

Trenchfoot

The word “Trenchfoot” probably invokes visions of World War One and troops stuck in wet and muddy trenches for extended periods with little access to proper hygiene. Although a distressing condition, which in extreme cases could lead to Gangrene and amputation, you may be surprised to learn that doctors in Calais have reported a significant re-appearance of this condition among homeless refugees there.

This was one of the shocking stories we picked up on a recent visit to Calais by Fr. John Lee, the parish priest of St. Joseph’s, Maidenhead and myself from Caritas at the kind invitation of The Windsor & Maidenhead Community Forum. The group was formed with people from other charities and faith groups and also included Alf Dubs, a labour peer and former Labour MP. Alf Dubs, who sponsored an amendment to the immigration bill in 2016 to bring 3,000 additional unaccompanied refugee children to the UK, was himself a refugee from Czechoslovakia, but was rescued in 1939 at the age of 6 by Maidenhead resident Nicholas Winton, often known as the British Schindler. Also on the visit was Barbara Winton, the daughter of Nicholas Winton.

Although perhaps shocking in its own right, Trenchfoot is only one of the daily degradations refugees in Calais have to put up with. Dodging the local riot police is a daily activity and infamous in their violence against refugees, the French police have certainly sunk to new lows in their actions using tear gas to deliberately contaminate drinking water, clothing, blankets and sleeping bags.

But hope readily shows its optimistic face and on a visit to a huge collection warehouse in Calais we witnessed a massive operation involving about 200 young volunteers working together to sort out donated clothing, shoes, backpacks etc as well as an enormous kitchen to provide daily cooked meals for the Calais refugees. These young people would possibly not call themselves Christian or perhaps haven’t entered a Church for years, but the Gospel spirit of “who is my neighbour” and its point of reaching out to those most in need and most vulnerable was very much blowing through this drab and draughty warehouse on the edge of Calais.

The cynicism of government can be clearly witnessed not only in its refusal to no longer execute the Dubs amendment by refusing to accept any more unaccompanied refugee children, but also to exorcise themselves of any responsibility by saying local authorities are unwilling to accept them. This is far from the truth as many local authorities are very much willing to reach out to this vulnerable group of unaccompanied minors. It does seem that we have a country that is willing to accept refugees but a government that is not.

And what are our churches doing? Well along with Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Justin Welby’s critical response to government policy we can also remind ourselves of Pope Francis’s shared response to migrants and refugees summed up by four verbs: “to welcome, protect, promote and integrate”. We know that to “welcome the stranger” is a core Gospel value, however it is not easy to find much echo of these verbs in the response of the French and UK governments to the Calais situation. Let us, as a living Christian community, do what we can to counteract this and reach out to the refugee stranger among us.

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Note: Under the Bishop’s direction, our Portsmouth Diocese is now actively engaged in setting up a program to house refugees