

PILGRIM CATHOLIC

Newsletter of the Gypsy & Traveller Support Network

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Pilgrim Catholic is the Newsletter of the National Catholic Gypsy, Roma & Traveller Support Network

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Bishops Visit Dale Farm

Bishop Thomas McMahon from Brentwood Diocese and Bishop Laurie Green of Bradwell – representing both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England – paid a pastoral visit to the Dale Farm Travellers' site near Basildon last week. The threat of eviction is hanging over half the site and the two Bishops were keen to talk to residents about their situation. While they were there, they both prayed with the bereaved family of John Flynn, a leading campaigner in the battle to remain at the site, who died suddenly earlier in the week.

Prior to the visit, the two churchmen toured the local Crays Hill Primary School, which is attended by many of the Traveller children. The Bishops, who were very impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of staff at the school, talked to some of the children and listened to them read.



Bishops Thomas McMahon and Laurie Green at Dale Farm

“We are particularly concerned that breaking up this long-standing community and its way of life will be a serious trauma for the children, who have stability and support at the excellent Crays Hill Primary School,” said Bishop Thomas. “It is certainly a privilege in our ministry,” commented Bishop Laurie, “to support the Traveller community and to work for more understanding on all sides. We really enjoyed the company of such lovely children and we will be keeping Crays Hill School, the children and their

families very much in our prayers.”

Bishop Thomas added: “Alongside the humanitarian concerns, we have to ask if an extremely expensive operation to evict the Travellers is a good use of public money in these straitened times.”

Bishop Thomas was accompanied on the visit by Sr Catherine Reilly, who ministers to the Travellers, and Fr Dan Mason of Wickford parish, who sees many of them among his congregation.

CRAYS HILL PRIMARY SCHOOL

Sr Philomena Purcell, OSU

Crays Hill School is situated in a picturesque part of the Essex countryside between Billericay and Wickford. About six years ago it had a role of about 300 pupils but once the children from the

local Travellers site on Dale Farm began attending this school the local parents took their children away. Even the teachers and governors resigned. Now the school has only one non traveller pupil.



Crays Hill School Essex

Also there is a completely new staff and Governing body. The Headteacher, Sulan Goodwin, is very dedicated and enthusiastic and leads a committed staff. She is very encouraging and both the staff and pupils are valued and supported and they in turn pass this on to each other and all who come to visit this great school. The Travellers children of the Dale Farm site in Essex receive a first class education in this wonderful school. On entering the school I am always struck by the care and commitment of the staff. Likewise I am very impressed to see the children given healthy tuck which is available to the children at playtime and the timetable includes yoga so helping these children to relax. All the children wear a red and gray uniform and they all look happy, clean and tidy. As a retired teacher I would be proud to teach in this superb school. Visiting Crays Hill School is the highlight of my work with the Travellers on Dale Farm site.

Ministry to Travelling People

Sr Bernadette Healey, PBVM

As a member of the Presentation Sisters, I see our charism today calling us wherever we are, to being in formative community with people made poor. In all our ministries we stand on the side of the poor and marginalized, by promoting God's kingdom of truth and goodness, justice, love and peace, while being challenged to inner conversion and critical questioning.

On completion of my Diploma Course in Pastoral Studies at Milltown Institute in Dublin, I felt a strong call in myself to minister to people who are on the margins of society experiencing exclusion in different ways. The Nottingham Diocese had advertised a Chaplaincy post to undertake pastoral and catechetical work among the Travelling People in the Diocese. Today I see the Travelling Community as very much a minority group on the edges of life and was appointed to the job in May this year.

In my previous job as a Primary school teacher I had some experience of the Travelling Community having worked with families at school and parish level. I had prepared children and young people for the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Communion and Confirmation. At Christmas time I helped in integrating families into the parish community through involving children and young people in Nativity Productions during the Christmas Liturgies. I worked with young women on a one to one basis and in small groups with basic reading and writing skills in the parish community and their own homes. My first encounter with travellers started when I was a young child growing up in Ireland. As a child, I grew up in a family where my mother had a special interest in the Travelling Community and I learned from her example a compassionate acceptance of them and their culture.

Since I started the job I feel I am very much learning as I travel up and down the Diocese visiting sites and homes each day. I can easily

identify the homes when I see the open windows letting in the fresh air. Statues, grottos and other pious objects can be seen at every window and entrance to houses and sites.

I find the families very welcoming and accepting of me when I visit them and experience a real sense of community in caring for one another. I experience Travellers having a real concern for their sick, disabled and elderly in a special way.

I have visited some family members in prison and feel this is very important and means a lot to the Travellers when 'housed' there and their families appreciate the visits. The Travellers in jail tend to bond together for support. Each week I attend Mass at Nottingham prison and find it is an opportunity to meet Travellers from different parts of the country.

In the early Summer I experienced an emptying from sites as the trailers were on the move, navigated by drivers to near and far destinations to visit friends, family, and take part in pilgrimages to many shrines along the way, in England, Ireland and Europe.

As I journey from place to place I am trying to make contacts with key people who already have more experience than I do with the Travelling Community. I am making contacts with local parishes, schools, health centres, social services and prisons.

I am learning that being a Traveller is not just a way of life. A young man said to me one day, 'it is what and who we are'. I have come across some Travellers who now prefer being settled, some in

houses, others on sites. And with the strict laws out now, the Travellers are finding it more difficult to just travel anywhere when one wants.

Travellers are now beginning to realize that school is important to their children's welfare and more young people on finishing primary school are continuing into secondary school with the support of the Travellers Education services. This I see as very positive as I travel around the sites. In the sites I visit in Leicester, Lincoln and Market Harborough, all the young people have transferred positively with the support of their families from year 6 to year 7 this academic year.

Pilgrimages and fairs are important to Travellers. They tell me it is an opportunity of meeting up with old friends and making new ones along the way.

Each year Travellers take part in a special Mass with Bishop Malcolm which includes, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. At this Mass the Bishop takes time to meet with the Travellers which they are very much looking forward to this October. This Mass will also be an opportunity for the Travellers to say 'Thank You' to Sister Pat for her many years of dedicated service in ministering to their needs. As I travel around the Diocese I am very aware of how good a friend she is to all the Travellers and they will always treasure her friendship and valued support to each one of them.

I continue to look forward to the challenges and blessings of this ministry and hope that I can be in solidarity and continue to support the growth of the Travelling Community as a positive confident Christian community through celebrating with the Travellers their faith as a living reality in everyday life. I also see it as important to continue to work in partnership with Travellers to ensure that their distinct ethnic, identity is valued and to provide opportunities for Travellers to participate as equals in a society which constantly says, 'you are not welcome' and which discriminates against and excludes Travellers.

A Seminarian's Testimony

Brian O'Mahony

My name is Brian O'Mahony and I am studying to be a Catholic Priest. As part of my training, I spent some time working with the Irish Traveller community in London. I began working with the LGTU, helping their staff as a volunteer with the boy's club. This was a fantastic opportunity for me to see the great work that is done at LGTU and also to experience the rich culture of the Irish Travellers for the first time. Like all teenage lads, they were excitable and energetic, but what really impressed me was their firm sense of cultural identity as Travellers and an attachment to their traditions and way of life. My time with them also revealed some of the challenges that Travellers face.

Religion is a very important part of the cultural identity of the Irish Travellers. When I had finished with the Boy's club, I took part in preparing the children for 1st Holy Communion and Confirmation. I joined Sr Petronia Williams, who cares for the spiritual needs of many Travelling families. I learnt an enormous amount from her about working with Children and also more about Traveller culture. The climax of this experience was the celebration of Confirmation by the Bishop in West Green just for the Traveller children and their community. It was wonderful for me to see such a joyful and colourful celebration of Traveller identity.

The last part of my experience included visiting various sites around London and to meet some of the communities with Sr Petronia. In all the sites we visited, I felt very warmly welcomed.

I believe that my time I spent with the Irish Traveller communities was important as many of the Parishes around London have Traveller families attending church each week. I was able to gain some insights into Traveller culture and my experience allowed me to see some of the needs that can be met. I'm sure that this opportunity will be valuable in my future ministry.

Travellers in Prison

Conn Mac Gabhann

“They do not inform anyone they are Travellers as they are afraid they will be picked on by both staff and offenders” (Prison Officer, SE England)

With 25 years of experience of working with Irish prisoners in the UK, the Irish Chaplaincy in Britain (ICB), through its dedicated prisoner project, ICPO, became increasingly concerned about the isolation and suffering experienced by Irish prisoners who come from an Irish Traveller background. Anecdotal evidence acquired from ICB’s own practice experience and reinforced by our partnership with chaplains and foreign national co-ordinators across the prison estate,

identified the unequal hardship faced by Irish Travellers in prison.

And yet, up until the launch of the ICB’s research project, there has been an absence of statistics for Irish Travellers in prison. Moreover, little attention has been given to the specific needs and challenges they face as a group, in order for prison to be effective in their



Advisory panel for the Prison Project at the London Irish Centre

rehabilitation. Irish Travellers are not currently monitored as a distinct ethnic minority by the Prison Service, which leaves Irish Travellers as an invisible, but sizeable, minority who often get lost within the system. Acknowledging that cutting re-offending rates and demands for improvements for Irish Travellers while in prison depends firstly on accurate research, the ICB launched in April 2010, a study into the situation and experiences of Irish Travellers in prison in England and Wales. The ICB is determined to put Irish Travellers at the forefront of the rehabilitation agenda through this national study.

Our research project has two main phases. The first is a quantitative survey to establish the scale of the issue. This has just been completed and robustly evidences both the number of Irish Travellers in prison across England and Wales and patterns of offending. The second stage is qualitative in nature. A series of interviews and focus groups with individual Travellers in prison will elucidate the experiences of Irish Travellers in prison and explore solutions and service interventions to help move people on.

Already the interim findings of the research indicate that Irish Travellers represent over 0.5% of the overall prison population. The main challenges facing Travellers, as identified by the national survey, include poor literacy, high levels of mental ill-health, a lack of family contact, isolation and discrimination. Critically, each of these issues represents a major barrier to the effective rehabilitation and resettlement of Irish Traveller prisoners.

A final report of the complete findings and policy and practice recommendations will be produced by early summer 2011.

Traveller Community and Human Rights Day

14th December 2010 (10am – 4pm)

Westminster Catholic Cathedral

Opening Mass: Mgr John Armitage

The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (ITMB), in partnership with the British Institute of Human Rights (BIHR) and Friends of the Earth (FOE) are putting on a Traveller Community and Human Rights Day at Westminster Catholic Cathedral on 14th December (10-4 pm). The day will be lively and fun involving interactive theatre, art and religion to better enable participants to understand their Human Rights and how they can protect them. Above all the day will be a fun and educational family Christmas

event with food, drink and games. There is also rumour that Santa will be dropping in with presents for all the children!

Don't miss this opportunity to learn more about your Human Rights. To book places for the event contact: Matt or Cassie at the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain on 0207 706 2002 or matthew@irishtraveller.org.uk and cassie@irishtraveller.org.uk

Traveller Site Plans Under Threat

At a recent meeting of the CARJ Gypsy & Traveller Support Network, concern was expressed that certain policies of the new coalition government may lead to the abandonment of Traveller specific initiatives such as the regional provision of Gypsy and Traveller sites.

At the same time, the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (ITMB) has made a Submission (October 2010) to the Mayor's consultation on proposed alterations to policy on Gypsies and Travellers. The Submission has been endorsed by a number of organisations, including the Catholic Association for Racial Justice (CARJ).

ITMB objects to the Major's decision to remove all pitch requirements for Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Show People from the London Plan. ITMB believes that a pan-London, strategic approach to the provision of Gypsy and Traveller accommodation is essential to delivering sites and ensuring fairness between the settled and Traveller communities.

The ITMB submission also raises the wider concern that the nationwide abolition of regional spatial strategies (RSSs) by the government is already leading many local authorities to adopt regressive policies on the provision of Gypsy and Traveller sites across the UK.

In London and throughout the UK, many Gypsies and Travellers face a severe shortage of authorised Gypsy and Traveller sites which has been documented by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. In London, as in the rest of the UK, regional targets for the provision of Gypsy and Traveller accommodation are essential to address this shortage of sites, especially considering the extent to which Gypsies and Travellers face discrimination in accommodation provision at the local level.

The Mayor Boris Johnson refers to the Government's abolition of RSSs nationwide as support for a localised approach to Gypsy and Traveller pitch provision in London. However, ITMB argue that since the abolition of RSSs, many local authorities in England have either scrapped or seriously reassessed their Gypsy and Traveller pitch requirements. In numerous cases the abolition of RSSs has been interpreted as a green light for turning a blind eye to Gypsies' and Travellers' accommodation needs. ITMB document a number of instances where the effect of the abolition of RSSs on the provision of Gypsy and Traveller sites is already noticeable.

CARJ Traveller Support Network
NATIONAL GATHERING
15-16 March 2011
Focolare Centre for Unity
Welwyn Garden City

Census 2011

The next Census will take place on Sunday 27 March 2011. The Census takes place every ten years and is used to collect information about the whole population. The Office for National Statistics runs the census in England & Wales. Each household will get a questionnaire with straightforward questions about those who live there. The census is compulsory for everyone and if you don't take part you could be fined up to £1000. Census information is completely confidential. Personal information is protected by law.

The results of the Census are used to plan public services like schools, social housing, health, transport and training for skills and employment opportunities.

This year, for the first time, Gypsies and Irish Travellers will be able to tick a separate box as a distinct ethnic group. The statistics collected in the Census will help national and local government and society as a whole to:

- Understand the size and nature of Gypsy and Traveller communities in England and Wales
- Plan services that are more in tune with the needs of these communities
- Monitor the allocation of resources to make sure that all are treated equally and fairly

Those organising the Census 2011 are encouraging Gypsy and Traveller communities to participate in the census in order to gather accurate statistics that will help to maintain their lifestyle and ensure access to public services.

The last Census achieved an overall response rate of 94%, however some communities recorded lower returns. There is some concern that the tendency of Travellers to resist recording their presence might lead to under-counting in the Census 2011. This could in turn lead to under-provision of services that would support Gypsy and Traveller communities.

The CARJ Gypsy and Traveller Support Network is urging those working with Travelling communities to promote full participation in the Census among these communities.

People can participate by using the paper questionnaire which can be returned in a pre-paid envelope or by filling out the questionnaire online at www.census.gov.uk. A multi-lingual, telephone helpline will be available from Friday 4 March 2011.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Advisory Council for the Education of Romanies and Other Travellers (ACERT), Moot House, The Stow, Harlow, Essex CM20 3AG (01279 418666)

Catholic Association for Racial Justice (CARJ), 9 Henry Road, Manor House, London N4 2LH. (020 8802 8080)

Catholic Children's Society (Westminster), 73 St Charles Square, London W10 6EJ. (020 8969 5305).

Church Network for Gypsies and Travellers (CNGT). www.cngt.org.uk

Friends, Families and Travellers, Community Base, 113 Queen's Road, Brighton BN1 3XG (01273 234777)

Gypsy Council for Education, Culture, Welfare and Civil Rights (GCECWCR), 8 Hall Road, Aveley, Essex RM15 4HD. (01708 868986)

Traveller Law Reform Project, c/o London Gypsy & Traveller Unit.

The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (ITMB), The Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Rd, London N7 6PA (020 7607 2002)

The London Gypsy & Traveller Unit, 6 Westgate Street, Hackney, London E8 3RN. 020 8533 2002)

The Irish Chaplaincy in Britain, 50-52 Camden Square, London NW1 9XB. (020 7482 5528).

Travellers Aid Trust, PO Box 16, Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire SA17 5BN (01554 891876)