneliness and hardship in Direct Provision, or made practical provision while in transition or simply provided 'a listening ear'. One story-teller spoke of how easy it was to lose hope, but was reassured that 'God may close one door, but another two will open'. They concluded that hope and healing come through help and compassion.

Closure

The consensus of the assembled guests at the close of the conference was that we had been privileged and indeed gifted with the migrant and refugee, but we in Ireland have indeed to look deeply into our collective souls to respond to Dr Rowlands's challenge 'to address and bind the wounds of our societies at every level'.

Margaret Lennon

Rapporteur