

The Gift and Challenge of the Migrant and Refugee to the Soul of Ireland

October 22nd 2016

The Margaret Aylward Centre for Faith and Dialogue is located on the lawn at the front of the Holy Faith Sister's convent in Glasnevin, a beautiful setting surrounded by well-cared for gardens and mature trees. The focus on dialogue is of particular significance to the work of the centre. The cedar of Lebanon which stands in the space between the convent grounds and the Botanic Gardens is a symbol that resonates with Judaism, Christianity and Islam and reminds us of the need for dialogue between faiths.

On October 22, we held a conference entitled **The Gift and Challenge of the Migrant and Refugee to the Soul of Ireland**. Margaret Aylward, the foundress of the Holy Faith Sisters, after whom the centre is named, was especially concerned with the separation of parents and children due to the poverty of post-famine Ireland. She described this as 'one of the greatest social evils'. (1869) Along with many other social and ethical issues, the separation of parents and children continues to be a reality for the families of migrants and refugees in Ireland today. Margaret Aylward's vision for a new Ireland founded on her faith, courage, compassion and hunger for justice was the source of our inspiration in planning the conference.



Our keynote speaker, Dr Anna Rowlands, of the Department of Theology and Ethics in the University of Durham, acknowledged that the issues of extensive migration to Europe are addressed daily through multimedia. As a result of her own research, however, she notes the fact that many countries now use an 'enforcement model' which may involve cruel and draconian powers of detention, forced expulsion and deportation, citing this reality as a cause for concern. Furthermore, she claims, 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.

She later stated that in responding to the needs of migrants, faith-based organisations as diverse as Islamic Relief, Catholic organisations and Methodist communities recognise 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'. She believes that religious narratives and heritage are crucial to people displaced and on the move and 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. She underlined the urgent need 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.



In response to Dr. Rowlands presentation, **Mr Pablo Rojas Coppari of Migrants Rights Ireland**, emphasised the need for the rights of all migrants to be enshrined in law. He believes that the existence of Direct Provision Centres acts as an obstacle to social justice and creates extreme marginalisation, strongly recommending that an alternative be established. His insights into their impact on family life and the life 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.

A number of ‘story-tellers’ gave testimony to many of the issues raised by Mr Coppari, as they shared their narratives in ‘dialogue circles’ 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 side-lines at G.A.A. matches!

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 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’.