

One thousand “Little Packets of Love and Hope”

PRESS RELEASE – 17 October 2015

Over thirty volunteers spent Saturday afternoon at Our Lady and All Saints Catholic Church, Basildon, packing 1,000 “little packets of love and hope,” to be delivered to the refugee camp at Calais on Friday. They contain donated items – toothpaste, a toothbrush, a bar of soap, 2 pairs of socks and 2 pairs of underpants. Support has come from Christian churches and people of all faiths and none across Basildon, as well as further afield with donations from Catholic parishes in Gidea Park, Romford, Tilbury, Chelmsford, Stanford le Hope, Witham, Grays, Lexden and Benfleet. There were even donations from a parish in Perth, in Scotland, where some parishioners’ relatives live!

Messages of hope were added into each packet; these came from schoolchildren at St Teresa’s School & St Anne Line Junior School in Basildon, and St Teresa’s, Lexden, and were often very moving: “I am sorry you have been bombed,” read one, “Don’t give up! We have not forgotten you!” Another child had written, “I ask God to bless you and I hope you find peace.” “Keep believing.” wrote another, “You have a lot of courage and we are praying for you.” The children had taken time and care to decorate the messages, and perhaps the simplest of all, from a very young child, had a picture of a house and just a little sentence, “I hope you find a home soon.”

Fr Dominic Howarth, Parish Priest in Basildon, said, “This whole project shows how much people care about the refugees. We have had literally thousands of bars of soap, tubes of toothpaste, and toothbrushes donated. Over £5,000 has also been given, and this is enough to mean that we can buy more items for another trip in November, and again in January. The volunteers here this afternoon have not only worked hard, but with real compassion in putting the packets together. We know that what we are doing is just a tiny drop of hope in an ocean of need. But together many drops make a different ocean.”

Over the last few weeks there has been some challenges about the refugees – are they refugees at all? Or economic migrants? And should they be let into the UK, would it not be a pull for many more to come? Fr Dominic has also considered this, and said, “When I went to the camp with the first donations from Basildon, in September, the only word for it was squalor. People are living in shacks made of bin bags. And in the last few weeks the University of Birmingham have conducted a study which shows that all the factors are in place for an outbreak of cholera at Calais, because the sanitation is so bad, and winter will make things much worse. It is so devastating to think that there could be cholera in Northern Europe in 2015. I believe, as a Christian, that every person is my sister, my brother. Whatever we think about how the Refugees arrived in Calais, this is a crisis, and a tragedy, and I can offer no other response than to try and help. Some people have also challenged us on social media, asking why we are not helping local needs, like the homeless in Basildon. The answer to that is that of course we do, every day and every week; the parish here gives so generously of time, money, and donations to the poorest in our town, and we have vibrant projects for the young and the elderly, reaching into the community. That really matters. The need in Calais is an additional need, and everyone has just given a little bit more – often when they do not have very much to be able to give. It really is faith in action, and I thank God for such kindness.”