

PILGRIM CATHOLIC

Newsletter of the Gypsy & Traveller Support Network

ISSUE 2
Autumn 2006

IN THIS ISSUE...

Page 1

- New Initiatives by Government and Commission for Racial Equality

Page 2

- My Spiritual Home With Travellers

Page 3

- Travelling Community in Nottingham Diocese

Page 4

- Our Pilgrimage to Knock Shrine
- New appointment in Westminster Diocese
- Feet that Made a Difference

Page 5

- A very special afternoon in May

Page 6

- Reflections of a Traveller

Page 7

- Traveller families raise money for CAFOD

“ *let Travellers be known as they really are, not as they are so ungenerously imagined to be* ”

Pope John Paul II
1990

New Initiatives by Government and Commission for Racial Equality

Circular 01/2006 (DCLG) requires Local Authorities to identify in their Development Plans the location of appropriate sites – local authority sites, those of registered social landlords and privately owned sites. Both residential and transit sites should be provided. The circular also seeks to protect the traditional traveling way of life and to help avoid Travellers becoming homeless through eviction from unauthorized sites without an alternative to move to.

Local authorities must explain how land will be made available and give timescales for provision. They have the power to allocate vacant land or under-used land and are not bound to dispose of land at the highest price if it leads to social improvement. The Government has power to intervene in the process when it considers that the constraints being proposed by local authorities are not justified.

Temporary permissions should be granted where possible while new sites are being prepared. When no other suitable sites exist outside the Green Belt, alterations can be made to the Green Belt boundary.

At the same time as the Government was preparing Circular 01/2006, the Commission for Racial Equality was conducting an Inquiry into how well local authorities were planning, providing and managing sites as part of their duty under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 to promote equality of opportunity and good race relations. The results of this Inquiry were published in the report *Common Ground: equality, good race relations and sites for Gypsies and Irish Travellers*.

The Inquiry found that the approach taken by most local authorities perpetuates a vicious circle of failure to provide services and poor race relations. The Report makes a series of recommendations for Government, local authorities and others in order to move beyond this vicious cycle.

My Spiritual Home With Travellers By Brother Louis

I met the Travellers thirteen years ago in Peckham and since then, as I think about it, it almost seems as if they have become my life blood. Why? The Travellers, in this age of materialism, social alienation, spiritual cynicism and any number of other things that have so often been described in terms of the malaise of modern man, seem to have sprung from the second chapter of Acts. As in Acts, there are some who are holy, the majority struggle along the journey and, yes, there are also some who are lost along the byways of violence, petty crime, drugs and drink and any number of other things that sap their moral strength and the beautiful dream of what they could be. That being said, they all feed my soul almost in a Eucharistic sense. In their example - even among those who are suffering - I see an innocence and simplicity of being that is

nothing less than inspirational and speaks of a natural capacity to live and understand the Gospel.

There is one site, where the Travellers are like a huge family, that I have had the privilege to get to know in Oxford. I immediately discovered a great affinity among these folks for the particular way of life I have chosen as a priest and religious, as I and also several other Franciscan brothers used to visit not only in a pastoral capacity but as friends. The openness and simplicity of their lives, not to mention the deep and direct expression of their Catholic faith, lit a fire in my heart and strengthened my vocation in so many ways as I struggle to discern how to be a Franciscan in the modern world. In many respects they have become my teachers. One of the most profound experiences that I have had at the site is the celebration of the Mass, with the entire community gathered around, often in the cramped space of a simple trailer or outside under the wide blue sky. All ages were present, from the elderly patriarch and matriarch that almost seem like mythical figures from the Old Testament, to their children, grown now with families of their own, and the myriad little ones, sitting cross-legged, wide eyed as the ancient faith is passed on. We spoke of the martyrs; not in Rome, but the fields of Ireland and I saw in these people's eyes a reflection of the same nobility.

I have recently learned that I will finally be able to return to Oxford and I am greatly looking forward to it. Since then, I have met many other Travellers in many other sites but, in a strange way, I will always feel that somehow the Redbridge site in Oxford is my spiritual home.

**Travelling Community in
Nottingham Diocese**

Sr Patricia, Derbyshire

*It is a delight to hear
Traveller women
expounding their
philosophy of family,
survival and coping with all
the buffeting that life
throws at them.*

Their rich humour gives us many a chuckle. We are impressed by the straight forward way which committed Christians take God at His word for living and life-giving truth.

In our areas, as in others, many Travellers live in houses, which are usually identified by the perpetually open windows letting in the fresh air they and their forebears have been accustomed to. These houses and the trailers lived-in by other members of the community are easily picked out – statues and other pious objects can be seen at every window.

Come the Spring, the trailers are on the move, navigated by drivers perhaps unable to read but steering a course marked out by familiar pubs and churches. So schooling is not easy. Those authorities which provide houses insist on the children attending school but their presence can be sporadic if during the Summer they move with their nomadic families and don't return until the Winter.

We find, in visiting them, their sense of community is real, hence those living in houses find life very lonely. Hospitality is good, the sick and disabled are nursed devoutly and hospital patients are visited

constantly, often in hard-to-cope-with numbers.

We applaud the fact that St Benedict School in Derby run a weekly class for parents of travelling children in basic reading and writing skills. The school issued letters to parents inviting them to a meeting to explore ways of joint action to benefit the children.

As we feel prison visitation is important, we try to visit the Travellers when 'housed' there. As I now have a personal identification, with picture, I am able to visit any prison without much of the 'red tape' encountered in the past.

We visited Glen Parva Young offenders Institution, Leicester Prison, Lincoln Prison, Ashwell, Morton Hall, Boston, Swinderby, Manchester and Whatton, over a period of time. Jailed Travellers tend to bond together as a defence against the taunts – and worse – of other prisoners. The cells occupied by them in prisons and youth detention centres, display a 'repository shop' of statues and other pious objects.

Because some members behave badly – and which community doesn't have 'bad eggs' – all are classed in the same category, whereas the majority are honest, hard-working people. Some notices are not complimentary and are doubtless illegal. One outside a Nottinghamshire public house warns 'no gypsies served here'. Officialdom in this country may not be keen on Travellers but the sick patients in care homes, Lourdes etc... where Travellers do hospital work, have certainly never objected.

Our Pilgrimage to Knock Shrine

M McDonagh, Manchester

In May of this year a group of us travelled from Manchester to Knock, on pilgrimage. On arrival we looked for a B&B and were booked into one by the woman of the house. We proceeded to unpack our bags and relax over a cup of tea. After some time there was a knock on the door and a man with a large book in his hand, entered saying that we were booked in by mistake. He regretted the fact that we must leave as our rooms were already booked to other people. We were disappointed but accepted it.

As we were re-packing my son in law returned from the shop and on hearing our story went to the desk to speak to the man who again produced the book explaining their mistake in double booking the rooms. My son in law felt there was something suspicious going on and on saying 'excuse me' took the book from the man's hand. As he guessed the space for that day had only our names written in. There were no other bookings.

As our names were (are): McDonagh,

Joyce and Ward. *We can only guess that we were asked to leave because we were Travellers.*

My sister and I are Great Grandparents many times over and my daughter and her husband are Grandparents, so we cannot see that we posed any threat to these people. Luckily it was off-peak season and it was easy to find alternative accommodation.

New appointment in Westminster Diocese

Sr Petronia

My name is Sr. Petronia OSM and I am a member of the Congregation of the Servants of Mary (Servites). The Westminster Diocese has asked me to coordinate the Catechetical provision for the Irish Travellers, together with some Pastoral care in the Diocese on a part-time basis. This will initially involve finding out where the Travellers are located and any provision and ministry to Travellers already taking place. I shall be living in Hackney, where we currently have a Travellers' site located in the Parish. I am on a big learning curve at the moment and trying to make contacts with key people who already have more experience than I do with the Travelling Community. I hope to contact each parish to find out where their Travellers are located and whether they are on sites or housed. I am looking forward to the challenges and blessing that this Ministry will bring and the support and friendship of others around the country who work with the Travelling Community.

Feet that Made a Difference

Rev David Grey, Community Coordinator, The Monastery of St Francis and Gorton Trust, Manchester

In the early 1990s, we lived on the West Gorton estate, East Manchester. The estate was a triangle with major roads on either side. Despite being mainly family housing, there were no play facilities for children and young people.

Drugs were abundant in the area and having growing children myself, I was keen to protect the young by making life on the estate more interesting for them. On applying to Save the Children, I got a grant

to employ a female co-worker; together we started to organise activities. The children responded to our initiative coming forward with suggestions of their own. As our numbers grew we needed help from the adults in the community but they didn't want to get involved.

However, over a period, our work began to have an impact on behaviour. The children began to get stronger and more confident. Some, who had been excluded from school due to their challenging behaviour, were now being consulted by their teachers about projects they were involved in and asked to present talks to their classmates. They won a Community Foundation award and were invited to take part in helping plant up Manchester's first inner city orchard.

One hot day I was walking through the estate when I was set-upon by four local drug dealers. They hadn't liked the idea of the young being strong, occupied and able to resist their attempts to give them drugs. They had tried to intimidate me on occasions, but this time it was serious.

The first one hit me in the face with a fist full of coins and split my nose. Instinctively, because of my past as a member of a Hells Angels group, I reacted and took him down. I could hear children's voices in the distance and stopped retaliating...to practise what I preached. Soon I was on the ground.

I curled into a ball to protect myself from the continuous kicks. Suddenly they became fewer. Cleaning the blood from my eyes I noticed one pair of feet facing away from me, facing in a different direction from those that were kicking me. That person was pushing the attackers away. I looked up and saw Jimmy Reynolds, a Traveller, the father of some of the children in my group. Soon

other men joined him and in a short time the attackers fled.

Next day I had plenty people asking to help with our projects, wanting to improve their estate. From then on we had street parties, fun events, trips out and even family holidays. Jimmy Reynolds had shown other adults that it was possible to make a difference.

Often when I read the poem 'Footprints' I think of that incident. That day God sent the friendly feet of a human father to protect me and to protect the young on our estate.

(Note. Sadly Jimmy Reynolds died January 2003 but not without making his mark)

A very special afternoon in May

Jennifer Austin, Kent

One Friday afternoon, Father Louis Maggiore brought great happiness and joy to a yard I visit. The family had asked for the yard to be blessed and Father spent 2½ hours with them visiting each trailer, giving private time to those with problems, hearing confessions, giving Holy Communion and celebrating the Sacrament of the Sick. It was a very moving experience for us all.

We discussed with Father why Travellers were forsaking the faith and joining sects. Eileen, whose eyes are always alight with love of God, said that Travellers are drawn to charismatic celebrations and perhaps we might win some back to the faith if we have such a celebration in Kent. Fr Louis was very much in agreement and we are putting our heads together and praying to the Holy Spirit in preparation for what we hope may be a regular charismatic service here.

The migrant workers in the area often find themselves homeless and without funds. The family in this yard have given a trailer to three of these workers and, even in the winter months when work was scarce, they shared any work they had with them so that they might have money to buy food.

In another yard I visit, the Travellers have done exactly the same. Bridie and Joe Jones live near me and I have the honour of being Godmother to two of their grandchildren. They have known what it is like to be hungry, so whenever they have had money to spare, they have made mountains of ham sandwiches and have gone up to London to distribute them to the homeless on the streets and in the parks.

I feel ashamed of my own response to the homeless – limited to giving a donation – when I see the Travellers, so disadvantaged themselves, carrying out Jesus’s command to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger in such a practical way.

David, aged 11, made his First Holy Communion last year. He is a thoughtful boy, drawn to prayer. He is now considering whether he has a vocation to be a priest when he grows up. Is it not in the faith-filled homes of the Travellers that an answer to the shortage of vocations may be found?

“You are dear to the heart of the Pope, as are all minorities who have suffered much – I think for example of the persecutions during the last war – you belong to these minorities who constantly experience simple and precarious living conditions, and try to be faithful to their ethnic identity, to their itinerant way of life and to their long cultural tradition.

Faced by this situation, the Church concerns herself with your problems. She wishes that you may everywhere find – and especially among those who bear the name of Christians – a welcome worthy of Christ marked, that is, by understanding, respect for your identity, concern for you dignity, friendly dialogue and humanitarian aid.”

John Paul II

Reflections of a Traveller

Kathleen Gaffey

Things have really changed since my parents were young, from the way they lived, in tents and wagons even the attitude and way they brought up us children.

Being a Traveller is not just a way of life, it is what and who we are, but the travelling way of life is not for everyone. Some Travellers now prefer being settled, some in a house, others in a site. And with the new laws out now, it’s very difficult to just travel anywhere at anytime.

I came from a family of fifteen and my husband from a family of twenty. I have lived in a house, caravan, mobile home and

now a chalet. I've also traveled around some of England and Wales.

If wishes came true, I'd love to be back traveling and not stop until I wanted to when and where I wanted to, but alas it's not to be.

I don't really travel now as my four children need their schooling. I was took out of school at 15, to help care for my younger sisters and brothers, but many Travellers are now realizing school education is fundamental to their children's welfare. We even have some children going on to college.

Because there isn't as much travelling as there used to be, we don't get to meet or stop with many other Travellers as we would like.

So going to different fairs, Appleby, Stow and the likes, is a good way of meeting up with old friends and making new ones.

Some of the old traditions are being lost, like tin smithing, whereas some are still going strong, like the saying 'a family that prays together stays together.' Well I'm blessed to say I live in a site with most of my sisters and brothers and my parents, and on most Mondays, we get together with a nun we have known for several years. Sister Margaret comes to one of the homes in the site where we will all gather to do the Rosary, Divine Mercy and several other prayers and have talks with Sister Margaret, leading up to their First Holy Communion and Confirmation. Sister has become a very good and loyal friend to us and many other Travellers, not just in Oxford.

Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Gypsies

The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People has published *Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Gypsies* (Vatican City, 2005)

Traveller families raise money for CAFOD

The families on a Travellers' site in Hackney Marshes raised a total of £450 for CAFOD during Advent 2005. Having been moved by stories of poverty they were seeing on the TV, the families wanted to help in some way. They placed collection boxes in each of their homes and succeeded in raising a substantial amount. Rebecca Mongdon, 8 years old, realized that others had a greater need than her and handed over her own pocket money as a donation to CAFOD. Helen Gilbert, a CAFOD Volunteer, went along to thank them and to receive the cheque. She said 'it was a privilege to be invited along to meet the families and to say thank you on behalf of CAFOD'.

NATIONAL GATHERING OF
CATHOLICS INVOLVED IN A
MINISTRY TO TRAVELLING
PEOPLE

**Wistaston Hall, Crewe
23-24 March 2007**

This meeting will take place at Wistaston Hall in Crewe from Friday evening 23 March 2007 until late Saturday afternoon 24 March 2007.

Some participants will come for the full meeting and others for Saturday only.

The cost, for those who are able to reclaim it from their parish, dioceses, religious order or organization, will be £50 for the full meeting and £25 for Saturday only. Those who cannot reclaim the cost will not be charged, and in some cases we may be able to help with travel expenses.

There are limited places, so please book a place as early as possible.

For further information, or to book a place for the meeting, either contact:

richard.zipfel@cbcew.org.uk
or: Liz Taite on 020 7901 4828

Or: write to
Travellers' Network National
Meeting,
Catholic Bishops Conference
39 Eccleston Square
London SW1V 1BX.

POEM BY BLUE JONES

A Tear

*As I approach my thirteenth year,
I stop to reflect and shed a tear.*

*A tear for those who we have lost,
By racist attacks and lives it's cost.*

*A tear for folk who lost their land,
Now on the road, Section 61 in their
hand.*

*A tear for those who hide who they are,
In fear of a beating or even a scar.*

*A tear for a race trying hard to survive,
In a world full of hate and utter despise.*

*If you thought for a minute this is about
you, I must let you know -
You're a gypsy too.*

*Read by Blue at the Yellow Rose Award
Ceremony, 25.9.06*