

Reflections on a day in the Calais “Jungle” & delivering aid there.

My heart and head are very full as I write this evening. I have seen a lot of suffering today. I have met very many decent, peaceful, open-hearted people, including an architect, a computer engineer and a doctor who have fled from the most appalling conditions of war, political persecution, and terror; I have met volunteers overwhelmed by the response yet also offering new and better suggestions to those who want to bring aid to Calais; and I have been utterly ashamed that the UK and French governments are letting 3,500 people live in near-total squalor.

So there are three stories to weave in here; the big picture; the hope; and what to do if you want to get aid to the refugees at Calais.

I'll keep it as brief as I can!

The big picture



The big picture is that whatever we think about how people got there, they are our brothers and sisters and they are living in squalor. When a person is so touched by the donation of a bar of soap, or a toothbrush, you know things are desperate. These are 30-40p items, received as if they are precious – which they are, of course, if you do not have them. The shacks in the pictures are just that – made of bin bags and bits of wood. So the first way to help the refugees at Calais is to write to your MP, and hope that someone has the guts to table a motion to get the Government to act – not by building fences, but by spending the same millions

alleviating this near-total squalor. Just look at the pictures, and ask yourself honestly if you could live there for months on end. We pride ourselves on being a civilised country. And we are called by faith to treat the “least” of our sisters and brothers as if they were Christ himself. If all the UK Government did was to make it legal for people (with all the checks and support that would require) to take refugees into their homes, I have no doubt people would respond very generously.

Hope



The hope is in the dignity and decency of the people. They have been branded as “criminals” by some newspapers. Why? Because in their desperation they have tried to climb on, or under, a train or a lorry, to get out of the misery they are in now. Again I ask, what would you do? I met one man who crossed the Med in a boat full of 125 people which was so overloaded that 60 of those people drowned. The Calais refugees have seen unimaginable and traumatic horror, and now they live in squalid conditions. Of course they will do anything to leave. So where is the hope? In the way that they conduct

themselves, and in their gifts & talents; I watched 400-600 people queuing for two hours and more for a pair of trainers. They waited patiently, some of them got an old tape player and a speaker and with a generator danced and sang for those waiting in line. These are professional people who have managed to put a bit of old solar panel on the Mosque (built of tarpaulin and old wood) so there is light inside. And in perhaps unique ways, they have forged deep understanding; as the man who had survived the boat told me: "There were Christians and Muslims there. We shared the strife on that journey. Here in Calais we understand what people have been through; we live at peace." So there is hope – hope that, in the end, good shines through, and all these gifts and talents will not fester in pitiful shacks in a forlorn part of Calais, but will grace humanity, and human society.

Help (These points are to help get the best aid to the camp.)

Please note that right now – Sept 2015 – the warehouses are full. New deliveries to the charities can only be planned for late Oct/November. So now is the time to collect large multiples of items, as detailed here. See poster for the plans we have in Basildon for our "little packets of hope and love."

- **Women's clothes and children's clothes are not needed.** The charities have ample (as there are just a tiny number of children and only 50 women in the 3500 people at the camp).
- **The best thing to do is focus on one item and get lots of the same brand, same style, etc.** Most useful would be sleeping bags, shoes, soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, socks, pants, jeans. It could be 1000 bottles of coke, or bars of chocolate. The key is as identical an item as possible, and if something differently sized, like shoes or jeans, then sort them by size before you come. There is a very good reason for this – distribution. When hundreds of people are waiting in line, there can only be frustration if people are lingering over choices of colour, style etc. Aim to bring 500 of something, or 1000 of something.
- **Link with a charity – don't just head in alone.** Again, simply and practically, there are some places more suitable for distribution, and there are some planned distributions (like the daily food distribution); it would not help to be trying to distribute anything else at the same time. Seeking Sanctuary will link you with Secours Catholique, and there is also Calaid.
- **Bring a team with you – at least 4 or 5 people** – to help make sure the distribution is as efficient as possible, and to help sort out the line when you arrive.



There is one other thought, in relation to financial donations. The biggest need, as winter arrives, is proper shelter. Secours Catholique and CSAN are working on a plan to get proper timber frames to make more robust shelters for winter, and in the next few weeks it may be that collections can be directed to purchasing some of these.

I hope this is helpful, and above all urge that we **write to our MPs to get some humanitarian, civilized, Christian action to make sure this camp is consigned to history**, with the decent, talented and peaceful people living there lifted from squalor and offered the new beginnings they deserve.

With prayers for all of those volunteering, and all of those living in the Calais "jungle", as well as for refugees across the Middle East and Europe,

Fr Dominic, 8th September 2015