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Through 2020 with Seeking Sanctuary.

Life for Calaisiens

At Christmas, we remembered the Holy Family's flight into Egypt to escape King Herod's massacre of the innocents – a flight that reflects Abraham's Old Testament escape from famine. How did the Egyptians feel? Did they demand labour? Could Joseph practice his trade? Were the newcomers detained and questioned about reality of fears of violence?



Not all Calaisiens sympathise with the exiles around their town – they have their own problems. Many markets and streets are empty; trade has shifted to the outskirts. Traditional industries have either closed or become automated. Unemployment is 30 to 40% in places and the poverty rate is more than double the national average. The National Front gains votes from traditional politicians, who use hostile rhetoric to try to regain them.

The attraction of Calais is that the UK is 21 miles away. Governments create unpleasant conditions and a hostile climate, trying to reduce the pull. Trees have gone, ditches are flooded and walls, floodlights and fences have been built with added barbed wire.

Regulations increasingly forbid town centre gatherings and distributions of aid. Portrayed as less than human, the exiles are hidden from sight. Police violence, the destruction of makeshift camps and confiscation of belongings are routine.

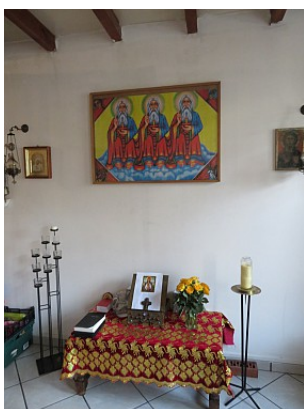
Priti Patel followed many predecessors with her latest security initiative – most recently Sajid Javid (2019), Amber Rudd (2016), and Theresa May (August 2015 and May 2016). None stopped people arriving. Care4Calas founder Clare Moseley said, “All that is achieved is further brutalisation of already traumatised people.” Asylum can only be claimed upon UK soil and dangerous journeys are currently needed to do this – no routes are safe and legal. Sealing borders fails and equipment suppliers profit. Securitisation shifts migration routes towards more dangers and risks of drowning. 8417 people are known to have crossed the Channel in small boats during 2020.

The Home Office

Media reports have concentrated upon these Channel crossings and upon a series costly, of hare-brained, illegal and physically impossible schemes that have apparently

been considered to make these unviable. Several Parliamentary committees are quietly giving more measured attention to how immigrants are dealt with. Accounts of evidence received are posted on the Parliamentary website. A couple of findings from these are that there is little or no attempt to assess the success of new measures and that two-thirds of people arriving at our coast would be eligible for asylum if their claims were properly processed. Rapid decisions to refuse to process claims or to assess the vulnerability of claimants result in deportations without correct assessment of the validity of cases – unless “activist lawyers” manage to intervene and hold the government to account before the law.

House of Welcome

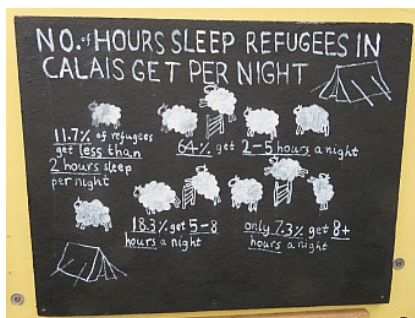


The London Catholic Worker community established Maria Skobstova House in Calais: a sign of humanity, welcoming and valuing guests and encouraging mutual help. They keep busy, learning French, playing chess, joining painting or yoga sessions, and outdoor plants produce a pleasant corner to get fresh air.

Rev. Kirrilee Reid provided fine leadership and collegiality through much of 2020, administering the house and working with other support groups. She has moved on to new challenges and is sorely missed. Her predecessor, Bro. Johannes Martens, has settled in London, often seen out in his distinctive blue cassock.

The Story Continues

Reports from contacts in Calais and Dunkirk arriving via our partner organisation “People not Walls” become more and more disturbing.



There are usually around 300 people at the Secours Catholique day centre in the afternoons, but at the start of December only 150 turned up on some days. It is very cold and people cannot warm up. They suffer from living in the open, with complaints about frostbite, cracked skin and muscular or bone pains. The usual problems with access to showers and laundry persist: many do their laundry at the centre, but there is no time to dry things.

The Red Cross has treated people who have been clubbed. Police violence seems to have increased and phones are seized when people use them to record incidents. Pre-dawn evictions from informal places of shelter continue to occur on a daily basis, though not always from all sites and not always following the same sequence. Observers have been prosecuted and fined.

Lessons not Learned

20 years ago in June the bodies of 58 young Chinese were found at Dover, suffocated in a container from Zeebrugge. A small group including a Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Kent gathered this year, socially distanced, to remember them at their seafront memorial, with livestream to many more – a first lock-down success. We also remembered the 39 Vietnamese found dead in Essex in October 2019 after a similar disastrous voyage.



The Bishop of Dover, Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin gave a stirring address, holding back no punches in speaking of the historical and continuing injustices that date back to our colonial era.

Governments are obliged to ensure rights to life, liberty and security. Saving lives is paramount: we should not choose to endanger lives by limiting access to our territory. Access is essential to show responsibility towards our fellows. Policies and programmes should protect human rights and dignity and allow development of their God-given potential.

Imagine

“Imagine” was the theme of Refugee Week 2020. A pandemic demands imaginative adaptations of old ways of working and replacement of those that fail. Many see signs of hope for a future when we care for our planet and protect and value human lives – and look less at how much things cost or how much someone earns, but rather at the benefits they bring.

Pope Francis is one of the few world leaders to consistently urge support for refugees. In his recent letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, he points to the fabled Good Samaritan unhesitatingly helping a needy traveller from a hated race and ensuring that he had shelter and treatment for his wounds. Pope Francis writes that God does not ask us to say “Am I my brother's keeper” and leave others to respond, but instead encourages us to create a different culture, where we resolve conflicts and care for one another.

Reactions

We know that the most so-called 'illegal immigrants' have experienced grinding poverty, discrimination or the adverse effects of climate change or are fleeing war, persecution and terror. In the face of terrible things, they have chosen risky routes towards hope and life.

After pointing this out, one response said: *When are you dumb do gooders going to get it in your thick heads that the only reason these immigrants come to Britain is to claim benefits what is wrong with you 90% of us British DONT want them here? You disgust me I hope you get karma for trying to destroy our British culture*

Other countries, e.g., Sweden and Hungary, house several times more refugees per head we do. Only 5% of those who cross the Mediterranean try to reach us and there is no valid reason to accept proportionately fewer than other European countries. Our people are no less compassionate and responses to our advocacy confirm that many want to help.

In Dover

27 September was the Catholic Church's annual Day for Migrants and Refugees. Bishop Paul McAleenan, the bishops' spokesman on these issues, visited Dover beforehand to meet volunteers working alongside those arriving in small boats and passing briefly through the port. Our time of reflection featured in a broadcast of BBC TV's "Songs of Praise".



On 27 October a Kurdish/Iranian family of five tragically drowned off Dunkirk – two parents and children aged nine, six and 15 months. They set off into rough seas in an overcrowded boat and soon capsized. The body of their youngest child is still missing. Bishop Rose Hudson-Wilkin said: 'My heart is full of sadness. We cannot stand by while those who seek refuge and safety are dying at the hands of those who exploit them and their hope. Children and their families are being washed away just miles from our shores. We must do more to help our fellow sisters, brothers, sons and daughters seek safe haven and be offered the same chances to live their lives as we do, with peace and love.'



Seeking Sanctuary lays flowers at the Dover memorial after every drowning. Others follow us, and we are pleased that TV news programmes and other media covered our simple act. On the evening of 30 October, a candlelit vigil drew over 50 people at short notice to a true expression of solidarity.

A Challenge on Our Doorstep

Since September, 420 asylum seekers – young men who had earlier arrived on the nearby Channel coast – have been brought to live in the run-down Napier Barracks near Folkestone. In October over 300 locals joined a 'Welcome Event' outside, bringing placards and banners. Many chants, songs and cheers sounded out, and despite the wire fence, all were connected by their common humanity.

Numerous local groups are organising support. Despite prior assurances from the Home Office that all their needs would be met, extra bedding, changes of clothing and toiletries have been supplied; equipment for indoor and outdoor games is also needed to relieve boredom.



There are reports of poor mental health, suicide attempts, self-harm and unrest. On November 26, several humanitarian organisations expressed concerns about conditions in ex-military accommodation. They suggest that these sites are "unsuitable" for "people seeking asylum and survivors of modern slavery," because of "a lack of access to adequate and appropriate healthcare services." There are also concerns about "lack of compliance with Covid-19 regulations and the risk of re-traumatisation triggered by accommodation in former military barracks".



In December, Seeking Sanctuary joined dozens of other individuals and groups in signing a letter asking for more humane and dignified treatment and for improvements to conditions in Napier Barracks and similar accommodation elsewhere, in other ex-military premises and in immigration detention centres. So far, no meaningful reply has been received.

Hope

It is not easy to remain hopeful in the face of such hardships. We are sustained by the examples of many volunteers who spend long periods in France attending to the needs of the exiles and noting their treatment. And of those who spread the news about what is happening and advocate for better treatment of those who seek sanctuary. And of all who encourage people to provide help, recognition and comfort.