

"I WAS A STRANGER, AND YOU MADE ME WELCOME"

These are notes from the meeting of the Diocesan Council of Laity on 11th November 2006, which focused on the theme of how we might better welcome migrants into our parish families. Bishop Michael and the Council of Laity invite Parish Pastoral Councils and other parish groups to discuss these thoughts and ideas, and to implement some of the suggestions for good practice.

Bishop Michael introduced the discussion by highlighting the increasingly multi-national and multi-cultural nature of East Anglia in general and our Diocese in particular. Things have changed considerably even since our *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* was launched in 2004, when large numbers of Portuguese-speakers were moving into the diocese. We now also have significant numbers of people in our Catholic parishes from Eastern Europe, India and the Philippines, as well as from Africa, alongside the long-established Italian and Polish communities. Some are here to stay; others intend to return to their countries after a while. This illustrates the special role that the Catholic Church (both in our parishes and in our Catholic schools) can play in furthering social and community cohesion, in a truly 'catholic' way which celebrates the distinctiveness of each group of people from other countries, while encouraging authentic 'unity in diversity'. Increasingly, our Catholic parishes in East Anglia are becoming a reflection of the worldwide nature of the Catholic Church. This is something to celebrate. It is not a 'problem', but a 'challenge'.

There can be a tension between migrants' desire to maintain their rich distinctiveness (including their language, culture, traditions, etc) and their wish to be warmly welcomed and drawn into the ordinary life of our parishes. There are sometimes very different approaches even within their own communities. Bishop Michael encourages an approach whereby people moving into our parishes in East Anglia are encouraged to enter fully into the ordinary life, worship and witness of our established parishes while preserving and sharing their own cultural richness.

This approach should also involve British parishioners being more conscious of their own cultural heritage, language, etc, and being ready to share that as a gift with those entering the country and the church in East Anglia. We can exchange our many cultural gifts with each other, and all be deeply enriched as a result. We should celebrate both our diversity and our unity.

Many of those Catholics coming to our diocese from overseas come with a vibrancy of faith and a spiritual commitment which can only strengthen and enhance our personal and parish Christian lives. Our parishes are already the stronger for their being among us, and they are warmly welcome. In some cases, Catholics from other countries are very much part of the worshipping community (coming to Mass, etc) but do not get involved in other areas of parish life (social life, organisations, outreach, etc). While carefully respecting different cultures and personal preferences, it would be good if all people joining a parish were to become as involved as possible.

Here are some of the examples of good practice which emerged from the discussion at the Council of Laity; some are already included in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (p.15):

1. As one small but helpful gesture, have a large notice in the church porch with 'Welcome' in many different languages (with perhaps 'Welcome to our parish family' in large letters in the middle).
2. Copies of the Scripture readings and prayers for Sunday Mass could be provided in different languages.
3. Copies available of the main texts of the Mass in English, perhaps simply on two sides of A4, so that people can begin to join in Sunday Mass with confidence.
4. All or part of one of the Scripture readings at Mass could be read in another language as well as English. The Sunday readings can be found in many European languages on the following website: <http://www.virc.at>
5. Occasionally have Bidding Prayers in other languages.
6. Invite people from other countries to sing a liturgical song from their country at Mass (for example, a group of parishioners from India sang a hymn in their own language during Communion at Gorleston just a few hours after the Council of Laity meeting). At Christmas, groups could sing one of their own carols.
7. As appropriate, invite people from countries where dance is used in a natural and reverent way to do so at Sunday Mass on an occasional basis (e.g. Indians, Vietnamese, etc dancing at the Presentation of Gifts/Offertory Procession).
8. Invite them to contribute their special heritage and tradition in others ways (e.g. arranging some of the flowers).
9. Mass in their own language (and 'Rite' when appropriate) can be celebrated on an occasional basis, in a way which discourages any form of 'ghetto mentality' while combining respect for their distinctiveness with a desire to draw people into the one parish family. Very careful thought needs to be given as to whether such Masses should take place on days of the week other than Sunday, so that the whole parish community can normally gather together as one (in a truly catholic 'unity in diversity') on the Lord's Day.
10. Welcome packs, introductions to the parish, etc, in other languages (cf. the different language leaflets at the National Shrine in Walsingham). Translating such texts is one way in which people from other countries can contribute.

11. Gradually encourage new parishioners from other countries to take on ministries and other roles of service in the parish (e.g. Readers, Ministers of Communion, members of Parish Pastoral Councils, Altar Servers, etc). Their taking on visible, public positions may help others to feel at home in the parish.
12. Take special notice of each culture own special annual feasts, and enable and encourage them to celebrate them in the parish. Encourage other parishioners to participate, both in the prayer and worship, and in any social event.
13. The Catholic Church (and its hall, etc) can be a place where groups of migrants can meet for their own distinctive events (e.g. social activities, community meetings, prayer groups). They can also provide a drop-in centre.
14. Arrange English language classes for people coming from other countries, perhaps making them available not only for Catholics but for the wider migrant community. Every migrant needs gradually to learn English if they are to become of both the church community and society, and benefit as fully as possible from their time in our country. The same would be true if English-speaking people were to go and live in a country where English is not the first language; easy communication is vital to being a community together. Catholic schools which are language colleges may have a special role to play here.
15. Encourage and facilitate established parishioners to learn at least some basic words and greetings in the languages of the main migrant communities.
16. Provide a register of interpreters ready to assist migrants in certain circumstances (e.g. hospital appointment, immigration or police interview, going to the bank, getting children into a school).
17. We also need to be sensitive to the needs of people moving into the United Kingdom from other English-speaking countries (including the USA, Canada, Australia, NZ, some African countries, etc) and not presume that they will always integrate easily because of the common language.
18. People from other countries can be invited to lay on a cultural evening for the whole parish (with their national food, music, dancing, etc), either on their own (e.g. a Filipino Evening) or as part of an international celebration.
19. Church notice-boards and parish websites could give Mass times, etc, in other languages.
20. A large map of the world in the church porch or parish hall, into which people can stick a pin to indicate the range of countries from which parishioners come.
21. Something like the area Link Scheme proposed in our *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (p.66) could help to ensure that people from other countries are made welcome when they move into a neighbourhood. Parish visiting teams can do the same. This cannot be left, however, to a small number of appointed people. Every parishioner has a role to play, welcoming new neighbours next-door and in the same street (regardless of their religion), welcoming newcomers at church, inviting them to parish events (e.g. coffee after Mass). **Personal outreach and befriending is the key!**
22. Such a process can be enriched by a few from a particular country having a special responsibility to welcome people from their own country.
23. Children are often a catalyst for drawing parents and grandparents deeper into the life of the church. Our Catholic schools have a very important role to play here, as a key part of their Catholic ethos.
24. However, how do we reach out to those many Catholic children from the countries who attend non-Catholic schools?
25. Transport to Mass can be an important issue, especially in a rural diocese such as ours. How can parishioners help?

Besides the ideas above, we also need to be very conscious of the particular situation of many people coming into East Anglia from other countries. Some are young, and vulnerable. Some are alone, either because they are single or because they have left their family behind in order to come here and earn some money for their family. Some are doing shift-work at unsocial hours, and have little time for anything else. For some, there is a real danger of economic hardship and even destitution; parish groups such as the SVP need to be ready to respond to this in a practical way.

Drawing people from other countries and cultures can be a slow process, and needs patience and perseverance. For some of them, the movement 'from the pavement to the hall' after Mass is not an easy one, nor one they desire. The Catholic Church, however, provides a vital 'anchor' point for them, however long they intend to stay among us.

It is all too easy, however, to think that we know what people from other countries want from our parish communities. Each culture is different, and each individual is different. We must ask them what they want, and how we can help them.

<p>"If a stranger lives with you in your land, do not molest him. You must count him as one of your own countrymen, and love him as yourself - for you were once strangers yourselves in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19.33-34)</p>
