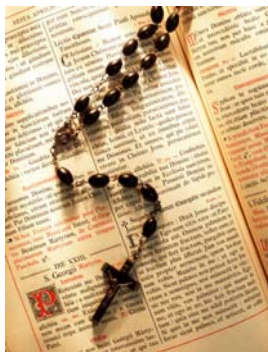


# *The Church's Mission to Migrants*

*A talk given by Bishop Pat Lynch at the Southwark JPIC Commission Assembly  
day April 19<sup>th</sup> 2008*

Thank you for the welcome and the invitation to speak. It is a great joy to be here and to be able to speak about a theme that is very close to my heart: *The Mission of the Church to Migrants*. I am basing this talk on the document approved last week at the Bishop's Conference and in the talk I would like to focus on three main themes:

1. The complexity of the phenomenon of migration today,
2. Our Biblical Mandate and the Social Teaching of the Church,
3. Our Mission as a Church to migrants today.



I remember over forty years ago when I arrived in Boston to continue my studies I had two things in my luggage that were typical symbols of a migrant – my rosary beads and my hurley stick. The first was a symbol of my faith, the second a symbol of my culture. As I look back on my time as a student, a pastoral worker and a teacher - in places as far apart as New Hampshire and Detroit, Washington D.C. and Los Angeles - studying with, working with and teaching people from all over the world, I see how my understanding of faith was enriched by the interaction with other cultures and I see how that in some

way prepared me for my ministry with migrant communities from Nigeria, Ghana, Ecuador, Goa and India here in the Diocese of Southwark.



## **1. *The complexity of the phenomenon of migration today.***

Migration today is first of all a global phenomenon. It touches all regions of the world and crosses all national and ecclesiastical boundaries. I remember fifteen years ago visiting Japan to give a retreat for priests and what immediately struck me was how immigration had radically changed the demography of the Church there. In the space of ten years a Church which was ninety five percent native Japanese people became a Church that was comprised of forty or fifty percent immigrants from Brazil, the Philippines and Peru. Migration is a major issue for the Church throughout the world, not just here in Europe but also in the U.S., Asia, Australia and Africa.

Second, the causes of migration are very complex. Sociologists speak about 'push factors' (the factors encouraging people to leave a particular country) and 'pull factors' (the factors encouraging people to come to a particular country). 'Push factors' would include conflict, human rights violations, economic deprivation, human desperation and environmental disasters. 'Pull factors' would include the attraction of living in a particular country, the language spoken by a particular country, having relatives in a particular country, historical links with a particular country and most of all, the strength of the economy of a particular country.

Today, however, migration is also a feature of globalisation and for us in Britain a feature of EU enlargement - where a shortage of labour in one country is a job opportunity for someone in another. A shortage of labour in the construction industry, the health

service or the service sector, for example, is an opportunity for a job for a builder from Poland, a nurse from India, a carer from the Philippines or a waiter from Portugal.

Thirdly, it is very important to recognise also the diverse forms of immigration in Britain today. At the outset we should distinguish between economic migrants and asylum seekers: asylum seekers come primarily seeking protection, whilst economic migrants come seeking work and in general a better life. One of the problems in the recent past has been that there has not been a clear distinction between immigration and asylum policies. There is now an attempt to rectify this in government policy but not in some parts of the media.

It is, therefore, important also to distinguish between different kinds of migrant communities:

- Settled migrant communities (for example from Ireland, Poland, the West Indies, Goa and the Indian sub-continent
- Newly arrived immigrants from E.U. countries (from countries like Portugal on the one hand but also from A.8 countries like Poland and Lithuania. It is good to remember that by 2010 all people in the EU will have the right of freedom of movement within the EU.
- Migrants who receive work permits (nurses from the Philippines, students),
- Irregular migrants (those who enter without documents or those who overstay).

Finally, the Catholic Church in Britain has a long tradition of welcoming and extending hospitality to migrants in times of conflict, political upheaval, poverty and famine elsewhere in Europe. Ever since the French Revolution and then the famine in Ireland the Church here in England has been greatly strengthened by immigrants - from Ireland and Italy, the West Indies and Poland and now more recently from Africa, Asia and South America. The parish of St. Thomas the Apostle in Nunhead where I worked for five years is one such example in Diocese. Eight years ago I remember we did a study of the demographic profile of the parish. The results showed that the West African and South American communities emerged as the largest but also the youngest communities with high percentages of young families and children). The Irish and the West Indian communities on the other hand - in stark contrast to thirty years ago - were both dwindling and ageing communities.

## ***2. The Biblical Mandate and Social Teaching of the Church.***

2.1. The Church's mission to migrants is rooted first and foremost in God's love for humanity and people on the move. Again and again the Scriptures describe God's presence with and God's call to migrants. In the Book of Genesis Abraham and Sarah are called to leave the land of Ur and go to the Promised Land of Canaan (Gen 12:1-3). In the Book of Leviticus the Israelites own experience of leaving Egypt and wandering in the desert gives rise to God's command to take special care of the alien. *"You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you: have the same love for him as for yourself: for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt"* (Lev. 19:33-34).

2.2. In the New Testament we see in the Gospel of Matthew that Mary and Joseph were uprooted three times from their community. First they travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census: then they flee to Egypt to avoid Herod killing their newborn son Jesus and then finally they return when the danger is past. Throughout His ministry Jesus is portrayed both as a migrant and as one who welcomes strangers. He himself says *"The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"* (Mt. 8.20 and Lk. 9.50). All during his ministry Jesus reached out to welcome, to include and to heal the



strangers of his time and his culture – the Samaritans, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Roman centurion.

- 2.3. The *Social Teaching of the Catholic Church* has, over the years, consistently drawn on this scriptural tradition to emphasise three basic principles:
- People have a right to migrate to sustain their lives and their families,
  - A country has the right to regulate its borders,
  - A country should regulate its borders with justice and mercy and recognise and respect the human dignity and rights of migrants.

**As Christians and as a Church we are called to welcome Christ in the migrant and welcome the migrant like Christ.**

### ***3. Our Mission to Migrants – a call to Proclaim the Word, a call to build communion and a call to be at the service of God’s Kingdom.***

- 3.1. In the Catholic Church we have a very rich tradition of mission.

From the earliest times – as the early disciples moved out from Jerusalem to new lands and new cultures – the mission of the church has consistently included three interdependent elements; first the task of *Proclaiming the Word*, second the task of *Building up and renewing the Communion and Holiness of the Church* and third the task of *being at the service of God’s Kingdom*. These three dimensions of mission shape our mission and ministry to migrants today.



- 3.2. *Our Mission to migrants is a call to ‘Proclaim God’s Word.’* In his encyclical “*Redemptoris Missio*” Pope John Paul II wrote “*I sensed that the moment has come to commit all the Church’s energies to a new evangelisation*”. This call for a new evangelisation is repeated in the Pope’s letter *Ecclesia in Europa 2003 (The Church in Europe)* where he calls for a new evangelisation centred on the person of Jesus Christ. Proclaiming the Word involves first and foremost leading people to faith and leading people to a deeper and renewed faith.

- 3.2.1. For newly arrived migrants the Church is very important. It is a familiar place where people can find meaning, strength and hope. Helping migrant communities to pray together, to share their faith together, to grow in faith together and to pass on the faith to a younger generation are important challenges to the host community – **challenges that call for openness to new expressions of faith and new skills (e.g. languages) to help migrants grow in faith.**

- 3.2.2. Our mission as a Church is not just to proclaim God’s Word to migrants but also to Proclaim God’s Word through migrants. For centuries migration has served as a means for transmitting the faith and building up the Church. Migrant communities continually give witness to their faith – through their faith, through their prayer, through their commitment to the family and through their commitment to the Church. In his opening address to the Bishops of Latin America last year Pope Benedict summed it up beautifully “*The Church today has the great task of protecting and nourishing the faith of the People of God. By virtue of Baptism the faithful are called to be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ. Through Baptism Christians are called to follow Him, to live in intimacy with Him, to imitate Him and give witness to Him*”. **Our mission as a local Church is to help migrants to grow as disciples of Christ and grow as missionaries of Christ.**

- 3.2 *Our mission to migrants is a ministry of welcome – a call to build up the communion of the Church.* The Vatican Instruction ‘*Erga Migrantes Caritas*

*Christi'* (The Love of Christ Towards Migrants) published in 2004 stressed the importance of a ministry of welcome and building communion. Building communion is a two way process. It is a process – a journey that involves helping migrant communities and families to connect with, belong to and participate in the social, cultural, ecclesial and economic networks of the host community. **If migrants can't connect with our parishes they won't feel they belong to them and if they don't feel they belong they can't participate.**

3.2.1 For migrants from a 'collective' culture, community and a sense of belonging are very important. When someone leaves their country they are leaving their family, their extended family and very often a very close knit community. It is not surprising that migrants gravitate around their own cultural community where they find friendship and support. This is sometimes misunderstood by the host community or the parish. **Our challenge is, therefore, to be a welcoming community in a real and tangible way by helping parishes to be communities of faith, communities of fellowship and communities of prayer that welcome and include migrants.**

3.2.2 It is good to remember that 'unity' is not the same as 'uniformity'. Unity does not mean everybody doing the same thing or praying in the same way. Just as cultures differ in the ways values and feelings are expressed likewise the ways of expressing faith and the styles and patterns of prayer will differ. Dancing, for example, is an essential part of prayer and praise in Africa. In Asia there is a deep awareness of the 'sacred space or place' so altars and shrines are a very important focus for prayer. In Eastern traditions icons have a special place in Christian spirituality. In Spain, Portugal and Latin America processions are an important part of communal prayer and popular faith. Last October, for example, I participated in two processions for the feast of Our Lady of Fatima in the Lambeth Deanery where there are 20,000 Portuguese migrants. On the Sunday nearest to the 15<sup>th</sup> August close to 700 Latin Americans mostly from Ecuador gather annually to celebrate the feast of 'Nuestra Senora del Cisne' with a procession, a Mass and a communal celebration. **Our challenge is to be respectful of diversity but try to ensure that it contributes to unity.** We can all learn from the different forms and expressions of prayer in the Church but we must also learn to find ways to pray together and celebrate together. We could do that by having liturgies with an international flavour on special occasions – for example the parish feast day, World Migration Day, National Patrons Day – liturgies that would include hymns in different languages, prayers from different traditions, customs.



3.3. *Our Mission to Migrants is a ministry of Service – a call to be at the service of God's Kingdom.*

3.3.1. For migrants in a new country the need for a warm welcome quickly gives way to the need for pastoral support, practical help and advice. **For the Church and the host community this is the challenge of 'walking with' or accompanying people in the ups and downs of everyday life.** The challenges faced by migrants differ greatly from region to region and diocese to diocese in England and Wales. The difficulties facing agricultural workers in East Anglia, Lincolnshire or Herefordshire are very different to those faced by

Portuguese workers on the Channel Islands, or the Polish migrants up and down the country or indeed the diversity of migrant communities in inner London.

3.3.2. For me, the Gospel inspiration for our pastoral care and strategy is summed up in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The response of the Good Samaritan sums up the response we are called to give to anyone in need – *‘to see the suffering, to be sensitive to the suffering and to respond to the suffering.* It is interesting that in the parable the Good Samaritan doesn’t just respond personally to the person in need - by involving the innkeeper he involves others in the ministry of service. He puts in place a structure that can respond to the need.

3.3.3. I am not going to list the activities that people or parishes might do. All I would say that

- sometimes it involves giving practical help,
- sometimes it is advice (giving advice on where to go or how to get help),
- sometimes it is advocacy (being the link with schools, social services or health services), -
- sometimes it reminding (reminding organisations or Local Authorities)
- and sometimes it is working to change a national or local policy.

However what ever the action, it is best done together as parishes, as deaneries, and as Dioceses and with the migrant communities and not just for the migrant communities.

## *Conclusion*

As globalisation gathers pace, the Church throughout the world and here in England and Wales will be called more and more to extend a hand of welcome **to** and be in solidarity **with** migrants, refugees and the victims of trafficking. Through His life, His ministry, His Death and His Resurrection Jesus gives us the inspiration and the example of how we can reach out to those in need especially to migrants. Pope Benedict himself reminds us in his latest Encyclical *Spe Salvi* why “*A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering through compassion is a cruel and inhuman society.*”

