

Reflection on Visit to Calais, April 15th 2016



Here is a sombre thought: just 24 hours before we crossed the Channel two Iranian refugees had set off from Calais in this rubber dinghy, trying to row across the 22 miles to England. It is the busiest shipping lane in the world, with 400 crossings a day. Undoubtedly, they are very lucky to be alive. Who knows how many others will try this summer? How many will drown off our coastline?

“People think Calais is finished, gone,” said one volunteer, almost despairing. “They did such a good job of showing the world when so much of it was bulldozed. **But 4,500 still live here.** And the other 2,000 have not gone far – some to Belgium, some further along the coast.”

We had set off at 5.45am, this time with 250 blankets and a number of coats; the blankets are good blankets, thick and soft, and they come from an army surplus store, EastWest Trading, in Laindon, who give us excellent value for money, putting the donations to very good use. As in March when we took blankets, we handed them out directly at the camp – this time in Calais – and could be sure that with night time temperatures this week at 0 – 3 degrees, they would be both well used and very necessary.

At the warehouse run by Care4Calais we sorted thousands of socks – “When you have walked from Macedonia, you need a new pair of socks” said one volunteer, wryly.

The “wall of shame” is growing – look at the cartoon pictures on the T-shirt (right) and think at just how many levels that is inappropriate for a refugee! Later in the day we sorted hats, and scarves, and during the day we made two trips to the camp – once to give out the blankets and later to visit the Eritrean/Ethiopian church that we have been to several times before.



How is Calais, now? It is truly very difficult to put into words how searingly sad it is to drive onto the camp and to see what had once been tents and tarpaulin-timber dwellings literally razed and erased.

Cleared away leaving a sea of mud – the “buffer zone” from the road to the camp now hundreds of metres wide, with just an occasional building – a school, in one place; in another, a youth centre; a cluster of three mosques. **A little way on, like an island in the mud, the church. It was pitiful.**





Over the months between September and January we had seen the hard work, the resources, the time and the kindness, that had gone into the construction of the timber and tarpaulin dwellings. We had seen the shanty town of tents gradually be replaced with more and more of these little homes. They offered somewhere dry, and relatively sturdy. Above all, they had been designed with a sense of community – in amongst them were little cafes. There were first aid and medical points, and the geodome which became a centre for the artistic projects – theatre and music.

All of that is gone, all those labours bulldozed away, cleared into great skips and jettisoned. Valuable wood and tarpaulin ripped apart and thrown out.



And so where do people live? About 1500 moved into the containers – these are behind a large fence, and to get in and out requires fingerprinting. It could not look or feel more like a prison if it had been designed to be one. It is soul-less, and soul destroying, and without the community hubs that there used to be, people are just existing. Around the containers, though now in a much smaller area, there are dwellings like there used to be – only now these are very tightly crammed together, every inch used in the great scramble when, firstly in January, then again in February, the French authorities gave a notice period of four days before starting to clear the areas deemed to be beyond the boundaries of the camp.

It was hard – very hard – to see the great expanse of bulldozed area. **This is the consequence of ruinous decisions of Governments that see the refugees, it seems, only as a security risk and no longer as people, as sisters and brothers who have fled war and horror.**

But, as so often in Calais, even in the midst of despair, there is hope, and light, and today that came in two ways. Firstly, as we went into the little church of St Michael we found three Religious Sisters quietly praying. They were French, from the Community of Little Sisters of the Lamb, and they live about eighty miles from Calais. There is a small camp near to them and they help refugees there each day; about once a month they come to Calais, and they filled that little church with prayer. When they saw I was a Priest they asked for a blessing, and once we had made the sign of the cross they broke



into the most beautiful a capella chant of Aaron's blessing ("May the Lord bless you and keep you; Make he make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; May the Lord lift his countenance towards you, and give you peace"). **This was so unexpected, so poignant and moving; it brought me and those with me almost to tears. In the midst of desolation, the church remains an island of prayer, giving hope.**

The other ray of light comes from a new charity, **Play4Calais**. Some of the greatest difficulty in Calais, for adults and children alike, is complete boredom. The more so for those living in the ghastly metal containers. What is there to do? How do you keep your mind and heart stimulated in any way? Prayer, certainly – it was Friday yesterday, and we saw the great rush to the Mosques for Friday prayers. Beyond that, what? **So Play4Calais is providing sports kit and equipment, and has also cleverly used part of the area razed to the ground by levelling it, covering it with sand, and thus creating the beginnings of a proper football pitch.** Goals have been purchased, and footballs, and this facility will undoubtedly be well used. It stand just feet from St Michael's church, and hopefully that will also help in terms of the tiny Eritrean and Ethiopian community living in the church compound, that they will not be so isolated from the rest of the camp. To have a football pitch is a truly inspired idea; taking some of that bulldozed land and transforming it into a place where there can be a bit of community, some fun, physical exercise, a place where – just for a while – some of the worst troubles can be forgotten. Perhaps above all a bit of normality – football is, after all, a universal language, and no doubt there will be a "world cup" here on the Calais pitch.



We left with the words of the volunteers and refugees resounding in our hearts and minds: **"Tell people we are still here. Please don't give up on us. We feel invisible to the world. We need help."**

The refugees are our sisters and brothers – and as they become ever more despairing, there will be more and more attempts to cross the Channel by all possible means. What is the solution? Nothing is straightforward, but there is one definite thing the UK Government could do: put a Consulate in Calais. This would mean that the (at least) hundreds who have genuine asylum claims in the UK, with family here, would not first face a perilous & illegal journey across the Channel. It would be a statement of true justice, and integrity. Surely it is better than spending money on any more fences?

As I write this, news comes of Pope Francis visit to Lesbos, this very day, and his challenge to the European political leaders, and all of us: **"Refugees are not numbers; they are people who have faces, names and stories, and need to be treated as such"** (@pontifex on Twitter 16th April, 8am). On Holy Thursday, the Pope washed the feet of refugees and migrants. He is showing us true leadership, faith in action. We can only pray that his example melts the hearts of those taking decisions in Calais. In the meantime the tiny charities Calaid, Care4Calais, and now Play4Calais will keep doing all that they can; we keep them in prayer, and will continue to support them from Basildon in any way that we can.

Fr Dominic, 16/4/16

Could you support the Calais Refugees?

The aid being delivered from Basildon is inspired by the work of *Seeking Sanctuary*, and in Calais we are working with *Secours Catholique*, *Auberges des Migrants* and *Care4Calais*.

Wherever aid will best and most effectively be used, we deliver a package about once a month, and we adjust it based on what those in Calais all the time are telling us is most useful.

- In September, we took mainly shoes and clothes.
- In October, we took toothpaste, soap, toothbrushes, pants and socks, packaged into “1000 packets of hope and love”, with messages from our schoolchildren.
- In November we took blankets, duvets, some cough medicine, and 1000 hats and gloves.
- In December we delivered £7500 worth of basic medicines – cough mixture, nit combs, and medicines for scabies, along with 1000 tubes of toothpaste and 1000 bars of soap.
- In early 2016 we had intended to deliver insulation, but the rough weather and the bulldozing of part of the camp meant we were alerted to a very urgent need for sleeping bags and blankets, which we brought in early February 2016. We also brought £2,500 worth of medicines. A £1000 donation was specifically given to us for shelter, and we will pass this to “Jungle Canopy” for caravans, as this now seems the best way to ensure shelter for the most vulnerable.
- In March 2016 we delivered 120 sleeping bags and 250 blankets to the new MSF camp in Dunkirk.
- In April 2016 we delivered 250 blankets direct to the Calais camp, plus coats and sleeping bags to the Care4Calais warehouse.
- **The appeal for sleeping bags and blankets continues, and we will travel again in May.** Please **only** donate sleeping bags and blankets; generally, we have found that as donated items come in a wide variety of sizes and styles, they can be hard to sort and distribute. We aim for multiple units of items, and have found wholesalers that will support us in the quality, price and uniformity of what they offer.

**We therefore gratefully accept donations of any amount,
as cheques payable to “Our Lady and All Saints.”**

Please mark the envelope “Calais” and post to:

**Fr Dominic Howarth
Calais Appeal
Holy Trinity Church
71 Wickhay
Basildon SS15 5AD**

The money is strictly ringfenced and used only for items to support the refugees. The petrol, ferry and any other costs of the journey are covered by private donation, and so every penny received is spent on the items for the refugees.

If you are a group or individual wanting to help, then contact www.care4calais.org or use the website www.calaidipedia.co.uk which has all the information you need, and co-ordinates a wide variety of aid deliveries and volunteer offers of help.

For additional information specifically about the Basildon project, which is supported by a number of churches and individuals in Basildon, and other parishes within the Diocese of Brentwood, please feel welcome to email frdominic@basildoncatholics.org or call 01268 281732.