



26th Week and the Year and the Memorial of St Faustina – 1 and 5 October 2023 in the light of World Day of Migrants and Refugees

Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“Lord, make me know your ways” (Psalm 24)

Last weekend I chose to focus in my Reflection on the Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving for the Harvest rather than the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. I knew it would give me time to hear what Pope Francis had to say on his Apostolic journey to Marseilles when he was addressing Bishops of the Mediterranean region (some 70 countries) on the challenges facing them in the area of migration. This was the third such gathering: two had already taken place in Bari and Florence in Italy. All included representation of other churches and faiths. In Marseilles there was a particular focus on young people too.

I remember a retired Bishop saying some time ago: *“keep your hats on when Pope Francis gets into his stride; there’s going to be change.”* Well, this is nowhere more true than on the subject of migrants and refugees! In his address at the weekend, Pope Francis said *“those who take refuge in our midst should not be viewed as a heavy burden to be borne, if we consider them instead as brothers and sisters, they will appear to us above all as gifts ...the future will not lie in being closed, which is a return to the past”*. As Christians we can see this is an important principle guiding our relationships with migrants. At the same time we live in a society where our views are being impacted on by politics of left and right, from those who believe in an entirely open society to those who want to close our borders entirely. Neither is going to work in practice. Pope Francis brings to the fore principles rooted in the Gospel and Church teaching that we need to hear, reflect on and strive to take to heart. Like the two brothers in the Gospel Parable for the 26th Sunday we have to reflect seriously on what the Father wants us to do and why. One Brother said he would go to the vineyard as requested by the Father and then didn’t go; the other said he would not go but then *“thought better of it”* and went.

The other Saturday 16 September, I was in Stoke-on-Trent for a special celebration of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Community coming originally from Kerala in India. A most interesting aspect of their celebration was the confidence they had in their contribution to society: they invited local political representation to attend and had made a video showing their contribution to many areas of the health service, NHS and social care. It was impressive and I was made aware of how much their contribution is needed in shortage areas of skilled and hard-working staff. The Syro-Malabar Community also showed off the youth work they lead in: especially music, dance and song. We are blessed in the Church to have intercultural celebrations that highlight the way that

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



different ethnic communities live and express their Faith; the contribution they make to wider society could be a valuable part of future celebrations. This could assist us in responding positively to these words of Pope Francis in the message for the World Day of Migrants *“we are called to show maximum respect for the dignity of each migrant; this entails accompanying and managing waves of migration as best we can, constructing bridges and not walls”*.

The response to Pope Francis’ words in Marseille was not altogether welcoming, one French politician saying *“he does not know the type of immigration we are experiencing”*. Undoubtedly, we have complicated issues at a practical level but we should be prepared to reflect on Church teaching as interpreted by Pope Francis, like the son who went away and considered his Father’s request and then returned to give him a yes to his request to go into the vineyard.

In these days we are experiencing the horror of the war in Ukraine, where people are forced to leave home, and the recent upheaval in Nagorno-Karabakh where Christians are leaving for Armenia to be secure. The ideal for Pope Francis that *“freedom ... should always mark the decision to leave one’s native land”* is a long way from being achieved. Many who have come to live among us in recent times would embrace the words of Pope St John Paul II in 2003 quoted by Pope Francis *“as regards migrants and refugees, building conditions of peace means in practice being seriously committed to safeguarding first of all the right not to emigrate, that is, the right to live in peace and dignity in one’s own country”* (Message for the 90th World Day of Migration and Refugees, 3). That was not the situation Mary and Joseph faced when they had to flee to Egypt with the child Jesus.

The Reading from St Paul to the Philippians for the 26th Sunday has these key words: *“In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus.”* The Pope points to important principles in the midst of the great debate about immigrants – underpinning them as those words of St Paul. This coming week we have an important signpost to conversion of hearts with the Feast of St Faustina, the Apostle of Divine Mercy.

Like the son who “thought better of it” and went into the vineyard, we have an opportunity to think again about our attitude to immigrants: to ask *“do I see Christ in each one?”*

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