

Norway: A summer festival focusing on Hope

Sr Patricia Mulhall csb

I was privileged to be present for the Trondheim International Olavsfest in Norway - a week of festivities and folklife from 28 July - 3 August, as the guest of 'Together in Hope Project' from the USA. It was the first festival that could be attended in person since Covid-19.

The week was filled with quality concerts and religious services, pilgrim walks, outdoor hymn-singing, market-stalls, conversations and gatherings in small churches as well as in the magnificent Nidaros Cathedral where Gaia (the Greek goddess of Earth, mother of all life!) was hanging from the high vault. Saint Olav's shrine in Nidaros Cathedral Trondheim has been the most important pilgrimage site in the Nordic countries since his canonisation in 1031. The Norwegian Saint King retained his status as the most esteemed Nordic Saint throughout the Middle Ages.

According to the festival's website, "Each year during the week of St. Olaf's Day (29 July), Trondheim International Olavsfest shall organise a festival relevant for today with well-defined associations with the past, of a quality that appeals to a wide audience, both national and international."

I don't know how many know about this annual festival. It's a very multi-faith, multi-ethnic gathering that aims to promote good relationships between the Churches, Faith groups and people from all countries.

The 2022 theme of this festival was 'Hope'. With the backdrop of war, it was poignant that on the feast of St Olaf, the Kyiv Chamber Choir sang at the 11am Lutheran High Mass to a full congregation in Nidaros Cathedral and again at the Catholic High Mass in the afternoon. The particular emphasis on 'hope' centred on refugees and migrants - with a strong message of encouragement to open our hearts and doors of welcome to offer hospitality to those seeking a safe, secure and better life.

'Together in Hope Project,' the brainchild of Celia Ellingson and Gary Aamodt, partners with UNHCR. Its 60-strong choir from Minneapolis-St Paul performed their world premiere 'The Stranger' -new music composed by Kim André Arnesen accompanied by Trondheim Solistene, under the leadership of conductor Mark Stover. 'The Stranger' aims to raise awareness of refugees and displaced persons and raise funds for humanitarian aid for refugees. The Together in Hope Choir (music with a purpose) was invited to deliver the opening concert at this largest cultural festival in Norway.

When CAFOD first raised awareness of refugees and campaigned for those seeking asylum for a better life across the world in the 1990s, I wrote the poem 'Call No One Stranger' and which, set to music by Kim André Arnesen, featured in 'The Stranger,' sung by the 60-strong Together in Hope choir. Their goal is to use the universal language of music to raise awareness of shared issues. Today's issue of refugees and displaced people is one of those critical for our time. More than 100 million people worldwide have been forced to flee their homes - a number greater than at any other time since the end of World War II.

One cannot but be conscious of the fact that almost 700 desperate migrants crossed the English Channel in 14 small boats a few days' ago, 1 August - the highest number in a single day so far this year. Desperate people taking desperate measures seeking refuge in the UK. This brings the total to more than 17,000 since the start of this year. Despite the harsh policy of the Home Office, it does not seem to deter them. Despite also that Ms Patel has agreed with the East African country, Rwanda, to send those deemed 'illegal' under the new immigration rules, to that country. Religious Leaders have been outspoken in their criticism of this harsh policy, calling it shameful and immoral. Pope Francis calls us to act in solidarity with refugees and migrants. One way we can respond to this call is to raise awareness of their plight, offer hospitality, assist with humanitarian aid, pray earnestly for peace, assist with development so people do not have to leave their homes. The need is great. It calls for our generous response.

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