

I begin with the words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel: *'I was a stranger and you made me welcome'* Here Jesus is EQUATING himself with the stranger!

In the Bible, Book of Leviticus 19:34 we read:

“When strangers reside with you in your land, you must not oppress them. You must treat the stranger living among you as native-born and love them as yourself, for you were strangers once.”

The International Migration Report 2017 says there are 258 million Migrants in the world at present. Contrary to what is reported, the majority are not in our part of the world. 80 million are in Asia / 78 million in Europe / 58 million in America / 25 million in Africa.

When I left Ireland for Mexico in 1985 to work with poor communities, Ireland was almost all white, all Irish and majority Catholic. When I returned in 2002, there was a huge change in terms of people: different cultures, skin-colour, languages, variety of foods, even dress mode. People came from Poland, Nigeria, China, Iraq, Iran, Romania, Bulgaria, Afghanistan. They are Muslim as well as Catholic and Christian. Ireland was looking like a multi-cultural country, especially in Dublin and more especially in the Tallaght area.

My main focus was to welcome the migrants and refugees, who were seeking to make their home in Ireland. My interest was to show them a welcome to our land of C  ad M  le f  ilte! My interest also was to find out how to help them to integrate into Irish culture. Of course, that also meant finding out how Irish people could welcome and embrace the new cultures. I saw all of this as an enrichment for Ireland.

Fortunately, my Brigidine congregation was committed to doing the same, to welcome migrant and refugee communities, and to accompany them in some way. So, I got some Brigidine funds to set up a **Drop-In Hospitality Centre** in Tallaght. At that time - 2003, Tallaght had five hostels - filled with families seeking asylum in Ireland. I visited the hostels and invited them to come to the Centre.

I joined with a team on this project under the auspices of West Tallaght Resource Centre. We rented a space at St. Maelruain's Church of Ireland in Tallaght village, for a very modest rent – thanks to the hospitality of Pastor William Devrell. We appointed a Coordinator for the project. She was from the Gambia. Her husband is an Irish man working with CONCERN. We invited volunteers to join us. Many of these were returned missionary sisters and I am delighted to see them here today.

Our vision was to create a warm and welcoming place where these new communities could meet and get to know one another. We asked them to tell us how we could support them to integrate into Irish society. Our aim was to listen and respond to their needs. This would be our main agenda. As we listened, we heard the following points in one of our first workshops:

- INTEGRATION IS A TWO-WAY PROCESS and
- INCLUSION IS KEY TO INTEGRATION

We agreed with both these points. When migrants are respected and understood they will integrate. When any of us is welcomed, respected and understood, we will join in!

- THE HOST COMMUNITY IS VERY IMPORTANT

If we are good ‘hosts’ we will be open to newcomers and above all, welcoming. Irish people went all over the world, so are well placed to know what it is like to live away from home and experience a welcome (or not!) I firmly believe that societies are enriched by sharing culture, language, food, music, art and customs. Travelling broadens the mind! Welcoming people from other places does the same!

As Pope Francis says, ‘Immigrants are not a threat, but an opportunity to build peace.’ (He was the son of an immigrant himself.) At the Centre, that’s what we are doing – building peace; building bridges, not walls!

Pope Francis is particularly strong on the issue of integration. He has even told countries not to take migrants unless they are going to help them integrate into the country. Of course integration is not the same as assimilation. People can integrate without losing their own identity.

For 10 years at St. Maelruain’s, we welcomed families from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Middle East, and South America. We had ten great years there. Then came collapse of the banks and the economy. This took a heavy toll on the migrant communities and life became more of a struggle. But there was hope too. Hope in that their children were doing well in the local schools – even to raising the standard. Education was a priority for the parents – they saw it as a route out of poverty. Many also valued the peace of our country – the absence of conflict, even war. Many spoke about how Irish people were respectful and everyone was treated equally. Though life was a struggle, they felt it was good to be in Ireland. Often their remarks are:

Irish people say ‘Please’ and ‘Thank You’ and ‘I’m sorry’ a lot! Even to saying ‘thanks’ to the bus-driver when getting off the bus! They see this was part of Irish culture and they like it.

In 2013, we moved to another premises in another area of Tallaght, Mountain Park. St. Maelruain’s was now too small for the growing numbers attending on a daily basis. We were known in the area and numbers were growing. We approached the Department of Justice and Equality for funds through the Tallaght Partnership now the Clondalkin /Tallaght Partnership. This time last year, the Drop-In Centre was threatened with closure. A small group of volunteers formed a committee to petition to keep it open and I joined with them. We prepared our case. We met with Ministers and Local Authority persons. We recounted the many successes of the Centre, the numbers who had been through it, the assistance they received. Many of those who had been through the Centre became our Advocates! Fortunately, we succeeded in reversing the decision to close as Statutory funding was given to us.

Carmen is our present Coordinator, leading us forward in Life-Long Learning. Carmen came to Ireland from Peru and is now an Irish citizen in full employment.

In yesterday’s Scripture Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews we read: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers; for by doing so, some have entertained ANGELS without knowing it!”

One of the angels, Yemi who was with us at the Centre will tell you her story of her journey with us. I believe we are all part of the ONE WEB OF LIFE – “We are strands of the one web. Strands of the one web of life!”

Kay Mulhall csb