

## Dignity, medicines, nits and scabies: reflections on Calais, December 2015

**On Wednesday, I had a powerful lesson in dignity that will stay with me for life.** I wasn't prepared for it – I had thought Wednesday would be about medicines. It was, mainly, and I'll come back to that, but first I would like to invite you to remember the last time you went shopping for a pair of trousers – for yourself, or someone else.

Consider this scene; at the care4calais aid warehouse, about 400 pairs of jeans sorted into boxes by size, from 28" to 36" waist. No further sorting is practical – so different colours, and different leg sizes, are all in the same boxes.



As an aside, there is one bit of light relief at the warehouse – the “Hall of Fame” where T-shirts with scantily clad girls, gold spandex y-fronts and other items that have been donated and are woefully unsuitable are all pinned up, for a bit of humour. The volunteers are an amazing mix of Germans, Swedes, people from the UK and Ireland, all pitching in for a day, or a week, or months, from their own resources, to respond to the extraordinary needs and deep crisis of the Calais camp.

The boxes of jeans are put into a small lorry, arranged in a semi-circle for ease of access, and we drive out to the camp. There are 7,500 people there now, and since there is no way to wash clothes except in buckets, with cold water, no items of clothing last very long. A queue quickly forms by the lorry – a patient queue, up to a hundred and more strong at any one time, for the next two hours.

And here comes my lesson in dignity. I am not a great clothes shopper – I generally wear black (!) and I know my waist and leg sizes, so shopping is pretty simple. But even still, I like to try things on, and I appreciate that there are a range of styles and types to choose from. I also know several people who can spend hours – days, even – immersed in clothes shopping!

So consider the realities of this situation; a hundred and more people waiting on a muddy path on a cold afternoon. I was by the lorry, with another volunteer, meeting each refugee as they arrived, asking their size, and then calling back to the volunteer in the lorry. She would present me with two or three pairs of that size, in different colours. There was, of course, no chance to try anything on. The best we could do was for each person to hold a pair of jeans against themselves, to try to measure the waist and length as best they could, hoping it would look like a reasonable fit.

***Here's a little statistic – the average male waist size in the UK is 37". In the aid lorry, when we eventually finished, anything above 34" was unused, and we were having to turn away numerous people looking for 28" pairs.***

I was very conscious of those waiting, so initially I wanted to deal quickly, efficiently, with those at the front. And then, the more people I greeted, the more eyes that I met, the more time I spent, I found

***“These refugees – each one my brother, each one Christ (Mt. 25) – they had no privacy, no mirror, not much time, and no luxury of choice, except the very limited choice that we could offer.”***

myself thinking very differently – not about efficiency, but dignity. My mind suddenly went to the last time I was in a shop buying trousers, and to the fitting room. I had privacy, I had a mirror, I had time, and I had a luxury of choice. If I didn't want it, I didn't have to buy it. These refugees – each one my brother, each one Christ (Matthew 25) – they had no privacy, no mirror, not much time, and no luxury of choice, except the very limited choice that we could offer. Very often the leg size was woefully wrong – holding a pair of trousers several inches too long, like a clown outfit, they always saw the funny side – handing the trousers back to me with a smile, ready to see if there was anything else. I found myself trying ever harder, willing that something left in the boxes would at least look mainly

right. But towards the end there was literally nothing else, and the best we could do was gesture to roll up the legs, at least to try to give them something. It was deeply pitiful – and yet, through it all, these men kept their dignity – with humour, with thanks, with decency. Clare and Roxy, the more experienced Calais volunteers, showed me what smiles and banter can do in such a situation, and it was hard but also so necessary to keep smiling, keep being positive, and above all to never forget that, with each new person, in front of me stood my brother.

I well know that others take the view that the refugees are lucky to get anything at all; why should there be choice? Why does it matter if something doesn't really fit? Dignity is the answer. Simple human dignity – we are all created in the image and likeness of God. I should stress here that no-one should be in any doubt that the refugees are absolutely, humbly grateful for what they receive. That is not in question. But dignity matters: put ourselves in their place, by the back of that lorry – we who are used to choosing clothes from racks upon racks, in well stocked shops.

On Wednesday, we ran out of 28" waist sizes first of all, then 30", then 32". Here's a little statistic – the average male waist size in the UK is 37". In the aid lorry, when we eventually finished, anything above 34" was unused, and we were having to turn away numerous people looking for 28" pairs. There was a particular sadness to turning individuals away empty handed.

There is a deeper sadness of the heart as I write this back at home, reflecting on how this entire situation robs fine, decent people of the very human dignity that all of us deserve. The Calais refugees are grown men with lives, families, humour and intelligence. They include many professionals, who had good jobs in their home countries, before war and terror overwhelmed them. Now, they stand in the cold and mud by the back of a lorry waiting for over an hour for a pair of jeans that partially fits them. And yet, despite everything, they do so with dignity. “When I was naked, you clothed me” says Jesus, and I understand that better since Wednesday than at any time in my life.

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And so to the medicines. Another statistic? The ratio of GPs:patients in the UK is approximately 1:2,000. It can be more in some places, less in others, but no worse than 1:2,500.

For the 7,500 refugees in Calais there are no GPs. Instead, there are a handful of medical caravans dotted around the camp, staffed intermittently by volunteers, and occasionally a doctor from Medecins du Monde in a slightly larger medical tent. These facilities only operate in daylight, because there is no way for them to run at night. Perhaps “medical caravan” might give an image of a big six berth caravan, wired with water, heat and light: just look at the pictures. The nurse we spoke to sees around 200 people per day in there. Outside there is a notice for “Onion cough syrup” - a mixture of honey and onions.



So on Wednesday we brought 650 bottles of cough medicine, 500 little tubs of vicks vapo-rub, 350 bottles of olbas oils and 400 nit combs. We also brought 250 tubes of something called Permethrin, which is a medicine for scabies. Yes, nits and scabies. It is Northern Europe, in 2015, and we were bringing medicines to fight diseases last seen on this scale in France in the trenches of the battlefields of the two world wars. I have to thank Dave and his team at pills2u.co.uk and James and the team at Boots pharmacy franchise in Basildon hospital. They supplied us with £7500 worth of medicines, fully paid for by the donations we have received over the last four months. In Calais, I know that they will be eked out for as long as possible, used carefully to treat as many as possible.

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Wednesday was a sobering day. It will be Christmas in a fortnight – and there are two (donated) trees outside the little church, with decorations consisting of little twists of foil. Again, there is an attempt at dignity here, even in the most basic of conditions. And just as Christ was born into the mud and cold of the Bethlehem stable, and for the first two years of his life lived as a refugee in flight from the murderous Herod, I do trust that Christ is there in the camp at Calais – there not as an observer, but in the sweat and effort of those building the shelters to try to stave off the worst of the winter weather; there in the hands and hearts of the nurses who volunteer, and the carpenters, and all those who have been drawn to this forlorn place to try to bring hope – like Liam and Alice, from our parish, who travelled with me and worked extremely hard all day. Above all Christ is there in the refugees, in their hopes and dreams, in their hearts and souls, in their God-created, God-beloved dignity.

The night before we came to Calais I was given a cheque for £1000, specifically to help with shelters. Asking around on Wednesday, the need is clearly for insulation and so we will spend the next few weeks getting hold of rolls of insulation, ready to bring over in January. If we get a few more donations, we can also buy some more of the scabies and other medicines. And in the meantime we can only hope and pray that there is someone in political leadership, somewhere, who will grasp the complex and difficult levels and layers of the whole Calais situation, and work to provide a permanent solution that gives each refugee what they need and deserve – hope, dignity, compassion and peace.

Fr Dominic Howarth, December 2015

## Could you support the Calais Refugees?

The aid being delivered from Basildon is inspired by the work of *Seeking Sanctuary*, and in Calais we are working with *Secours Catholique*, *Auberges des Migrants* and *Care4calais*.

Wherever aid will best and most effectively be used, we deliver a package about once a month, and we adjust it based on what those in Calais all the time are telling us is most useful.

- In September, we took mainly shoes and clothes.
- In October, we took toothpaste, soap, toothbrushes, pants and socks, packaged into “1000 packets of hope and love”, with messages from our schoolchildren.
- In November we took blankets, duvets, some cough medicine, and 1000 hats and gloves.
- In December we delivered £7500 worth of basic medicines – cough mixture, nit combs, and medicines for scabies, along with 1000 tubes of toothpaste and 1000 bars of soap.



- In January 2016 we will deliver insulation for the basic tarpaulin and wooden dwellings that are being constructed (like the ones in this picture) – much more sturdy than tents, and warmer, when insulated.

Generally, we have found that as donated items come in a wide variety of sizes and styles, they can be hard to sort and distribute. We aim for multiple units of items, and have found wholesalers that will support us in the quality, price and uniformity of what they offer.

**We therefore gratefully accept donations of any amount,  
as cheques payable to “Our Lady and All Saints.”**

**Please mark the envelope “Calais” and post to:**

**Fr Dominic Howarth  
Calais Appeal  
Holy Trinity Church  
71 Wickhay  
Basildon SS15 5AD**

**The money is strictly ringfenced** and used only for items to support the refugees. The petrol, ferry and any other costs of the journey are covered by private donation, and so every penny received is spent on the items for the refugees.

If you are a group or individual wanting to help, then contact [www.care4calais.org](http://www.care4calais.org) or use the website [www.calaidipedia.co.uk](http://www.calaidipedia.co.uk) which has all the information you need, and co-ordinates a wide variety of aid deliveries and volunteer offers of help.

For additional information specifically about the Basildon project, which is supported by a number of churches and individuals in Basildon, and other parishes within the Diocese of Brentwood, please feel welcome to email [frdominic@basildoncatholics.org](mailto:frdominic@basildoncatholics.org) or call 01268 281732.