

Church of many colours

Thousands of migrants, legal or illegal, many of them Catholic, are settling in Britain. Whatever their background or status, we should welcome them, says the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales

The face of London is changing and with it the Church. Britain's capital city is at the crossroads of the greatest movement of people in history, responding to the awesome forces of globalisation. Since the accession of the new European Union states in May 2004 alone, it is reckoned that more than 300,000 migrants have come to London in search of work. Migrants fill 90 per cent of low-paid jobs, working as cleaners, builders and caterers; they make up almost a third of the city's workforce. A very high proportion – notably from central and eastern Europe – are practising Catholics.

The Church needs to know more about them. That is why, together with the bishops of the other two London Catholic dioceses, Southwark and Brentwood, I have asked the community organisation London Citizens, together with the Von Hügel Institute, to carry out research into the presence of migrants in London's parishes and schools.

The results of the research, *The Ground of Justice*, will be published in September. But we can already see the future of the Church in London: parishes where 40 different nationalities are present, where Lithuanians and Colombians worship alongside Filipinos and Nigerians; in which there are more than 40 ethnic chaplaincies celebrating Masses in different languages and rites. In my own Diocese of Westminster, one needs only to attend the Brazilian chaplaincy in Underwood Road or the Polish church in Ealing to be immersed in the liturgical worlds of those nations. The congregations are young, mobile and dynamic: after Mass, telephone numbers are exchanged, job opportunities discussed and solidarity extended to newcomers.

These parishes offer a glimpse of what the future of London can be – places where our new multiracial and multicultural society is being forged. The Church was born from Pentecost: a real and symbolic meeting of peoples and cultures and languages. As Pope John Paul II said in his 1993 message for World Migration Day: "In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere." For the Church, he went on, is "a sacrament of unity and thus a sign and binding force for the whole human race".

This is our hope; but it is also a challenge for our Dioceses in the coming years. The

unity of Pentecost does not abolish different languages and cultures; it recognises them in their identities. But it also opens them to other realities. It is right that there are so many ethnic chaplaincies in London, for migrants need, at least initially, to worship in their own language and to find a church away from home. Every Sunday, thousands of migrants cross London to join their countrymen and women for Mass in Vietnamese or Spanish or Croatian. We are blessed in the foreign chaplains who come to serve them.

But ethnic chaplaincies are a staging post, a path into the wider Church. We do not want two parallel Churches in London: one for Londoners, one for foreigners. Our Church is Catholic; it is not British or Irish or black. As migrants settle and find work, it is to be hoped that they move into local parishes, and there find a warm welcome. It is one of the central tasks of Christians – a constant theme of the Old and New Testaments – to offer hospitality to the exile and the stranger, seeing in him and her the face of Christ. As the American bishops put it in their 2003 pastoral letter, *Strangers No*

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Longer, "Faith in the presence of Christ in the migrant leads to a conversion of mind and heart, which leads to a renewed spirit of communion."

On Monday, my brother bishops of Southwark and Brentwood and I will show the commitment of the Catholic Church in London to migrants at a Mass at Westminster Cathedral. On the Feast of St Joseph the Worker, we want to recognise that, without migrants, London would quickly grind to a halt, and would certainly not experience its current economic growth. But more than saluting them, we want the Eucharist to sig-



nal our Church of the future. More than 40 priests from the different ethnic chaplaincies will concelebrate; there will be readings and music in many different languages; and the liturgy will be, in a sense, a glimpse into the soul of the Church in London – a place of unity in diversity: a Church born of Pentecost.

We want migrants to know that we stand in solidarity with them, and we want to invite our parishioners to become aware and conscious of the strangers in our midst. The people we stand alongside in the pews need us also to stand alongside them in their search for dignity and justice and a new life. London is a place of tremendous opportunity for newcomers to earn money and acquire new skills – and hopefully work, homes, security and growth for their families. But migration also involves tremendous suffering: loneliness, exploitation and insecurity.

Near me at Archbishop's House there is no shortage of migrants who fail to find work and are homeless: the proportion of foreign-born people making up the visitors to The Passage and the Cardinal Hume Centre has dramatically increased in recent years. Many are not aware of their rights, or do not assert them; many suffer abuse and hardship.

The Ground of Justice research will shed light on the working conditions that our migrants face each day and will suggest practical ways in which our parishes can assist our brothers and sisters. It is vital that we hear people's stories, and find ways of helping them to recover their God-given dignity. As a Church, we need publicly to stand up against the prejudice and fear which are so characteristic of the media's depiction of the "immigrant problem".

The Church has long taught that to migrate is a right for families “when they are unable to achieve a life of dignity in their own land”, as Pope Pius XII wrote in his classic 1952 document *Exsul Familia*, which took its name from the Holy Family fleeing into Egypt. Catholic teaching also recognises that nations have the right to control their own borders and to regulate immigration. *Exsul Familia* states that the needs of immigrants must be measured against the needs of the receiving countries, and that the rights of these nations must not be exaggerated to the point of denying access to needy people from other countries.

In welcoming the stranger we should not distinguish between “legal” and “illegal” migrants. Illegal immigration is not something the Church can approve of or encourage. But our Gospel mandate is to assist strangers, whoever they are, and meanwhile to urge that the rights of undocumented workers be respected. The Church, said Pope John Paul II in his Migration Day message, “is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognised and welcomed as brothers and sisters”. Speaking out recently against a bill in the United States Senate that could make assisting undocumented workers illegal, Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles wrote in *The New York Times*: “The unspoken truth of the immigration debate is that at the same time our nation benefits economically from the presence of undocumented workers, we turn a blind eye when they are exploited by employers.”

In many ways, London now has similarities with the London of Cardinal Manning, when the capital’s workforce was swelled by massive Irish immigration. Manning spoke out for poor labourers, arguing that “whatever rights capital possesses, labour possesses in the same degree” – a notion that would later be enshrined in Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

Of course, we cannot be naive about the social tensions that the massive immigration of the past years have produced. In the East End of London, in particular, there is a sense of being overwhelmed; and for elderly, working-class Catholics, who find they are the only ones in the doctor’s surgery who speak English as a native language, there is a sense of the cultural ground being pulled out from under them.

We need to be aware of these feelings. But our task, as the Church is to forge communion by welcoming the stranger, and to demonstrate that natives and foreigners are not rivals but first of all brothers and sisters in Christ. The exciting challenge of the future in London is to forge a Church of the Pentecost in which the migrants are “strangers no longer”.

■ **Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor is Archbishop of Westminster. The Mass on the Feast of St Joseph the Worker begins on Monday at Westminster Cathedral at 9.45a.m., and is followed by a London Citizens “Living Wage” rally in the cathedral piazza. All are welcome.**

The boys from Brazil

One East London parish has more than quadrupled its congregation since it started offering Masses in Portuguese. For the migrants in the congregation, it offers social as well as spiritual and pastoral support

London’s Brazilian Catholic parish is based in St Anne’s Church in the East of London, writes *Francis Davis*. Originally it was an English parish with about 200 parishioners. However, after it was decided to offer Masses in Portuguese in this church a few years ago, the parish expanded to host about 1,200 Catholic migrants. Most of them are recent migrants from Brazil, but there are also some from other Portuguese and Spanish speaking countries like Madeira, Colombia and Peru. The parish has three priests who speak Portuguese, Spanish and English.

According to the Brazilian ethnic chaplain, the number of Brazilian migrants in this parish over the last few years has been increasing, due to the economic crisis in the country. There are now an estimated 80-100,000 Brazilian migrants in London. However, not all of Brazilian migrants attend Catholic churches: some of them go to Evangelical churches (there are over 50 in London).

The chaplain believes (and it was confirmed by the migrants themselves) that one of the problems is lack of awareness among the migrants about the availability of such Masses.

Most of the Brazilian parishioners of St Anne’s are not living in the neighbourhood, but mainly reside in areas such as Willesden, Harlesden and Brixton. Churches in Willesden and Brixton also celebrate Mass in Portuguese on Sundays.

Most of the Brazilian migrants attending St Anne’s are unmarried young male adults, 18-35 years old, educated to university level, but with very poor spoken and written English. Often there is no motivation to improve their English language skills because they only intend to stay in the UK for a few years before returning to their country. Asked why, the chaplain explained that most of the Brazilian migrants find British culture too different from their own. Another reason for wanting to leave is that they are staying in the UK illegally. As a result, the turnover of Brazilian migrants is quite high.

The majority of these migrants work in civil construction, cleaning, catering, babysitting, courier services and other similarly low-paid areas. A few, usually those who have EU passports as a result of marriage to EU citizens, have started their own small businesses such as shops and restaurants. Others are prevented from doing so by their illegal status.

Many of the Brazilian migrants report experiencing discrimination of one kind or another. Employers who know their vulnerable status offer them low pay or

demand that they work long hours in poor conditions. Living conditions of many migrants are very poor too: it is common for five to six people to share one room.

The chaplain’s perception is that his Brazilian parishioners are happy with their congregation. In addition to attending Mass, they engage in many social activities, such as having a meal together in the church hall, occasional music and dancing events, and plays.

The church also plays a major role in people’s lives, both spiritually and practically. Its parishioners turn to it for guidance and emphasis on Christian values. Also, many of them grow in faith and some of them discover their vocation. The parish already has two candidates for seminary. There is a Catholic primary school attached to St Anne’s and, according to the chaplain, with the arrival of the migrant population, its pupil numbers have expanded and it boasts of fairly good integration between the migrant and local children.

When it comes to more practical issues, the parish plays an important role connecting different people with various needs. So, for example, they inform each other about job vacancies and accommodation. For many of the migrants, the most pressing social and pastoral needs are legalisation of status, including getting work permits and national insurance numbers.

Although many Brazilian migrants find it difficult to integrate with the local culture, in some cases that is caused mainly by the language barrier. The parish tries to help by offering free English lessons. Other initiatives include providing volunteers who translate various documents for parishioners and the availability of two doctors – a psychiatrist and a gynaecologist – who offer consultations and advice about available treatment. The priests of the parish, when needed, direct migrants to various social services. This was the case, for example, with a pregnant young woman who did not know where to get help.

Asked about the resources required to help meet migrants’ needs, the chaplain mentioned legal assistance advising on banking/financial matters and relations with police. Other important resources in high demand are translators and advisers on social and medical services.

■ **Francis Davis is director of the Centre for Faith and Society, Von Hügel Institute, Cambridge.**