

PILGRIM CATHOLIC

Newsletter of the Gypsy and Traveller Support Network

March 2006

First Issue

Bishops Call for Solidarity with Gypsies and Travellers

The following Statement was issued in November 2005 by Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue on behalf of the Department for Christian Responsibility & Citizenship of the Bishops Conference of England & Wales.

We wish to call the attention of Catholics to the plight of Gypsies and Travellers who experience a level of disadvantage greater than most other groups in our society. The lack of secure and suitable accommodation gives rise to a number of other problems such as illness, unemployment and inadequate education for their children.

The priests, religious and lay people who provide services or are involved in a ministry to Gypsies and Travellers have repeatedly raised this matter with us. They speak of a growing fear on many sites lest the authorities come to evict them. The root of these stories of fear and eviction lies in the inadequate provision of sites, which all acknowledge but which has not, to date, been effectively addressed.

Earlier this year, the Catholic Association for Racial Justice (CARJ), in its submission to the Government's Consultation on *Planning for Gypsy and Traveller Sites*, highlighted

- the discrimination suffered by Gypsies and Travellers,
- their growing feeling of being under threat,

- the extreme difficulties which they suffered when the statutory duty on local authorities to provide sites was repealed,
- the lack of suitable accommodation and security of tenure on existing local authority sites.

We concur with this analysis and endorse the view that the different issues relating to adequate site provision must be urgently addressed.

We consider it a priority to provide more support for those already working with Gypsies and Travellers. However, a specialist ministry is not enough. Every Catholic parish and school must, in the spirit of a welcoming community, find ways of reaching out to Gypsies and Travellers in their area. It is also appropriate for Catholics to stand in solidarity with them in their struggle to obtain adequate accommodation and a decent life for their families. We can be confident that we will all be changed and enriched in the process.

Kent

Jennifer Austin

I have been visiting sites as often as possible and preparing children for the sacraments. I am very keen to speak to various groups about Travellers and Gypsies. As a member of the Canterbury & District Independent Ethnic Minority Council, organised by the police, I have had the opportunity to meet City Councillors and to give them a copy of the DVD produced by the Catholic Children's Society. I hope the DVD will give them a better understanding of Travellers and Gypsies and encourage

them to adopt a more sympathetic approach in the matter of provision of sites. I have also had the opportunity to address a meeting of catechists from around Kent and a dozen or so expressed – a great relief as there is so much to do and I am barely scratching the surface. a keen interest in visiting sites and preparing the children for the sacraments

In Remembrance of Fr Eltin Daly

Fr Eltin Daly began the Mission to Travelling People in 1966 in Oxford and was its National Director until he became ill in 2002. Much of the Church's ministry to Travellers in recent years has been built on the foundations laid by Fr Daly.

Crays Hill Travellers Site

Sr Catherine Reilly

The wind was blowing, the rain pouring down. There were large puddles of water all around us as we stood near the entrance to the Travellers Site in Crays Hill. A helicopter hovered over us making it impossible for us to hear each other.

People were gathering around waiting for what we thought was never going to happen. After months of negotiation with the Local Council and the NHS medical team as to the benefits of having a Mobile clinic on the site, and the advantage to be gained by the hospitals and Drs Surgeries by not having 800 to 1,000 extra people turning up for minor problems, which could be dealt with on the Site if we had a mobile unit.

Now that its success is recognised by the NHS, there are opportunities for other workers in the NHS who have expressed a wish to be able to use it too, while it is on the Travellers Site - Social Services, Smoking Cessation, Child Care and District Nurses. It is hoped that in the

near future the ambulance and fire services and also the police, in a friendly and helpful way, will visit us from time to time and give to the Travellers talks and demonstrations on what is necessary when fire starts or someone is injured in any way.

For the first six months, the Mobile Unit was driven onto the Site at 10 a.m. by a police liaison officer, who then went to his normal duties for the day, after joining us for a welcome cup of tea, before the start of a long day. At 5:30 p.m. one of us would collect the police officer from the police station, so that the Mobile Unit could be returned to the Police Parking area at the station, where it remained until it was next needed, by the police or by the NHS. We had to book the Mobile Unit several months ahead, so that there was a police officer available to drive it. Not all police drive the Mobile Unit.

Now that our friendly liaison officer has retired, after many years in the police

service, Kathy, the Health Care Practitioner, did an advanced driving test, so that we do not have to rely on the police to do the driving for us.

We are looking at other areas of need for the Travellers, such as drugs and their consequences. How to recognise them if offered some, etc.

A Fairly Typical Day

Sr Carmel Clancy

I leave home at 10:30 a.m. I feel that people are not ready for a visit any earlier than this. My first visit today is to a family whose young daughter Jane has died. Jane is 19 and she has had a congenital condition and has been ill for some time. I have visited this family often, keeping in touch with how Jane was doing. Her mum talks about her last day and last hours and how attentive the local priest was. It is a consolation that Jane was at home right up to the end and died at home. We talk of how Jane was always at the centre of the family, of the love and care she received from her parents and siblings and of how she reciprocated. We talk about prayers and hymns for her funeral. We pray as we always did for the family and for Jane and I leave promising to be back soon.

My next visit is to see a young mum who is critically ill in the Intensive Care Unit of the local hospital. Jill has pneumonia and asthma. She is unconscious, just lying there letting the machines do the work. I stay a short while letting her know I am there, telling how well cared for her children are, etc. I pray and leave quietly.

I call to see Joan, a widow who lives alone and is often unwell. We have a long conversation as she fills me in on her latest hospital visits, medication, etc. I enquire about the family and we talk of their ups and downs, the recent baby and how many grandchildren she has now. We finish with a prayer of gratitude that

she has kept so well and we remember her large family.

Next I visit Susan who immediately tells me about her son in prison; he is in the Block, in punishment, for ignoring orders. Jack is of a nervous disposition and has hearing problems, he hears best when spoken to face to face. He told her that he did not know that somebody was speaking to him from behind and that this had happened often. She had been trying to write to the Governor to explain the situation but felt inadequate. Together we write a long letter in which Susan pours out her fears and anxieties about Jack, how she saw her own temperament mirrored in his, etc. It was a wonderful letter of openness and honest and brought great relief to Susan. (Because I write this some weeks after the event, I can say that the problem was investigated at once and that the Governor replied very swiftly to Susan's letter, addressing her concerns fully). Later, when I go home, I write to Jack, as I do regularly to Travellers I know who are in prison.

Lastly, I prepare two groups of children in two different parts of the city for the sacraments. There is a group of four boys, cousins, in one group and three members of the same family in the second group. I see this as a very important part of my ministry and I give a lot of time to it. Sometimes these lessons can be challenging as the children are tired after their day in school and are anxious to go out to play. Today was a good day and I go home happy.

Diocese of Nottingham

Sr Patricia Feehan

Answering the varied needs of Travelling People in Nottingham Diocese is my responsibility. The work is funded by the Diocese and supported also by SPANNED (Services for People with Special Needs) within the diocese.

In many ways, I have become a travelling person myself, driving many miles each week to visit communities, some of them isolated and living in trailers or houses, across a five-counties territory.

I work with few helpers and my ministry includes: instructing children for first communion and confirmation, organising an annual Travellers' mass, celebrated by Bishop Malcolm McMahon, at a principal church (one with plenty of parking for the assorted vehicles), liaising with priests on a host of matters, applying for passports, obtaining baptismal certificates for couples wishing to marry and for children for First Communion and Confirmation, acting as peacemaker between opposing factions and visiting those of both sexes who end up in prison.

The Faith and Travelling People

A Travelling Woman

It is hard to find the right words to use. Our Faith is part of what we are. It is something very real and pure in our lives. It is as much a part of us as our very life-force. I wish that people could see it with our eyes and feel it with our hearts. For it is indeed a faith of the heart that is very deep within us. As our life blood keeps us living, our faith is just as important to our life. Different people will express their faith differently. Some Travellers are very devout in their practices and others show it differently. How we practice is different for each of us but our faith in God is something that is with each of us. God walks with us on our journey in life.

God is a very real presence in our life. If you see life as a journey or a road, then for us God walks the full journey beside us. God is with us every step of the way. I would say that we feel a nearness to God. As we pray to Him we really talk to Him. We involve Him in our life. We know that everything comes from God and as He is special to us, so too we are special to him. In that way God is very real to us and indeed a valued member of our family. He knows each one by name.

Our Lady, who held her own child dead in her arms, has a very special place in Travellers' hearts. We feel she is very close to us and see her as a mother. She is someone you can talk to and tell of all your worries. She is our second mother, who can share our thoughts, pains and joys because she understands life and so we have a great love for her. The Rosary is a popular prayer and places of pilgrimage like Lourdes and Knock hold a great attraction for us.

If you question our faith and beliefs you are questioning something that is at our very core. Yes, it is good to explore our faith and what it means to us but it must be done with greater sensitivity and with huge respect. Our faith is something that is very strong and that is deep within us. It is not something that keeps us down but our belief in God and our relationship with God is our strength, our guide and seems to have a life of its own, that journeys back to God, the source.

Walsingham and the Travellers

Sr Anna McDonough

I would like to share with you my memories of a memorable liturgy which was prepared by the Walsingham Shrine Team for the Travellers, for the feast of the Assumption of our Lady in August 2005. Two of us from the Travellers Chaplaincy Team, Sr Catherine and I were there to help in any way we could with the large numbers that were expected to arrive for the celebration.

For years now the guardians of the shrine, at present Fr Noel Wynne, have arranged with a local farmer to rent a large field to the Travellers for a few days. This is much appreciated by the Travellers, so used to having great problems finding sites, and they feel welcome at Our Lady's Domain. On the morning of the Feast the Travelling men take pride in their turn in carrying the Statue of Our Lady and relieving others who seem tired. They were also happy to help with the offertory collection. However, my story is about the evening liturgy at seven o'clock. The Shrine Liturgy Team invited us to be part of the planning and we were happy to do so.

The aim of the team was to plan a liturgy that would be meaningful to the Travellers' family orientated culture and would express their great faith, while being open to all. It began with a warm welcome by the Parish Priest who over the years had grown to know the Travellers coming to Walsingham, and he would be there to bless all the trailers, collect the rents, and wish them God's speed as they left the next day.

The next item was rather unusual as it was the blessing of the statues and pious objects from the trailers and also of the souvenirs for the people at home. This meant that all holy things had to be

placed around the foot of the Altar beforehand. During the afternoon, dads could be seen carrying the larger statues to the church, followed by the mums and children carrying a variety of smaller holy items and, not to be left out, the toddlers came clasping their beloved teddies. The Blessing was informal as was the whole Liturgy, and yet alive with faith.

Visiting Walsingham at this time was an American Monk, Pilgrim George, who was travelling the world preaching the good news. He was a most impressive figure, tall with long white beard and hair and dressed in a long grey robe and hand-made sandals. He had a kind and gentle attitude and one felt that he was a holy man. The Travellers took to him and he was invited by the Team to come and talk to them during the service. He came and spoke simply and sincerely to them about the basic truths, and the audience hung on his words. Then to our surprise he began to teach the children a simple hymn, 'Come and go with me to my Father's house'. After the children had the tune all joined in and he beckoned to us to follow him as he started to move around the church. The children joyfully scrambled to follow him singing along and soon the grown-ups, men, women and even the grandmothers joined in encircling the huge church. I was tempted to join, but I had a job and was on duty. I wonder if this was a first for Walsingham. Eventually all sat down and Pilgrim George, after he prayed for them, left happy with the response to his words.

The next item, which proved to be the last, was a dedication service using candles, and with such a large crowd it took careful planning. The congregation were invited to take an unlit candle from set places at the back and bring it up to the side of the Altar where it could be lit safely. Then the holder would place it at

the designated place near the Altar as a symbol that he or she was giving their lives to Jesus. This simple action resonated with the Travellers and it was edifying to see them come to the Altar with such devotion. Some returned with another candle in memory of someone at home, that was as long as the supply of candles lasted.

The planned service of Reconciliation, with a Travelling boy reading the parable of the Prodigal Son, had to be omitted as the candle service was deemed to be the appropriate conclusion and the priest brought this memorable evening to an end fittingly with a short prayer.

I left feeling a great gratitude of heart to the Rev Guardian and the Liturgy Team in Walsingham for all they had done to help make the Travellers' Pilgrimage so enriching and I pray that God will bless their efforts abundantly.

Fr Joe Browne – A new appointment

Fr Joe Browne has worked as a chaplain to the Travelling Community in the diocese of Westminster for over six years. He has also supported the chaplains in Southwark and Brentwood dioceses. He has now been appointed by the Irish Chaplaincy to develop a new project to address some of the issues affecting Travellers, including: supporting families facing eviction and those on unauthorised sites. He will also offer support to various Traveller groups and organisations to ensure that all can work together as effectively as possible. He looks forward to working with Chaplains around the country to support them in whatever way possible. He will continue to be based at the London Irish Centre in Camden.

'The good old days'

Sr Carmel Clancy

While visiting an elderly woman we got talking about the past. Jean reminisced on what life was like for her husband and herself as they brought up their family of ten in the 1940s and 1950s. There were no benefits in those days. Her husband and often she would get seasonal work on farms. They spent long hours in the fields often in severely cold weather doing laborious work, but they were happy.

When money was scarce, she would trek from house to house, with a baby or two on tow, selling little trinkets or paper flowers (hawking), the proceeds from which would buy their food. In some areas people would be friendly and give her food or clothes for the babies.

As the children got older they tried to limit their travelling so that they could attend school. Neither parent could read or write, so they were determined that their children would not grow up with the same disadvantage. But things were not easy. Officials from the Council would come and move them on. Jean gets angry here, as she tells of the ruthlessness of some of the officials and the pain and devastation they caused. There were times when she was cooking the only food she had, on the fire outside. Unexpectedly a very officious gentleman with papers in his hand would appear and in a rough voice order them to move off. If they did not obey instantly (or even if they did) he would kick the cooking pot off the fire, scatter the lighting twigs, hang on the bow tent generally cause chaos as they prepared to leave. The part that hurts her most is the effect it had on the

children. If they were still in school he would send one of his companions to fetch them at once so that the whole family and their friends could go on their way. When this became a fairly normal occurrence, the father lost his patience and stated that the children were never to be sent to school again. He had seen too often how they ran home crying, frightened and embarrassed at being singled out opposite their peers and teachers. So, sadly, this family grew up unable to read or write but in spite of this they and their children are fine men and women who have contributed much to their society.

When one hears of the rough and brutal way in which Travellers are evicted nowadays, one's mind harks back to Jean's story, to the 40s and 50s and one is prompted to ask 'has anything changed?' Has society not learned anything? Why has all our education not taught us compassion and respect?

CHANGES – A POEM

A Travelling Woman

'They're coming to move us', I heard my mum say.
'Come on, help your brother, there's no time to play.
Pick up the dishes, the buckets – that pan.
It's there by the fire. Quick, here comes the man.'

'We'll give you till twelve, then be on your way.
There's no need to argue, you really can't stay.
Move on to the next town.' I don't like it here.
It's too close to the roadside and traffic I fear.

'Tie up the old Juck or he won't last long.'
'Oh, he's olling the rope, dad, he knows that's wrong.
It's starting to rain, mum, we'll catch it to use.
Let's fill all the buckets, there's no time to lose.'

Night starts to fall now. There's no traffic sound.
We all fall to sooty 'til morning comes round
A knock on the varda. 'Dad someone to see'
A man with a notice – 'Be gone now by three.'

They're building new places. They're calling them Sites.
It's a big step to take, but Dad said we might.
'It all sounds so final', mum starts to say.
'We'll all have to go on them' Dad says 'some day'.

Travelling is finished and this life is through.
We'll try that new Site for a week – maybe two.
But thirty year later them Sites they are many.
Our people have changed now, I do not know any.

I'm glad Dad can't see it, but who do we blame?
The man who came knocking, but what was his name?
There's so many changes – life's never the same.

Planning Circular 01/2006, *Planning for Gypsy and Traveller Caravan Sites*

This has replaced Circular 01/1994 and places an obligation on local authorities to work together and with Regional Planning Bodies to identify appropriate sites for Gypsies and Travellers to meet need. The circular is available at www.odpm.gov.uk/planning-circulars. Also published recently is draft practice guidance for local authorities to help them meet their obligations to assess whether new sites are needed in their area. See www.odpm.gov.uk/gypsiesites

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).

Churches Commission for Racial Justice (CCRJ). CTBI, 3rd Floor, Bastille Ct, 2 Paris Garden, London SE1 8ND (020 7654 7254)

Department for Christian Responsibility & Citizenship, Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX (020 7901 4831 or 4828)

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)

Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition (G&TLRC), c/o Friends, Families and Travellers, Community Base, 113 Queens Road, Brighton, E Sussex BN1 3XG (07985 684921)

The Irish Traveller Movement (UK), Banderway House, 156-62 Kilburn High Road, London NW6 4JD (020 7625 2255)

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

The London Irish Centre, 50-52 Camden Square, London NW1 9XB. (020 7916 2222).

Travellers Aid Trust, PO Box 16, Llangyndeyrn, Kidwelly, Wales SA17 5YT (01269 870621)

Travellers Network Diary Dates

Northwest Cluster Meeting, Saturday 10 June (11:00 –2:00), St Austin, Heath St, St Helens.

Southeast Cluster Meeting, Monday 22 May (1:00 – 3:00), London Irish Centre, Camden.