



IRISH CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
COMHDHÁIL EASPAG CAITLICEACH ÉIREANN

From Pastoral Care to Public Policy - Journeying with the Migrant
21 – 23 November, 2007
Dunboyne Castle Hotel

OPENING ADDRESS
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PRESIDENT OF THE IRISH BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Introduction

Your Excellency, my brother Bishops, Reverend Fathers, Sisters, ladies and gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to open this Conference entitled '*From Pastoral Care to Public Policy – Journeying with the Migrant*'. Speaking to the Irish Bishops at the close of their *Ad Limina* visit last year, the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, made the point that 'after centuries of emigration, which involved the pain of separation for so many families, Ireland is experiencing for the first time a wave of immigration. Traditional Irish hospitality,' he said, 'is finding unexpected new outlets.'

This sets out very well the context and motivation of this Conference. I congratulate Bishop Seamus Hegarty, Fr Alan Hilliard and the staff of the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants for organising this timely initiative. The land of welcomes and hospitality is experiencing a new situation. It is a rapidly changing situation. Both Church and State, within their respective roles, share a concern and a responsibility to respond to that situation through appropriate Pastoral Care and Public Policy.

The Conference seeks to reflect on how these twin tracks might progress most effectively into the future. It will do so through the insights and, no doubt, the challenges of a comprehensive range of speakers with recognised expertise in this field.

I therefore want to welcome and thank, on your behalf, and on behalf of the Irish Bishops' Conference;

- Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio from the U. S. Bishops' Conference,
- Professor Desmond Cahill from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
- Mr. Francis Davis from the Von Hugel Institute, Dr. Patricia Kennedy, from the Department of Social Policy, UCD
- Mr Peter Sutherland who will address us on Friday.

I also extend a very warm welcome to Minister Conor Lenihan, Minister of State with special responsibility for Integration Policy at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. We are delighted that you could be with us Minister and I take this opportunity to thank you for the support given, by the Irish Government to the IECE, over the years. I also wish you every success in this important area of your responsibility to which the Irish Government has demonstrated a very high level of commitment and responsiveness to the work of NGO's.

I also extend a very warm welcome to all of you attending this Conference. It is a mark of your concern for this vital issue that you have given so generously of your time to be here. We have representatives from the public, voluntary and private sectors. We have many who are involved in the Church's mission to migrants. We also have representative of the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas.

The Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas is a related Commission of the Bishops' Conference. It was established in 1980 when the Commission for Emigrants identified emigrant prisoners and their families as a group that were in need of specific support and specialised care. I would like to take this opportunity to commend the ICPO for their outstanding work over the years. While the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four were among the more high profile cases, their work is normally that of quiet but effective practical and pastoral support for those Irish prisoners overseas and their families.

This work has culminated in the recently published '*Report on Irish Prisoners Abroad*' prepared by Mr Chris Flood. I commend that Report to all those with influence in this area. In particular I appeal to the Government to give urgent consideration to the recommendations made by the Report in the interests of human dignity and the care of some of its most vulnerable people abroad.

We commend our chaplains and others charged with the care of migrants and we encourage them to continue to identify and serve these vulnerable groups.

Irish Chaplaincy in Britain.

This Conference also marks fifty years of ministry to Irish emigrants in Britain. The words 'Irish' and 'emigration' are synonymous. Regardless of where you are in the world, the reputation of our Diaspora evokes sentiments of respect and affection.

Since the 1950's the pastoral care of the Church has never been far behind those who migrated from this island. Today I pay tribute to those who served with the chaplaincy in particular. Those women and men who ministered in the chaplaincy over these last fifty years provided invaluable and prophetic service to our people at a time when there were few opportunities in Ireland.

I also pay tribute to the many people who opened their homes and hearts to newly arriving neighbours, family members and friends as they stepped off the boat and faced their first days in a new and unfamiliar environment. The informal supportive welcome expressed in neighbourliness and simple acts of kindness are invaluable. Indeed I am sure that we all have memories of journeys where we met such kindness and goodness. It is telling that these are memories which stay with us for ever.

While for many who left our shores, emigration was the gateway to great success and a settled future, for some the pain of emigration was overwhelming. The casual, piecemeal structures often meant insecurity, and insecurity sometimes became the norm with destructive personal and social consequences.

I wish to acknowledge today the efforts of many Irish community groups and our Chaplaincy in Britain. Every day they seek to serve those arriving from our country that are in greatest need.

I wish to express my particular gratitude for the contributions made to the SIA (Supporting Irish Abroad) campaign between 2004–2006. The funds raised through this campaign allowed us to develop strategic outreaches to the most vulnerable Irish people abroad.

On behalf of the IECE I also wish to acknowledge the increased resources provided by the Irish Government in support of those who care for our communities abroad.

Pastoral Care of Migrants

A transition to a new land is filled with many unknowns. It can leave a person vulnerable. The quality of the welcome received by the migrant helps ease their fears and addresses their anxieties. Among the most important forms of welcome are the formal supports that a country has in place. The ability to access information regarding one's rights and services is vital in easing transition and integration. These structures are proving not only helpful but necessary here in Ireland.

Also critical to the successful integration of the migrant is the provision of adequate access to, and support for, the right to family life. We all know that to have those we love by our side, when circumstances weaken the body or soul, is invaluable.

In January this year Pope Benedict XVI made reference to the importance of the migrant family on the occasion of the 93rd World Day of Migrants and Refugees. 'The Family of Nazareth', he said, 'reflects the image of God, safeguarded in the heart of every human family, even if disfigured and weakened by emigration.' He continued 'If the migrant family is not guaranteed a real possibility of inclusion and participation, it is difficult to expect its harmonious development.'

Any law or policy therefore that establishes divisions between family members is a serious threat to integration and undermines a very basic human right – the right to family life. As a country which upholds the value of the family as the basic unit of society in its Constitution, it is imperative that we respect this value in all reasonable circumstances. The growing global trend of introducing laws which have the consequence of separating children from their parents, or spouses from each other for long or indefinite periods, is a matter of the utmost concern.

Global Migration.

The vulnerable step that seeks a foothold in a country which may eventually become home is a sound that increasingly is heard across our globe. At least 175 million men, women and children are estimated to be living outside their country of origin. This figure includes economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

More than ever migration has become a structural phenomenon in our world and an often bitter reality of the human condition. In the light of this reality it is imperative that we have policies in place that educate not just the migrant but also educate the citizens of the host nation. This Conference provides an opportunity for us, as a host nation, to reflect on the dynamic of migration and to develop those strategies that will make this new era in Irish society a time of enrichment.

This gathering, and others like it, provide an occasion to move in a direction that encourages healthy integration and social cohesion. The President of the Pontifical Commission for Migrants and Itinerant People; Cardinal Renato Martino, alluded to this point at a meeting for the European National Directors for the Pastoral Care of Migrants when he said:

‘It is the task of Governments to regulate the magnitude and form of migration flows. They should however take the common good into consideration, so that immigrants will be worthily welcomed, and the population of the receiving countries not put in a position that would lead them to reject the newcomers’.

Immigrants

The duty to protect the common good falls on all, including the immigrant. Education, language courses and programmes of welcome are necessary so that the immigrant can understand the cultural values and practices of the host nation. Whereas one has the right to observe the customs and practises of one's country of origin, the migrant is asked to commit to the building of a harmonious civil society in their new homeland. It was in this spirit that Pope Benedict said in a recent Angelus address:

'My desire is that relations among migrant populations and local populations would develop in that spirit of high moral civility that is the fruit of the spiritual and cultural values of every people and country. May those who are in favour of security and hospitality know how to use appropriate means to guarantee the rights and duties that are the foundation of all true common life and encounters among people.'

For my part, I wish to pay tribute to the immigrants who now bless our shores and who avail of the opportunities offered to them to work for a better future for their families. I commend those who have actively sought to foster the seeds of a secure and hospitable society in their local communities. I am conscious also of the many Catholic Parishes which have benefited from the enthusiasm and commitment of those, often with a deep and vibrant faith, who have come to us from other lands. As President McAleese recently commented, we have a good record in this country in welcoming the immigrant. This is something we should be proud of, but should never become complacent about.

Ireland –Challenges Today.

I wish therefore to acknowledge those who are actively involved in working with immigrants in Ireland. In fostering good relations between migrant and local populations you are offering a service that has the common good as its goal.

Worthy of particular mention in this regard is the work that goes on within our schools. It is often schools which are at the front line in the work of supporting immigrants. They experience, on a daily basis, the challenge and opportunities of integration. I am delighted that these issues will be explored in this meeting. I feel that the challenge faced by schools, and indeed in society at large, are well summarised in the words of Professor Des Cahill who will address us later today;

‘What we need are reflective inter-religious identities with a global view who are fully committed to their faith tradition, able to clarify and defend its values and attitudes but able to reflect on the essential nature of religious activity and expression and wish to dialogue with and participate with members of other faith groups.’

As an Irishman and as a Churchman, I am proud of the welcome provided by so many communities of faith throughout this island. You have responded concretely and generously to the biblical imperative to ‘welcome the stranger’. Or as St. Paul says, ‘make hospitality your special care’!

This goodness, which is so characteristic of Irish people, is the Gospel alive among us. It is intimately linked to our Christian faith and its influence on our culture. It is the Church actively becoming the 'sign and instrument' of God's love among us and the unity of humankind, a theme echoed in the Gospel of today's feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary - 'Look here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, my sister and my mother.' Mt12:50.

Conclusion

In conclusion then I would like to commend the energy and commitment of Bishop Seamus Hegarty, Chair of IECE and his predecessor Archbishop Neary. The last number of years have seen the work of the IECE go from strength to strength with an incredible number of diverse and effective initiatives being developed – all with the aim of providing practical Christian support to those in need. I thank the staff for their invaluable support in bringing these initiatives into place and keeping them alive.

I hope however that Bishop Seamus, Archbishop Neary and the staff of IECE will forgive me if I single out one particular person for mention on this occasion.

For the last four and half years Fr Alan Hilliard has been the face of IECE for most of you here today. He has also been the man whose incredible energy and drive has ensured its continued development and success. I want, on behalf of the Irish Bishops' Conference, to thank Fr Alan for his outstanding work during this time. As Executive Director he has given of himself generously and selflessly on so many fronts, not least in building up the sense of unity between those working in the different countries of the Commission's work. As the Lord now calls Fr Alan to different pastures, I hope and pray that his example and energy will continue to inspire those who work in this field. On my own behalf, I would like to thank him for his unfailing courtesy and enthusiasm and I am sure I speak for us all, when I say that we wish you, Fr Alan, every blessing, success and happiness in your new responsibilities.

Finally, may I wish all of you well in your deliberations over the next few days. I pray that the outcomes of this event will help to inform public policy on migration as suggested by the theme of our conference.

Perhaps I could conclude on this Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, with the prayer offered to us in the document *Erga Migrates Caritas Christi*. This document provides an excellent road map for all those committed to the human dignity of the migrant and the good of both sending and receiving societies:

May the Virgin Mother, who together with her Blessed Son knew the pain of emigration and exile, help us to understand the experience, and very often the drama, of those who are compelled to live far from their homeland, and teach us to serve them in their necessities, truly accepting them as brothers and sisters, so that today's migrations may be considered a call, albeit a mysterious one, to the Kingdom of God, which is already present in His Church, its beginning (cf. LG 9), and an instrument of Providence to further the unity of the human family and peace. Amen.

ENDS.