

ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE EMIGRANT CONFERENCE.

Your Excellency, Brother Bishops, Rev. Fathers, Sisters, Brothers, ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you all to the 2nd day of our conference 'From Pastoral Care to Public Policy – Journeying with the Migrant'. A special word of welcome to Bishop DiMarzio, Professor Desmond Cahill from Australia, Mr. Francis Davis from the Von Hugel Institute, Dr. Patricia Kennedy from the Dept. of Social Policy U.C.D. I reserve a special welcome for Mr. Conor Lenihan, Minister of State with special responsibility for integration policy at the Dept. of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Education, Science and Justice, Equality and Law Reform. A warm welcome to all who are addressing the conference.

Acknowledging the broad title of our conference 'From Pastoral Care to Public Policy – Journeying with the Migrant' I feel it would not be appropriate to allow the situation to pass without reference to the contribution which the Irish Church, through its Chaplains, has made to our Irish Exile.

Music and song are probably the purest expression of our emotions. They provide an insight into what is uppermost in our minds at a particular time.

Emigration and its associated experience of loneliness, absence, heartbreak and home feature prominently – Galway Bay, the Fields of Athenry, the Isle of Inishfree, and countless others. The pain of loneliness, uprootedness and a sense of separation was intense. While the Irish Church may be criticised for many things there is one area where it can hold its head high, namely the way in which it walked with, ministered to and supported our exiles. As a former Chairman of the Irish Bishops Commission for Emigrants for nine years I have witnessed the heroic work being done by our chaplains, religious and priests in London, Manchester, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Birmingham and among other places.

Our experience of recent economic prosperity here at home could easily blind us to the situations which confronted our Irish emigrants. Former Director of I.E.C.E., Reverend Paul Byrne, on numerous occasions has drawn attention to the huge disparity between the success of many of our emigrants on the one hand and the problems on the other. Our chaplains, giant-hearted men and women, helped them to cope with the disadvantage, with the physical and psychological stress, with the culture shock, the loneliness, the loss, the feelings of rejection which many encountered.

A programme that shocked the nation was shown on Irish television in 2004 depicting the situation of some of the Irish

in London who had emigrated in the 1950's and had fallen on difficult times. That programme was occasioned by a visit which made it possible for Paul Byrne and I to see at first hand the quiet desperation in which some of our exiles were living. One of the saddest sights I witnessed was to see in a small room six Irish men huddled together at noon – where they ate, slept and drank. Indeed the reality was far worse than what was depicted on the programme. When I returned and shared the experience with the priests of the Archdiocese, a diocesan collection was taken up to help address the plight of these people. The response was a most generous – €90,000.

Some of our emigrants have been unfortunate in that they have come into conflict with the law in the host country. As a result of which the sense of isolation and separation were intensified. Through the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas the Irish Church has provided them with support and with a link with their families at home. Through the trojan work being done by our Chaplains over the years, and responding to various reports and surveys commissioned by I.E.C.E. and with the help of lobbying by Fr. Paul Byrne, Alan Hilliard and others, the Irish Government in recent years have significantly increased resources for this important work. I warmly welcome this.

In view of our history of emigration and the way in which we have endeavoured to respond to the needs of our exiles, to journey with and support them, I believe that we are in a privileged position to influence the debate on migration and set a blue print for addressing the needs of migrants today.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the great work which is being done by the Chair of I.E.C.E, Bishop Seamus Hegarty, Fr. Alan Hilliard and my fellow Board Members in organising this important conference and reminding us not just of our history but challenging us to learn from that history and recognise our responsibilities towards migrants today.