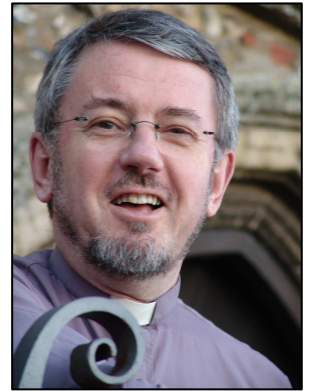


New Immigration, New Evangelisation

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Introduction

One of the most commonly talked about topics in the Catholic Church in England and Wales today is the large number of recent immigrants, many of whom are Catholics. Of course, in many places immigration is nothing new: some London parishes boast of having over 100 languages, and have become skilled at celebrating their diversity both in the liturgy and around the meal table. Now, however, there is scarcely anywhere in Britain that is untouched by the presence of Polish workers, Filipino nurses, Chinese students, and asylum seekers from various countries, and the Church is beginning to ask what are the implications for evangelisation.

Any question connected with evangelisation is both simple and complex. It's as simple as the initial proclamation by Jesus of the kerygma: "Repent and believe the Good News for the Kingdom of God is at hand." It's as complex as all the ways in which Jesus, in his earthly lifetime, and his Spirit, through the Church, have unfolded its implications across the centuries and within each culture.

When I was beginning work as a parish priest and getting thoroughly into the swing of things in a lively suburban London parish, a woman from Malaysia stopped me in my tracks by commenting how dead the parish seemed to her. In Malaysia, she pointed out, the singing is lively, the sermons last half an hour at least, and Catholics have a tangible joy in living and sharing their faith. More recently I was similarly challenged by a young man from Eastern Europe who had joined one of the new movements here and was organising a series of meetings. When I inquired as to the purpose of these meetings, he replied: "The conversion of England, of course."

It is easy to smile at the simplicity of these voices, but behind the smile is our painful realisation of our dilemma as part of a Western Church that is declining in numbers and, more seriously, is often lacking in vitality, and yet faithfully reflects the kind of society we live in: complex, confused and unsure where it is going or whether it even has any shared values which would take it on a common journey. Looking around we see churches in other parts of the world that suffer poverty, persecution, and other problems we do not have, but are vibrant, confident and growing. Their life we admire, their simplicity and black-and-white attitudes we feel ambiguous about.

Through increased immigration these other churches are very much with us in Britain, and that raises many questions for us. Here are just a few, selected at random:

- It's wonderful that so many Poles who are presumably devout Catholics are among us, but will they remain devout for very long in our society, and is the answer to give them separate Churches?
- The Catholic zeal of the Filipino and Keralese health workers in our hospitals is admirable, but can they evangelise our society without understanding it, and can they understand it without becoming like us and losing their zeal?
- As a church it's an integral part of our mission to welcome those fleeing desperate situations in Sudan, Zimbabwe, Somalia, but do we really know who they are, how they may still be being exploited over here and what kind of help is in their long-term best interests?
- Given the long hours many of these new visitors work in order to support themselves and their families, how can we involve them in our church life?

These questions are just the tip of the iceberg and you will be able to think of many more. Perhaps they can be summed up in the following single question with four elements, which we will examine in turn:

How can we create evangelising communities where we can:

1. hear the stories of the immigrants, and value who they are;
2. serve their needs;
3. allow them to evangelise us; and
4. work alongside them to evangelise our society.

1. Listening and Valuing

An evangelising community begins with listening. The Catholic Church in this country has recently been trying to listen to families in a process called "Listening 2004," one of the main findings of which is that the question of how to pass on faith in families must be preceded by the recognition that "Home is a Holy Place," that is, by recognising and valuing the presence of God in cooking meals, changing nappies and all the other activities of family life.

Inter-religious dialogue is another place in which it has become apparent that listening and proclaiming are two sides of the same coin, but the same is true for any kind of evangelisation: without genuine listening and interest in the other evangelisation lacks its necessary foundation in love. We must ask what it means to be a genuine friend of the poor, or of a refugee, not in a professional sense, but to make them welcome in our homes, for example. And what does that mean for our parishes? How can they be places where the stranger feels at home, not patronised or put up with for a while

because we're Christians, or treated as an exotic animal. That's where a superficial multiculturalism and a genuine welcoming of the other part company.

This may take a long time and a lot of patience. If someone has been held in a transit camp, abused, raped, or exploited, you can't just smile and say "So, tell me your story" and expect it all to come out immediately.

2. Serving the needs

How can we serve the needs of our immigrants? Some are obvious: food, housing, clothing, protection from enemies, healthcare, learning English, etc. Others less so: belonging, dealing with cultural desolation, the self-respect that comes from earning your own living, being able to make a contribution in the Church and in society.

The parable of the Good Samaritan invites us to project ourselves imaginatively into the situation of others, as he did with the man who had been robbed, not just patching him up but thinking of all the needs he would have as the situation developed. Many groups who have begun with simple care for homeless people by inviting them into Church and giving them a cup of tea, have gone on to cater for all their needs, such as medical care, drug rehabilitation, alcohol dependency programmes, education, job-finding etc., and the same will be true of our immigrants.

3. Allowing ourselves to be evangelised

How can we allow people of other cultures to evangelise us? This takes place both explicitly and implicitly. Our own history is full of examples of cross-cultural evangelisation: the Irish and Roman monks coming to England, English monks such as St Boniface evangelising the Continent, the French missionary orders in the 19th century. In our own time part of the richness of the new ecclesial movements is that they are made up of people from many nations.

But evangelisation also takes place less obviously. What about the way people from Zimbabwe and other African countries just enjoy being together and take time to do that: isn't that a challenge to our culture of over-work? When I was in China I was evangelised by the sheer simplicity and hunger of country people to know answers to most basic spiritual questions, and ashamed of the over-complex answers we gave. In London I've been evangelised by the belief of Keralese Catholics in the power of prayer: they really do believe that if enough people come together to pray, our cities will be converted.

I know this raises complex issues. We Western Europeans can't suddenly pretend to be Zimbabweans or Keralese and throw all our cultural baggage out of the window. We have to translate into our own culture the values we are sensing in others', just as we have to interpret our own culture for the immigrants. And there will be disagreements as to how that works itself out.

4. Working together in evangelisation

Finally, how can we work with immigrants to evangelise our society? Some people see no future for the Western Church in its current form: they believe it will be taken over totally by the new movements, or by the more vibrant churches of the southern hemisphere.

Surely the question, both with the movements and with immigrant Christians, is not to see them in competition but in partnership, learning from each other. To take specific examples, setting up separate churches for immigrants, unless the circumstances are exceptional, benefits neither them nor the host Church. "Solving the vocations crisis" by handing over large tracts of a diocese to immigrant priests is simply going to cause more problems, which is not to deny the great value of immigrant clergy.

Work in partnership together in these and other areas is no doubt more arduous, but also more true to the spirit of what it means to be Catholic. No passage of Scripture brings this out more clearly than Eph 2.19-22:

"So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."