



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

World Day for Migrants and Refugees

Bishop Patrick Lynch's Homily

FEAST OF SANTO NIÑO, ST GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL, SOUTHWARK, 19 JANUARY 2014

It is always a joy to celebrate and participate in the feast of Santo Niño especially here at St. George's Cathedral in Southwark. Appropriately, it usually falls on the same day when the Church celebrates the World Day for Migrants and Refugees - a day when Our Holy Father calls on Catholics throughout the world to pray especially for migrants and refugees.

In our Gospel today St. Matthew invites us to reflect on the gift that children are for the family, for the Church and for society. Matthew describes the scene where the apostles are arguing among themselves as to which of them is the greatest. Jesus, however, takes this opportunity to teach them a lesson about the dignity and importance of children. The apostles are completely absorbed in themselves so Jesus reminds them that being a true disciple means being aware of others and caring for others especially the most vulnerable and in particular children. For the Filipino community the Feast of Santo Niño is a very special celebration. It reminds us that Jesus too was a child and calls us to care for all children as if one was caring for the child Jesus. In our Mass today we pray, therefore, for all children but we also affirm the dignity of all migrants and recognise the positive contributions that migrants are making to our church and our society here in England and Wales.

First of all, we pray on the Feast of Santo Niño for all children but especially for the children of migrants and refugees throughout the world. We pray first and foremost for families – parents and children – in Syria, Southern Sudan and throughout the world who are forced to leave their homes and their country because of violence, war or persecution. I appeal especially to Her Majesty's Government who have responded financially to the plight of the two million refugees from the civil war in Syria to renew its efforts to bring about a peaceful solution in Syria but also in conjunction with other European Governments to find a way in which countries within the E.U. can receive at least some of these refugees. We pray also for parents and children who leave their homeland because of extreme poverty in the hope of survival and a better future. We pray for families and especially children whose families and homes have been devastated by natural disasters as we remember in particular your families who have been affected by typhoon Haiyan which struck the Philippines with devastating consequences just two months ago. Just recently our Holy Father asked the Papal Nuncio to the Philippines (Archbishop Guiseppe Pinto) to spend Christmas with victims in the worst hit area of Leyte expressing in a very concrete way his solidarity and the solidarity of the Church with all those who have lost their homes and their loved ones.

Secondly, we affirm the dignity of migrants and refugees throughout the world. In his address for World Day of Migrants and Refugees our Holy Father – Pope Francis – invites us to 'see' and to 'treat' migrants and refugees as 'people' – as people who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, as people who simply hope for a better future and as people who too often encounter mistrust, rejection and exclusion. "Migrants and refugees" he says "do not only represent a problem to be solved, but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved. They are an occasion that Providence gives us to help build a more just society, a more perfect democracy and a more united country". Pope Francis goes on to recall how Mary and Joseph although rejected by the innkeeper and forced to flee to Egypt were strengthened by their belief that God was with them and so he prays that every migrant and refugee will have that same certainty that God is with them. Our second prayer is, therefore, that all migrants and refugees will be sustained by their faith in God's enduring presence with them.

Thirdly, it is very appropriate that we celebrate the Feast of Santo Niño on World Day for Migrants and Refugees because it is a wonderful opportunity to affirm the enormous contribution migrants make to the Church and to society in England and Wales. The contribution that the Filipino community here in the United

Kingdom has made in this regard is a great example of how migrant communities can and do contribute to the common good. On behalf of the Church I thank you for your witness to family solidarity, I thank you for your engagement with society and I thank you for your commitment to the Church. For many years I personally have been deeply impressed by the loyalty of the Filipino community to your families back in the Philippines and especially by the generous remittances that you regularly send not just at Christmas but all throughout the year. For years our hospitals up and down the country have benefited from the dedication and experience of thousands and thousands of highly skilled and very dedicated Filipino nurses and carers. For years our parishes have benefited from the faith, the joyfulness and the prayerfulness of immigrant communities from all over the world – first from Ireland and Italy, then from the Philippines and other parts of Asia and more recently from Eastern Europe, West Africa and South America. Whilst immigration does present challenges – social and cultural to local and national government it is important also to recognise and underline the positive contribution that immigrant communities have made especially over the last fifty years to both the Church and society in this country.

Let me conclude by giving you a specific example – the example of the Filipino community in Tunbridge Wells in Kent. About fourteen years ago in response to an acute shortage of nurses in the Kent and Sussex Hospital in Tunbridge Wells and the Pembury Hospital in Pembury the National Health Service secured the services of about one hundred nurses (male and female) from the Philippines. Soon after the nurses arrived they were joined by their husbands and wives most of whom were not medical workers but who did very soon get work in the area. Very quickly the nurses became an integral part of the local community and the parish of St. Augustine's in Tunbridge Wells.

Today, nearly fifteen years later, there are approximately three hundred Filipinos including children in the area. Many of the children attend the local parish school and many of the adults are involved and engaged in different areas of parish life – as special ministers of the Eucharist, as readers and as catechists - while many of the children have become altar servers. The contribution of the Filipino community is also deeply appreciated in the hospitals and homes where they work – not only in the new 500 bed hospital in Pembury but also in the cottage hospitals, nursing homes and care homes in the area where their commitment to their work and their care for patients is renowned and respected. Finally, the Filipino community in Tunbridge Wells has been an outstanding example of how an immigrant community can be fully integrated into the community but also share its particular gifts and culture with the local community. On January 1st every year there is a special mass and reception for the Filipino community, their families and friends and their fellow parishioners. Everyone is welcome to attend and enjoy the singing, the dancing and the noodles. This outreach is replicated in the wider community when an annual Filipino music and food festival is arranged for the people and the town of Tunbridge Wells.

So as we celebrate the Feast of Santo Niño we give thanks for the wonderful contribution that Filipino migrants and indeed migrants from many other countries have made to our parishes and schools, our hospitals and care homes and our local communities up and down the country and with Pope Francis we pray for a conversion of attitudes towards migrants so that we do not concentrate on the errors of a few but recognise the honesty, the rectitude, the diligence and the goodness of the majority. So on behalf of Pope Francis I give you the assurance of his prayers and his blessing.

Bishop Patrick Lynch

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