



PASTORAL LETTER

A Hundred Thousand Welcomes?

Exploring what hospitality for migrant people means in contemporary Ireland



"May our Christian communities really be places of hospitality, listening and communion!

Dear friends, let us not forget the flesh of Christ which is in the flesh of refugees: their flesh is the flesh of Christ."

- Pope Francis[1]



Hospitality in Today's Ireland

In Ireland, we rightly pride ourselves on our céad míle fáilte. But in recent years that culture has come under pressure. Rising levels of immigration have brought to the fore challenges our society has neglected for too long – housing and homelessness, the provision of social services, mental health services and some areas of education. These challenges have deep roots in our political reality from long before the present immigration situation emerged. Fearful and angry voices even call for us to close our borders and our hearts to the newcomer. In justice, the Irish people can never do that. Many of our newcomers bring great gifts and talents to our communities. Many also seek our help and support as they try to make for a better future for themselves and their families.

As people of faith, we draw from the core belief of all Christians that human life is sacred and that we are all made in the image of God (*Genesis 1:27*). This respect for the inviolability and integrity of every human life finds its high point in the commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (*Leviticus 19:18, Mark 12:31*). It calls us to care for the needs of our neighbours.[2] The parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:29-37*) makes it clear that our neighbour is anyone around us, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or socio-economic

status. All of us – citizens and government – are called to work for all, to promote justice for all 'so that every social entity remains at the service of the common good, each with its own distinctive characteristics...safeguarding human rights and the rights of minorities'.[3]

By publishing this Pastoral Letter at this time, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference seeks to affirm, once again, universal human dignity and to encourage Irish Christians and all people of goodwill to take up the great opportunity given to them to make their parishes, their homes, and their lives places of hospitality. We make this call because care for the stranger is a biblical invitation of foundational importance (*Leviticus 19:33-34*). We make this call because the way of the Gospel does not lead to fear, but to welcome (*Romans 15:7-13*). We make this call because Jesus Himself insists we love one another and that when we welcome the stranger, we welcome him (*Matthew 25:31-46*).

Reflect: When have you been blessed by hospitality that you received?



Migration: An Irish Reality

We must make this call because we are migrants. This is true for all humanity but it applies in a special way to Irish people and is a central feature of our history. Migration happens for many reasons including war, famine, corrupt governance and, in our time, climate breakdown. We know that in the decade of the Great Famine (1847 - 1852), almost 2 million people left our shores.[4] But migration was a constant for centuries before that. In our own lifetime, due to our floundering economy, we remember the disruptive effects on families and



society due to the massive exodus in the 1950s and 1980s, the legacy of which remains with us.

It is quite a novelty that Ireland is now a place to which people want to move instead of a place they have to leave. That testifies to impressive advances in our economy and society. How much happier we should be to see people arrive here seeking a better life instead of the tragic scenes of families separating which for too long was our national story!

Fr Gerry McFlynn is the Manager of the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas London Office. He notes that these days it is “cool” to be Irish in Britain. But it was not always so. Happily, gone are the days when one could read signs outside boarding houses saying: “No Dogs, No Blacks, No Irish”.

‘On a personal level, I experienced the change since migrating to live in England at the end of the 1970’s. The 1980’s and 1990’s were difficult decades to be Irish here. The conflict in the North of Ireland was the headline news for most of that time and made life difficult for Irish people here. It was even worse when the bombs were going off in British cities and towns.

‘One had the strong sense of being a “suspect community”, having to keep one’s head down, say little publicly, always conscious of one’s accent and background.

‘Whenever I met with Irish prisoners, I often heard stories about how they were subjected to verbal and sometimes physical abuse by officers, some of whom had seen action in NI and lost friends there. It wasn’t until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, that things began to change for the better.’

Our Catholic faith is a migrant’s faith. It was spread throughout Ireland by St Patrick, an immigrant who was initially trafficked to the island as a slave. It has been continuously nourished by the arrival of missionaries from abroad. Pope Francis himself is the son of immigrants who left Italy to build a better life in Argentina.

The history of our Church cannot be understood without remembering the role of the diaspora in the building up of our

faith. Irish priests and nuns served in missions across the globe and Irish parishes in many countries, notably in the UK and the USA, were a key element in the life of our Church outside of Ireland. Such is the importance of the Irish diaspora that our government has consistently asked that undocumented Irish be given preferential treatment in the United States.

The plight of the migrant is close to the heart of Pope Francis. He insists that the migrant can find God on their exodus – as a ‘traveling companion, guide and anchor of salvation’[5] and that the Good Samaritans who offer hospitality along the way can also be blessed by this encounter. To welcome the migrant is to welcome Christ himself, who ‘is present in the sister or brother in need of our help.’[6]

Reflect: Have you or your loved ones been migrants? How did that experience feel?

Welcome: The Migrant’s Gift

In the last generation we have seen many people seeking a better life in Ireland. Our parishes and schools as well as sports clubs, social clubs and other community initiatives are at the forefront of integrating those who have recently arrived, embedding them in an authentic fashion into their adopted communities. It is often overlooked that from the congregation to the pulpit, the modern Irish Church is a dynamic and diverse reality. It is one of the prime locations in our society where those who have deep roots in Ireland encounter, befriend, support, and learn from those who are more newly arrived.

Diversity is a gift. It is a source of renewal that is much needed in the Irish Church.

My name is Irene Nunes from Brazil. I came to Ballyhaunis thirteen years ago. My husband Reginaldo works in the local meat factory. From the outset we were made feel very welcome by the local community here in the parish. Six years ago I was appointed sacristan here in St Patrick’s Church. There is a small Brazilian community here and we feel very much part of the parish community. I am a member of the Parish Pastoral Council along with two other members of the Brazilian community.

We feel welcome and at home here in Ballyhaunis. Our Parish Priest, Fr Stephen, has been like a father to us since we arrived here. Recently, five Brazilian couples celebrated their marriages at the same ceremony in St Patrick’s Church. It was a wonderful celebration for all of the community.



Caption Five Brazilian couples who were married in May 2024 by Deacon Rev Wando Araujo, in Saint Patrick's Church, Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo, Archdiocese of Tuam.

The Christian faith spread quickly in its early centuries because people realised that what they shared in Jesus was greater than any cultural, ethnic, or geographic barriers that kept them apart. Jews and Gentiles, male and female, slave and free – the community of Christians was a place of radical welcome and encounter. It should be a cause of great joy and gratitude that we get to experience this in a new way in our time.

Question to reflect on: Where do migrants enrich your parish?

Encounter: Moving from Welcome to Belonging

The Irish Bishops have consistently spoken on the importance of going beyond simply welcoming newcomers to our land to cultivating a culture of encounter: 'As a society we need to equip newcomers and thereby support them to contribute positively to our country in a way that promotes participation, encounter and integration.' [7]

Too often, it can seem that all we aim at in Irish society is a sort of polite tolerance of difference. There is no encounter in this approach, no mutuality. All too often, the stranger in our land struggles to become our neighbour without ever truly becoming our friend.

Instead, the Christian approach is to anticipate that we will be enriched by encountering those from different backgrounds. Our shared life can be renewed through the authentic interaction between the established Irish way of doing things and the expressions brought by the 'new Irish'.

From the earliest days of his Pontificate, Francis has emphasised this 'culture of encounter.' [8] To encounter someone means 'not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing,

but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them.' [9] When we give the gift of time and attention like this, we do not just bless our neighbour, we enrich ourselves. This is intrinsic to our faith because, as the Pope teaches, 'faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others.' [10]

When Pope Francis invites us to cultivate a culture of encounter, he is drawing on deep wells within the Christian tradition. St Peter writes in the New Testament how Christians are always in a sense 'foreigners and exiles' because their allegiance is never to one place or one State but to all their neighbours, and ultimately to God (1 Peter 2:9-16). Within a century of Jesus' ministry, Christians were known as those who 'live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory.' [11]

The Church has continued to live out this tension. Catholic literally means 'universal'. The most humble parish church is connected within a network of believers across the globe and across the generations. During the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), initiatives and efforts to encourage the 'cooperation among nations' were affirmed as 'an outstanding form of international activity.' [12] St John Paul II, who came from Poland at a time when the political culture there curtailed people's movement, reminded us that 'the church recognizes this right in every human person, in its dual aspect of the possibility to leave one's country and the possibility to enter another country to look for better conditions of life.' [13] Pope Benedict XVI underlined the basis of our openness to encounter: human dignity. In Caritas in Veritate he teaches that '[e]very migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.' [14]

Question to reflect on: When have you had that feeling of being encountered – of being listened to, of having someone's attention? How did that make you feel?



Racism is to be Rejected

Jesus's most famous parable illuminates this. A lawyer asks him 'who is my neighbour?' and Jesus shares the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) in response. The story is about a foreigner who saves the life of someone very different from him. When Jesus tells the lawyer, 'Go and do likewise', he is telling him to aim to live a life as virtuous as the Samaritan, who was a member of a group that Jewish people often despised as their inferiors. This parable has a real relevance to us as Christians in contemporary Ireland. There is much that we can learn from the foreigners who have come amongst us. We must aim to see those foreigners as neighbours, and hope that those neighbours become our friends.

What this means is that baptised Christians must tangibly oppose racism wherever they find it. As far back as 1537, Pope Paul III declared that all humans are equal in dignity as he utterly rejected the arguments about racial hierarchies that were emerging at that time. [15] Much more recently, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference has declared that racism 'is the opposite of encounter. It seeks to divide and to exploit anxieties by spreading fear, often through misinformation.' [16]

It is right and proper for people to have a love of their place, their parish, their county, their country. But that love is distorted if it takes precedence over what Christians share in baptism and what all peoples share in their common humanity. Our responsibility to others cannot be based simply on their passports and places of birth.



Caption Pope Francis greets pilgrims in Croke Park, Dublin, during the Holy Father's visit to Ireland for the 9th World Meeting of Families in August 2018.

Question to reflect on: Are there times when you should have spoken up in the face of racism – so often passed off as a joke or “slagging”? What stopped you?

Challenges to Integration

Immigration to Ireland is high at present, though not at the levels previously seen through the peak of the Celtic Tiger era. In the most recent year for which there are statistics (up to April 2024), 149,200 people came to live in Ireland. However, 69,900 people left Ireland in the same period. [17] The figures for Northern Ireland are lower, with the most recent statistics suggesting a net immigration of 2,300 people in 2022. [18] These numbers contain a great diversity. It includes Irish citizens returning to live here, people on employment visas coming to take up particular roles, EU citizens availing of the freedom of movement, people from Great Britain who benefit from the Common Travel Area and many others besides. A significant factor in the numbers coming to Ireland in recent years were Ukrainians who are fleeing the Russian invasion of February 2022. Their numbers constitute a net figure of just over 81,000. [19] The number of people who come seeking International Protection is a small proportion of the overall number – about 14,000. [20] According to the European Union statistics body, the number of people found to have been here in Ireland illegally in 2023 was 1,485 people. [21]

One of the reasons why this topic of immigration can be contentious is that differences within the meaning of the term are not always acknowledged. “Immigrant” often means someone who has made a permanent home in a new country. “Migrant” often means someone who is only based in the new country for a period. “Asylum seeker” means someone who is claiming protection outside their country of origin, which is different from a “refugee”, who is someone who has had that claim confirmed. It is important to note that the formal definition of refugee does not include anybody displaced within their own country, or who travels abroad to escape poverty or famine.

While these definitions are important from a legal perspective, we should not allow them to obscure what matters most to Christians: regardless of where someone was born or what passport they carry, they are our neighbour.



Patrick was born in Nigeria and grew up in a loving Catholic home before marrying and moving to work in Ireland in 2002.

'Adjusting to Irish society was challenging as many were unaccustomed to seeing black people. However, we gradually integrated through a long process of acculturation. We have four children, all born in Ireland, who identify more as Irish than Nigerian.

'After my wife's passing, we navigated through difficult times but also enjoyed good moments together. Finding employment was a difficult challenge but I got help and training through FÁS courses and I am now in my third and, hopefully, most lasting job.

'Cultural differences have been apparent at work, in church and with neighbours. In Nigeria, greeting one another is customary, while the Irish seem less inclined to do so. Most people have been pleasant but a few have been rude and directed slurs at me.

'Despite the challenges, coming to Ireland has been a blessing. We have the freedom to practice our faith and we are happy, although we miss Nigeria and find travel there expensive.'

It is common to hear people talk about the costs of immigration. But almost one in five workers in the Irish economy are 'non-Irish-nationals'. Our economy could not function without the people working in the sectors of hospitality, education, healthcare and technology who have come here from elsewhere. Economists describe our economy as 'at full employment' and it is still growing. There is clearly an inescapable need for migration. No one can but doubt that these newcomers have become foundational to the positive operation of our society.

Question to reflect on: How have migrants blessed your life?

Building a Friendly Society

Homelessness is rising across the island. [23] Our health services are stretched thin. Our education systems

struggle to meet the demand of growing student populations. These problems – which are just a snapshot of the challenges we face – are complex and deep-rooted. But they are not caused by migration. Indeed, migrants can play a key role in seeing our critical needs met.

Our governments have a responsibility to directly address these shortcomings in our societal provision and a considered, coherent, and practical immigration policy is a component of that. As Christians, we assess policies based on how they serve the common good. The 'common' includes everyone – migrants and citizens alike.

Catholics will often take a range of views on the provision of services in our society. [24] We treasure the political freedom of conscience our faith affords us. People of goodwill will differ on the best response to particular policy matters. We are fortunate to live in a country with a stable democracy and a vibrant civil society, and we encourage Christians to participate in such political debate to the fullest of their abilities and convictions. This is one way to serve the common good and to distinguish ourselves by our commitment to peace and truthfulness in speech (*cf. Romans 12:17-21*).

We need political leaders who can embody this moral vision. As Pope Francis advises, 'their biggest concern should not be about a drop in the polls, but about finding effective solutions to "the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion, with its baneful consequences"'. [25] However, we cannot expect individual leaders to shoulder that burden alone. They need to be mandated by communities who are marked by 'political charity', a refusal of the individualistic mindset that is so prevalent in our age. Christians in our society must take on this responsibility collectively to 'effectively seek the good of all people' in our society. [26]

Question to reflect on: How can you encourage constructive debate on the things that really matter in our society?

A Call to Parishes

Changes in our society bring challenges. A nation state has its obligations, but the Church has a different task.



Irish Christians were missionaries to the peoples across the globe for many centuries. Now we find those peoples on our doorsteps. The Church is already being enriched by this encounter.

It falls to parishes to oppose the voices of fear. As Pope Francis teaches in *Fratelli Tutti*: 'Once more, we encounter the temptation to build a culture of walls, to raise walls, walls in the heart, walls on the land, in order to prevent this encounter with other cultures, with other people.' [27] Parishes must be at the forefront of welcome and integration.

In the Gospels we read of Jesus' encounter with the deaf-mute man and his command 'Ephphatha' – be opened! (*Mark 7:31-37*). That encounter was in a foreign territory and the man was most likely not Jewish. The ministry of Jesus excludes no one and shows no favouritism. Our parishes and our lives are called to mirror that, to listen and to respond to those in need. This is fostering communion with God and one another.

Regardless of what the loud voices in protest or on social media might pronounce, we recognise the Image of God in every migrant. Even if a crowd is shouting racist chants, we stand for the truth that God's love is not restricted to the holders of any particular passports - we are all equal in his eyes. There are practical ways to bear witness to this truth. The Vatican has offered a resource of 20 action points through which we can welcome refugees and migrants. [28] The Irish Council of Churches has produced an excellent handbook for congregations who wish to begin the journey 'from welcome to belonging'. [29]

Whatever response we are called to make, whether it is a grassroots initiative of welcome or a social movement for structural change, we do it in prayer. The living God hears our pleas. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we are welcomed by Christ at his table, people from every tribe and tongue, gathered in unity by the Holy Spirit. This sacramental reality is our starting point. Because we have been welcomed by God, we can welcome others.

Pope Francis sets forth a vision of a fraternal society where everyone is treated with respect, where everyone is

welcomed. He has encouraged parishes to respond in a positive way.

One way in which parishes and local communities might respond is through the Community Sponsorship Programme. This is a scheme where people from a local community join together to sponsor a refugee family and welcome them into their midst, ensuring that they can resettle, find refuge during their time of hardship and provide them with an opportunity to build a new future, away from conflict. The scheme is supported by the Irish Government and is led by the Irish Red Cross, working with partners such as NASC (Irish word for 'link'), the Irish Refugee Council and Doras. All of these provide support, training guidance and advice to local communities. [30]

Fr Paul O'Boyle, Parish Priest of Clane, Co Kildare, coordinates a Community Sponsorship Group in his parish community. He decided to get involved after watching a piece on TV about the first family who arrived in Ireland through the programme. He immediately made a list of ten people from the locality who he thought would help and once on board they all set to work. They welcomed a family from Syria in December 2019. The family have settled well into the parish because of the great hospitality shown to them by Clane parish and the wider Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin, together with the cooperation of Clongowes Wood College. This is a very good example of a local parish responding to the needs of refugees and providing a positive means of encounter for all.

Question to reflect on: How can migrants in your parish be invited to help shape the journey from welcome to belonging?



Caption Brother Kevin Crowley OFM Cap as CEO of the Capuchin Day Centre, and Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, greet Pope Francis during the Holy Father's visit to Ireland for the 9th World Meeting of Families in August 2018.

Conclusion

Migration is complex and challenging for so many people. For the immigrant person or family forced to abandon their homeland and seek protection and a better future. For those who welcome them and try to house and provide for them. For governments and civic authorities who bear responsibility for provision of shelter, protection and welfare. For public services and those in our communities who strive to reach out to the newcomer, who offer and affirm human dignity. For most of us in Ireland, the growth in inward migration is something new. What changes are yet to come, we do not know. Yet, as people of faith, we believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is never out of date as it inspires and shines light on the questions we face in every age.

Our faith offers us many positives in terms of welcoming the newcomer. Scripture - the treasure from which Catholic Social Teaching is drawn with its emphasis on the dignity of every human being and the common good - provides us with the basis for action. In its Declaration on Human Dignity, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith has described the 'Travail of Migrants' as one of the 'grave violations of human dignity' we see in our contemporary world. They advise us that 'receiving migrants is an important and meaningful way of defending "the inalienable dignity of each human person regardless of origin, race or religion"'. [31]

The various patron saints of immigrants, refugees, and migrants remind us of the importance of compassion, love,

and service to those who are marginalized and in need.

As we continue to grapple with issues of migration and displacement, including the dangers and effects of human trafficking, let us turn to these sources of faith for inspiration and guidance, and acknowledge the critical role we all have to play in providing welcome, support and advocacy for those forced by various circumstances to migrate to our shores.

May St Patrick, St Juan Diego, St Frances Xavier Cabrini, St Josephine Bakhitha and all holy men and women intercede for all migrants and for those who welcome them and give them shelter, compassion and love. May we never forget that all of us, whether religious or not, are a migrant pilgrim people, journeying our way through this earth. May we never lose the great gift of encounter for which we Irish are so well known throughout the world. May we continue to have the courage to be witnesses to the love of God through our openness to encounter and embrace the other as one of us.

Prayer for Migrants and Refugees

God, Almighty Father,
we are your pilgrim Church
journeying towards the Kingdom of heaven.
We live in our homeland,
but as if we were foreigners.
Every foreign place is our home,
yet every native land is foreign to us.
Though we live on earth,
our true citizenship is in heaven.
Do not let us become possessive
of the portion of the world
you have given us as a temporary home.
Help us to keep walking,
together with our migrant brothers and sisters,
toward the eternal dwelling you have prepared for us. Open
our eyes and our hearts
so that every encounter with those in need
becomes an encounter with Jesus, your Son and our Lord.
Amen.

- Pope Francis, Prayer for World Day of Prayer for Migrants & Refugees, 2024.



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- [3] Compendium of the Social teaching of the Church, §187.
- [4] Irial Glynn, "Irish Emigration History," University College Cork, December 2012, <https://www.ucc.ie/en/emigre/history/>
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- [16] Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, "Statement of the Spring 2023 General Meeting of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference," March 8, 2023, <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2023/03/08/statement-of-the-spring-2023-general-meeting-of-the-irish-catholic-bishops-conference/>
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- [18] Hayley Halpin, "How much immigration is there in Northern Ireland?," BBC News, August 11, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgm7vn2kegjo> In Northern Ireland, where the arrangements are different because they are not members of the European Union, the number of Ukrainians increased by just over 1,000, totalling 3,149 people in the most recent statistics. Kurtis Reid, "Refugees on missing their homeland two years after start of war: 'I'm very grateful to the people here'." Belfast Telegraph, February 24, 2024. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/refugees-on-missing-their-homeland-two-years-after-start-of-war-im-very-grateful-to-the-people-here/a15315517.html>
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- [25] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Assisi: Vatican, 2020), §188.
- [26] *Fratelli Tutti*, §182.



[27] Fratelli Tutti, §27.

[28] Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, "Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points", <https://holyseemission.org/contents/statements/5a2716362f88c.php>

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[30] For further information, visit Community Sponsorship Ireland - Irish Red Cross <https://www.redcross.ie/community-sponsorship-ireland/>

[31] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Dignitas Infinita: Declaration on Human Dignity (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), §40

Front page caption Pope Francis with the sculpture 'Angels Unawares' by Timothy Schmalz, which was installed in September 2019 in Saint Peter's Square, Vatican City, to mark the 105th World Migrant and Refugee Day. Permission for publication has been granted to the Catholic Communications Office by Timothy Schmalz.

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