

In England and Wales: 'Parishes are enriched by migrant communities'

Statement from Bishop Patrick Lynch



“Migration and the New Evangelization” is the theme chosen by our Holy Father for his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees on 15 January. In his message Pope Benedict suggests that migration (both internal and external) provides the Church with both a challenge and an opportunity for evangelization. First of all a challenge in that many migrants “who have known and welcomed Christ are not infrequently constrained to consider him no longer relevant to their lives, to lose the meaning of faith, to no longer recognize themselves as members of the Church and often lead a life no longer marked by Christ and his Gospel”. This he goes on to say is the challenge of helping migrants not only to stay firm in their faith in a new social and cultural environment without familial, cultural and sometimes ecclesial support. This calls for what he describes as a new commitment to listening to the Word of God, a new commitment to prayer and a new commitment to building the Church as a community of faith.

The phenomenon of migration does, however, also provide an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel in a new way. Here in England and Wales and especially in our large cities the Church has benefited greatly from the faith and witness of migrant communities from all parts of the world – from Africa and Asia, from Eastern and Western Europe, from the islands of the Caribbean and more recently from South America. Our parishes have been enriched by the strong sense of community and commitment to family life within many of our migrant communities, by their love for the Scriptures, by their devotion to Our Lady and especially by their joyful participation in the celebration of the Eucharist.

As our Holy Father himself says “migrants themselves have a special role in this regard because they in turn can become ‘heralds of God’s word and witnesses to the Risen Jesus, the hope of the world”.

It is fitting, therefore, that we celebrate World Day for Migrants and Refugees as we come to the end of the Christmas season. If we look closely at the story of Christmas in both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew we will notice that all the key characters involved are in fact migrants and people who are away from their home environment.

First of all, Mary and Joseph have to travel to Bethlehem for the census, then they flee to Egypt to avoid persecution and finally when it is safe they return not to their original home but to Nazareth.

The shepherds on the other hand leave their flocks in the countryside and travel to the town in Bethlehem to see Jesus and to worship Him. Finally, the Magi (the three wise men) come from the east following a star and searching for the 'newborn King of the Jews'. The People of Israel at the time of Jesus would have considered the shepherds as outcasts and the Magi as strangers.

Nevertheless in the Gospel they are first two groups – both migrant communities - to hear the good news about Jesus, to meet Jesus, to worship Jesus and to go and tell others about Jesus. Having experienced God's presence they become committed to sharing the Good News about God's love.

All of us and especially our migrant communities can, I believe, take great heart from the Christmas story in our own journey of faith. Like the shepherds and the wise men we too are on a journey – a journey of faith and a journey of life. Like the shepherds and the wise men we too are given a light – the light of faith – to guide us. Like the shepherds and the wise men we don't make that journey on our own. We make it in a community and as a community. Like the shepherds and the wise men we too will have questions and we too will meet difficulties - sometimes opposition, sometimes apathy and sometimes injustice. Like the shepherds who 'go back glorifying and praising God' and the wise men who 'return by a different way' we too are transformed by our encounter with the Lord and are called to live in a new way – the way of justice, peace and love.

So as we celebrate the World Day for Migrants and Refugees and come to the end of the Christmas season we are conscious that all of us are called to be evangelized and all of us are called to be evangelizers. So we pray in thanksgiving for all the migrant communities who down through the years have enriched the Church here in England and Wales by their faith and their faithfulness, by their commitment and their witness and by their devotion and devotions. Secondly, we pray that God will help each one of us like Mary and Joseph, like the shepherds and like the Magi to appreciate and nurture the gift of faith – the gift of seeing Jesus, the gift of believing in Jesus and the gift of following Jesus. Finally, we pray for the courage to truly become enthusiastic evangelizers and like the shepherds and the Magi be "heralds of God's word and witnesses to the Risen Jesus" in the world in which we live and work.

With every good wish and blessing for the coming year,

+ Patrick Lynch SS.CC.

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