

PILGRIM CATHOLIC

Newsletter of the Gypsy & Traveller Support Network

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National Gathering, Gypsy & Traveller Support Network

23-24 March, Wistaston Hall, Crewe

On 23-24 March, 28 bishops, priests, religious and lay people met to discuss a variety of concerns relating to Gypsies and Travellers. This was the first national gathering of a new support Network for Catholics involved in this ministry.

The gathering took place at Wistaston Hall, an Oblate retreat centre in Crewe. The national support Network, that was meeting for the first time, has gradually been established over the past two years by the Bishops Conference of England & Wales. The Network includes some 40 participants from 12 dioceses. Some are Travellers and some are priests, sisters and lay people involved in pastoral work with Travellers. Others are from 'traveller friendly' parishes or representatives of Catholic agencies that have projects to support Travellers (eg Westminster Children's Society has an after-school project for traveller children on a site under the Westway in London). The Network has met previously in smaller regional meetings and working groups, but this is the first national meeting. *Pilgrim Catholic* is the newsletter of the Network and enables members to keep in touch with one another.

Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue and Bishop Bernard Longley were both present. Bishop Bernard led an open discussion Friday evening in

which participants briefly told something of their own work and concerns. Bishop Bernard will be taking over from Bishop Patrick as the Bishop responsible for work with Gypsies and Travellers. Bishop Patrick celebrated Mass for the group on Saturday. He spoke of the importance of this ministry and wished the Network well.

Joe and Bridie Jones, a Romany Gypsy and an Irish Traveller who are tireless campaigners, addressed the gathering - speaking about their own experiences. Fr Joe Browne outlined the Vatican Guidelines for the pastoral care of Gypsies. Fr Ged Barry and Moira Baldwin spoke of their experiences as a chaplain and probation officer in a high security prison. Caroline Keightley, from the government's Gypsy and Traveller Unit, described government policy for improved site provision. Revd Michael Hore spoke of his experience of conflict between Travellers and local residents in Cottenham and the role the church played in the resolution of that conflict. Sr Petronia Williams and Fr Louis Maggiore introduced a discussion of the new national support Network. Most of this issue of *Pilgrim Catholic* is devoted to brief summaries of some of the issues that were raised and discussed at Wistaston Hall.

A Travellers' Story

Joe and Bridie Jones

Joe and Bridie are a Romany Gypsy and an Irish Traveller. They are married with six children and many grandchildren. They bought their own land in 2001 and were given planning permission to have a caravan on the land. However, in 2003 the planning permission was overturned. In 2004 it was re-established and then overturned again. The opposition is not from the whole village. They are welcome in the local pub and shops, support local services and allow their land to be used by others.

Bridie was born in Ireland, one of twenty-two children, and lived as a young child in a wagon that was falling to bits. When she was three, the police with the support of the church took them away from their parents. They were separated for many years and eventually her father found

some of them. They lived in a house for some time and eventually went back on the road.

During the hysteria surrounding one event when a young girl was attacked, the police came to the Travellers site, dragged people out and threw them on the ground. After three days, those accused were released without any apology. She expressed disappointment with the churches – 'we know where our God is but we don't know where God's workers are. Often all we need is a cuddle – or someone to listen or pray with us. All we have on this earth is God – otherwise nothing. Our children are loaned to us. Before you feed our souls, you have to feed our bellies. God calls you to go out and find us.'

She described losing her mother and son last year. She was angry with God. 'I wanted God to come and touch me and say your son is all-right...and like a voice from heaven – I heard *be at peace*. What we need is people like you to come to us. We won't come to you. We feel ashamed. Sr Jennifer...I love her...she finds us and feeds our bellies. I said I wanted to offer her a cup of tea – she produced the tea bags'

'When God leads us to a new earth, I will have my caravan. We will have the peace we don't have down here. Plant the seed for us. Someone else will water the seed. God is bringing all the churches together. He has a purpose. We travellers are meeting and talking – something is going to happen.'

'Our Bluiie went to secondary school. He was beaten by some of the boys. The school didn't call the police or believe it was racial. After he was out of hospital, the police wouldn't arrest anyone. Instead of punishing the lads, the school

started a Gypsy and ethnic minority group. The school has a non-punishment policy. No child is born a racist. They opened the ethnic minority club. If anyone is being racist, they have to go into the club with the child they are beating and learn – 9 out of 10 come out friends. There are 52 Traveller children in the school. There is a need to support Travellers who can speak for themselves. We now have two very good people on Dale Farm. Travellers are a funny race of people – excluded so long – that is where we are comfortable.’

Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Gypsies

Fr Joe Browne

In 2005 the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People issued *Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Gypsies*. These guidelines provide a very good basis on which to develop a culturally sensitive pastoral approach to the care of Gypsies and Travellers. They were developed following the Fifth World Congress for the Pastoral Care of Gypsies, which took place in Budapest, Hungary in 2003. After a period of drafting and consultation and redrafting, the Holy See officially published the guidelines in 2005.

With the publication of these guidelines there is now a very comprehensive document in place, which offers good advice and examples of best practice on how to provide culturally sensitive pastoral care to the Gypsy and Traveller communities. These communities are present all over the world and their common experience worldwide has been one of marginalisation and exclusion, social, economic, cultural and sadly all too often exclusion from the church community. In the spirit of Pope Paul VI who boldly stated that the Gypsy and Traveller community ‘are at the heart of the church’ these pastoral guidelines are an attempt to ensure that such marginalisation should end and should certainly not be the experience of these communities when it comes to the church.

The guidelines are published following the normal structure of church documents; they are di-

vided into chapters, which are then subdivided into numbered paragraphs. They begin by setting an historical context for the guidelines and quote Pope John Paul II’s *Pastor Bonus* (1988) ‘that in the particular Churches refugees and exiles, migrants, nomads and circus workers receive effective and special spiritual care, even, if necessary, by means of suitable pastoral structures’. They then give an overview of the guidelines and in the Introduction §1-6 state that the ‘document is intended to be an unequivocal reaffirmation of the Church’s commitment to the benefit of this population’ and that ‘It is addressed not only to priests and agents engaged in this specific pastoral care, but also the whole ecclesial community – which cannot remain indifferent to this issue – and to Gypsies and Travellers themselves’.

Chapter 1 §7-20 covers the specific experiences of the Gypsy and Traveller people. It expresses the fact that these people have a specific ‘world view’ which is that of the nomad. This ‘world view’ differs from that of settled people. Often such differences give rise to suspicion.

Chapter 2 §21-33 express the fact that this nomadic ‘world view’ is more often akin to that of the People of God. The Church is a pilgrim church and the experiences of the church are very closely related to that of the Gypsy and Traveller people §27 ‘marked by persecution, exile, absence of welcome, even rejection, suffering and discrimination’ Because of this, the guidelines state §32 that we as a church would be betraying our roots and our ecclesial nature if we were to allow discrimination to exist.

Chapter 3 §34-44 speaks of the need for Evangelisation and Inculturation. By this it means that the church must evangelise from within. In §38 it speaks of the church becoming a ‘Gypsy among Gypsies’. It also goes on to say that the church must challenge and ‘purify’ any aspect of the Gypsy culture that may fall short of Christian fulfilment. However it stresses that such ‘purification’ does not imply ‘emptying’ of the culture.

Chapter 4 §45-56 continues and develops the theme of Evangelisation and links it very closely with the need for human promotion. It states in §48 ‘the dignity of the Gypsy population must

therefore be safeguarded and its collective identity respected, initiatives for its development encouraged and its rights defended'. In §56 the guidelines make the point that 'Man is the principle agent of development not money or technology'

Chapter 5 §57-79 takes up some of the particular aspects and challenges of pastoral care. The guidelines draw attention to the fact that Gypsies and Travellers learn more from 'lived experiences rather than redundant ideas'. The guidelines make the point that communication of the gospel message must be made in an appropriate way. The use of Sacramental preparation as a means to teach and share the faith is highlighted, as are the role of Pilgrimages in the life experiences of Gypsies and Travellers. It is worth noting that the guidelines make the point that the imposition of requirements should be avoided! Some of the challenges highlighted by the guidelines are that of moving from a position of suspicion to trust. The Gypsy and Traveller people have had to historically adopt a position of natural suspicion of the outsider. We must gain their trust and confidence in order to move to a point of shared faith experience. The challenge of secularisation is also highlighted by the guidelines. These communities are more and more being influenced by the secular 'world view' and we, as church, must be able to respond to this reality.

Chapter 6 §80-101 outlines some of the specific pastoral structures, which may be adopted in order to provide the culturally sensitive pastoral care that the guidelines set out. Here they take up the point made at the beginning of the document that 'suitable pastoral structures' may be necessary to provide for the spiritual well being of these people. They suggest that each Bishop's Conference should consider how it is providing pastoral care. The need for a National Promoter is mentioned, and various other suggestions on how to ensure that the pastoral care of Gypsy and Traveller people is adequate and effective.

The final paragraph § 102 expresses a final wish that 'the guidelines meet the expectations of all who wished for an overall pastoral orientation in the ministry among our nomadic brothers and sisters'. It also restates that the presence of Gyp-

sies and Travellers presents a 'challenge to the church' and that central to that challenge is 'the need to live our faith as a pilgrim people where there is a welcome for all in charity and Christian communion where there is no indifference or animosity'.

There is the challenge! Let us make that wish our own personal wish, as I am sure it is for all of us involved in this very special pastoral ministry. We must work to ensure that the communities in which we live and work respond in that spirit of charity to the plight of the Gypsies and Travellers in our midst and see them not as strangers to be mistrusted but friends to be welcomed and to share communion with.

Travellers and the Prison Service

Fr Ged Barry

In the Prison Service, Travellers are not officially recognised as an ethnic minority and, to counter this, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) set up a Gypsy and Traveller Policy Group (which, initially, was not going to include Irish Travellers, but now does) whose stated aim is to try to recognise and respond to the specific needs of Travellers in Prison.

Across the Prison Estate, Travellers' Groups are now being set up to offer support - social, spiritual, educative - to Travellers who are in prison. Mostly, but by no means universally, these are Chaplaincy led initiatives. In HMP Full Sutton, the Probation Service, through Moira Baldwin, offer much needed support.

Travellers are much more likely to suffer from 'hidden' prejudice in prison, whereby they will often not declare their Traveller status so as to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

It is important to encourage awareness of the needs of Travellers in prison so as to counter the almost universal negativity that they face.

In Prison, Travellers suffer, apparently to a greater degree than other groups, from depression, stress, self-harm and, most terribly, suicide. Much of this is caused by the loss of family support, the additional stress caused to Travellers from being incarcerated and the fear of separation from wife (or husband) and children.

It is not easy to know how many Travellers are in prison, but evidence we are beginning to collate suggest that maybe 20 times the number you could expect in percentage terms are held in Young Offender Institutions and 10 times the number in Adult Prisons. This is a growing figure. It is made worse by the fact the Travellers will almost always be remanded in custody, even if they have what is, by any normal standard, a solid family background and home to which they could be bailed. If found guilty, they are less likely to get 'tagged' and more likely to get longer custodial sentences. ASBOs are also seen as being disproportionately aimed at Travellers.

In HMP Full Sutton, we hosted a Travellers Awareness Day for professionals from the Criminal Justice System and the result was a great success; the Travellers' Group were able to present their background in a positive, if often challenging way.

The success of our Travellers' Group can be measured by the fact that lots of non-Travellers try to join it – much to the amusement of our Romany, Irish, Scots and Showman Travellers.

HMP Full Sutton Traveller Groups

A brief overview

Moira Baldwin

The Traveller Groups at HMP Full Sutton are run on a weekly basis and cater for both mains and vulnerable prisoners, each attending either for the morning or afternoon session. The Groups were set up by Father Gerard Barry and, as a

seconded Probation officer at HMP Full Sutton, I became involved in 2005 as part of the Probation Service contribution to Diversity issues within the prison. Since then I have been involved in the first event of its kind at HMP Full Sutton, the Traveller Day that was successfully held on May 11th in 2006. This has since been followed by a second Traveller Day held on 21st May 2007. The Days were held at this time of year in commemoration of the Patron Saint to Travellers El Pele who was beatified on the 11th May.

Being part of the Traveller group has been extremely informative and interesting as well as important in my work with prisoners and offenders generally.

I have had previous experience of supervising Travellers in the community and have been able to share one example of my previous work at the Gathering in Wistaston hall. I refer to a case that required sensitivity to the needs of Travellers (through the use of negotiation at managerial level within the Probation Service) and understanding of the specific individual's lifestyle. The Traveller in question was able to successfully complete his Probation order and period of supervision. This involved flexible reporting – he was allowed to continue to travel and still report either by telephone or at pre-arranged Probation offices throughout the country. I used this example of how, with understanding and flexibility as well as communication and negotiation with the criminal justice structures, individual needs can be appropriately accommodated. I also believe that such a case highlights how respect for difference can be facilitated within the most rigid boundaries.

Being able to attend the Gathering at Wistaston hall has been very useful in terms of networking and exchanging information. Everyone who attended was invited to the second Traveller Day at HMP Full Sutton and, although some were not able to make it on the day, the contacts have been made for future events and discussion.

Travellers and the local community

The Cottenham experience

Rev Michael Hore

This is what happened in Cottenham, an otherwise sleepy village north of Cambridge. In 2003 a large and sudden influx of Irish Travellers led to fear and anger amongst the settled community. There were undoubtedly faults on both side, but the situation boiled out of control. The atmosphere in the village became one of hysteria.

In such situations the church has a valuable role to play. In Cottenham, it was the only organisation that could command any respect on both sides of the divide. It was the church that made the first peaceful contact from the settled community. It was the church that encouraged the two sides to talk.

A number of events were organised. The Bishop of East Anglia and the Anglican Bishop of Ely were invited to the village; and a joint service was held in the Parish Church. There were meetings between Traveller representatives and the Parish Council.

Very gradually, through the work of the church, people on both sides put aside their antagonism and began to talk. Stigmatisation was replaced with friendship, anger and antagonism eased.

Four years on, there are still occasional problems. However, we now have the mechanism to defuse potential problems before they become serious. Many amongst the settled community have come to respect the Travellers; many Travellers now have more understanding of the settled community.

In summary, when Travellers live alongside settled communities, antagonism will often occur. The solution is a simple one: Travellers and the

settled community must meet, talk and learn mutual respect. It is a simple solution but not easy to achieve. However, the church has a major part to play in this work. It is a witness to the Kingdom.

Winning Hearts and Minds

Sr M Petronia

We hear a great deal in the news, usually in the context of Iraq, about winning hearts and minds. I believe we have a similar problem in the Church, particularly with some aspects of its social teaching. If the faithful are to follow the teaching of the Church then minds and hearts need to be won.

I think one of the functions of a national chaplaincy would be to win the hearts and minds of not only the Travellers, but the minds and hearts of the clergy and faithful concerning some of their attitudes towards Gypsies and Travellers. A national chaplaincy cannot be only for Gypsies and Travellers, but for the whole Church. Many problems which they face would not exist if attitudes towards them were different. Bishops, deaneries, clergy, parishes and local communities need input and enlightenment about the lives of these minority groups.

Nonetheless, I believe that some of the responsibility for changing hearts and minds lies with the Travellers themselves. They cannot wait for someone else to do it for them, and they have a positive contribution to make. They have retained in their culture some of the Gospel values that the rest of us are losing, but they too must be encouraged to integrate with cultures other

than their own. I would see a national chaplaincy encouraging a two way process, a process towards winning the hearts and minds of all.

Gypsy & Traveller Unit
Department of Communities & Local
Government (CLG)
Caroline Keightley

The projected Gypsy and Traveller population growth, means that unauthorised camps and developments will become an increasing problem unless pitch provision is increased.

Efforts are being made to tackle the problem. Measures in the Housing Act 2004 - requiring local authorities to include Gypsies and Travellers in the Accommodation Needs Assessment process and to have a strategy in place which sets out how any identified needs will be met - came into force on 2 January 2007. Ministers expect all local housing authorities to have completed a Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment by the end of 2007.

A **Gypsy and Traveller Unit** has been established by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) with the key objectives of: breaking the cycle of poor site provision (including a grant programme to assist local authorities and housing associations), encouraging peaceful relations and ensuring fair and effective enforcement.

The unit also works to ensure that local authorities and other public agencies fully understand their roles, powers and responsibilities and will act on them even-handedly to promote the best interests of the whole community.

In terms of health and education Gypsies & Travellers suffer severe disadvantage:

- average life expectancy is at least 10 years less than the settled population
- 41.9% report limiting long-term illness (compared to 18.2% of the settled population)
- 17.6% of mothers have experienced death of a child (compared to 0.9%)

- In 2004, 30.2% of Traveller children and 13.5% of Gypsy children achieved 5 A-C Grades at GCSE (compared to 51.9%)

There is a cross-government effort to tackle such disadvantages and to support: improved access to health services, better education, community cohesion and opportunities for work.

My Involvement with the Traveller Community
Malcolm Harper

My first contact with Traveller families was over ten years ago. I was active in several areas in the cathedral parish in Wrexham where there were two large Traveller sites: a local authority site and an unofficial site which was eventually shut down and cleared by the local council. Through these sites I made contact with families from other sites in the north Wales area – eg at Queensferry and Bangor – and elsewhere in the country.

The reason I deepened my involvement with the Traveller community was that, the more I got to know about their situation, the more concerned I became. Travellers are often disadvantaged in several ways, which I can only mention briefly here. Their living conditions are often unsatisfactory; they suffer poor physical and mental health; they frequently lack the benefits of formal schooling; and their moral and religious education and spiritual development are neglected. Finally, they are often the object of prejudice and distrust among the community at large, including the wider Catholic community.

My initial contact with Traveller families gradually evolved into a role of pastoral care, and the bishop of Wrexham, Edwin Regan, appointed me as 'lay chaplain' to the Travellers.

In this capacity, I kept in regular contact with the Travellers I knew and responded, as far as I was able, to whatever requests they made to me. This included: helping read and reply to letters, forms and legal documents; arranging practical things like driving lessons, hospital and prison visits; accompanying them on occasions such as baptisms,

weddings, funerals, and sometimes helping make the arrangements for these occasions – anything which I regarded as legitimate areas for assistance.

My present concerns are still as above: a lot needs to be done to improve the welfare of Travellers materially (eg the condition of their sites, their diet, entry into working life etc). But from the standpoint of the Church's pastoral care of Travellers, their moral and spiritual welfare must also be given priority.

Briefly, I am thinking of two things here. (1) The Catholic faith of Travellers is often confused and superstitious: they are a prey to Evangelical Protestant churches or groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses who deliberately target Travellers and exploit their weak grasp of the Catholic religion. (2) I believe that Catholic chaplaincy provision to Travellers must find ways of confronting the problems of heavy drinking, drugs, domestic violence and other forms of criminality that often take hold in the Traveller community and blight the lives of its members.

This is easier said than done, of course, but these are the goal and objectives that I have come to see as important after ten years and more of involvement with Traveller culture.

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