

International Community in London

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London, for centuries the centre of a worldwide empire, is today a very racially mixed city. Everywhere you go you walk through areas and along streets that are almost like visiting country after country and you meet people with an endless variety of languages and cultures. These are not tourists, but people who wish to make Britain their home and that of their children. Primary schools can commonly have 50 or more first languages among their pupils and for some English remains a poor second language, which is not used at home or outside of school. Parishes have much the same reality as the schools, and so there is a great pastoral need to be answered among these non-British born residents. Many are settled and working normally, but faced with the very high cost of living – London is among the most expensive places in world. Many others of these immigrants are asylum seekers who are not allowed to work as they await a decision on their request for residency permits, something which can take several years. Others again are without legal recognition, and so are excluded from all social welfare, and who find it increasingly difficult to find accommodation and work. All this is not confined to London. It is a reality of all the urban areas of the United Kingdom, but is most pronounced in the capital city. People want to feel at home here, to feel that they belong, and church communities and the outreach from such communities offers social, as well as spiritual support.

Many of the Evangelical Churches, which are strong in their countries of origin, provide the immigrant population with a real sense of being welcome here, of being understood and belonging, and offer support and help in all sorts of ways. The Catholic Church

was not left behind, and now Ethnic Chaplaincies are well organised for about 50 different ethnic communities, some very large with a whole team of ministers, others are small and are cared for by just one Chaplain. These Ethnic Chaplains are registered with the Diocese of Westminster for immigration purposes, and receive a monthly stipend, closely equivalent to that of a diocesan priest.

The Spanish confreres have the longest tradition in this ministry here. Since the 1960s they have had very active centres here, one of which, based in Potter's Bar in North London, is now a Diocesan property; the other in Palace Court is where our little community has been based since 2011. Until 2011, this was a missionary outreach of the Salamanca Province and had little contact with the Irish Province. For more than 40 years it was the home of confreres from the Salamanca Province providing terrific support to the huge Spanish-speaking population of London, those from Latin America as well as those from Spain. Pastorally the confreres worked with families, preparing children for the sacraments, and for marriages and funerals. Sunday Eucharist was celebrated in many parishes around the city. Associated with these Sunday Eucharists, there was always a very real social dimension, where all sorts of difficulties about accommodation, work, and school places were sorted out. Father Ernesto Atanes, CM, widely known and greatly loved has been in this ministry almost since his ordination in 1970. He has established very practical cooperation with the Spanish Embassy and for years has been able to offer hospitality and short-term accommodation to people in difficulty who turned to their embassy for help and were directed to Father Ernesto.

Since 2009, Father Ernesto had been alone in this work, until the Irish Province under its Provincial, the late Father Brian Moore, suggested that it become an international community instead of just a Spanish one.

The International Community begins

In 2005, the Irish Province began an International Community. This was based in the house purchased from the French confreres in Osterley, West London, not far from Heathrow Airport. In the beginning, there were three foreign confreres, one each from Nigeria and the Philippines and later joined by one from Ethiopia. None of them joined the Irish Province, but they got the work going with their respective national populations. The location in Osterley, while a good residence, was not a good pastoral base, and the move to Palace Court in Central London was a great boost in September 2011. For almost 50 years this had been the home of the Spanish Catholic Chaplaincy. Here there is a Chapel for about 70 people, and two halls of a similar size, which are used for a variety of meetings.

With its long history, the Spanish Chaplaincy has much of its work based in the centre. Monday to Friday there is a constant stream of people coming to the office – arranging baptism and formation for First Holy Communion. Others come for marriage preparation. Many of these weddings take place in Spain, and, not infrequently, Father Ernesto will be invited to Spain to be the celebrant. Home visits, hospital visits, funerals, and cremations take the Chaplains all over the city. Weekends are very busy with three Masses in Spanish in three different locations and each one also providing catechetical training.

The other members of the community have Sunday Eucharists in various parishes around the city, generally once a month in each place, an afternoon time, and followed by a social/community meeting. Somewhat different from Father Ernesto, they tend to go out to the areas where their people live, and their mobile phones become their offices.

For many of the different ethnic minorities to which our confreres minister, religion is of the greatest importance, and they bring life to their local parishes, taking part with joy and enthusiasm in

pilgrimages, retreat, and special church events. Without them, many of the London parishes would look very tired and lacking in life.

When Father Cirino Potrido, CM (Father Inno) began his work with the Filipino community in London and beyond, he was really building on the work begun by the Columban Missionaries who had returned after many years in the Philippines, and wished to continue with the huge scattered Filipino population here in London. Over the years, it has become one of the biggest and liveliest of the ethnic communities and it has brought a great measure of celebration, joy, and deep faith to the Church of Britain.

Likewise, when the Bishops Conference of Ethiopia decided to send a confrere to London to care for its people here, Father Petros, and his successor Father Ufayissa, readily joined with the little international community and both gave it life, and got strength from it. They have been ministering to their nationals and this includes some people who are not church-going but are looking for help. Together with Father Cirino, they have been visiting the homes of their members in different locations all over London for a long time. Some Filipino and Ethiopian families made their home in the Grenfell Tower, so tragically in the news recently, and sadly some of their members are now numbered among the dead and injured from that disastrous fire.

Special pastoral needs

The immigrant ethnic-minority population is in many ways disadvantaged compared to the British-born population. Many have resorted to “people traffickers” to get here. It has cost a great deal, but they hope it opens a new and better life for them. These traffickers are not regarded as criminals, but as people who helped them to achieve what they could not have done otherwise. On arrival, the first struggle is to find accommodation, but, even with as many as three jobs a day, many find it very difficult to keep home and family

together. Things are all so expensive here – I found costs in London about six-times greater than I had known in the Ural Region of Russia before moving here in 2011. Jobs can be found, and they seem to pay well, until it comes to the cost of renting an apartment or even a room. The result is that many sublet their space to others of their community for a partial payment of the rent. Of course, this results in overcrowding, with stress and tensions. Stress related illnesses and, sadly, also suicides are part of the world in which our Confreere Ethnic Chaplains work. Who can say how many undocumented people live in Britain (the government has no accurate idea), and many of these individuals become part of a separated family – with husband or wife and children left far overseas. The immigration laws, which are constantly being made more demanding, perpetuate these sad situations and it is not infrequent that the family breaks up, and new relationships begin here and probably also in the country of origin. This is a whole world of suffering and frustration, people in a new relationship here, but doing everything they can to send money home to support their partner or children there. Very sadly, too, there are people here who have been trafficked by criminals, some for the sex trade, some for slave-like poorly paid work. They also can be part of the ministry of the Ethnic Chaplains, usually in partnership with specialised groups (some church-based, some not), who work in the world of contemporary slavery.

International community life

For those who have not experienced it, living in an international community appears to be very challenging. But in reality it is not. In London, our style of community living is rather open and free. We all take part in community prayer at 7.00 am and generally in the Eucharist that follows. We take turns in leading this. Sometimes few, or maybe no one, will be present for the Mass, because they will have Eucharist later in the day in other places. Once a week on Thursday evenings at 7.00 pm we have a community evening – it is a mixture of prayer, discussion, and a little agape. It has virtually never

been missed over the years, and can continue to 9.30 or later. A lot of issues from the different ministries are discussed, and attention given to Vincentian affairs. The members take part in Vincentian days of recollection and retreats, though often the diocese arranges specific retreats for the Ethnic Chaplains and it is good for them to take part in these. Language differences are not usually a problem, but, of course, they hide a different way of thinking and seeing the same reality. That is something to be respected, and it also shows itself in differing senses of humour! Different food-tastes also exist, but I have found this not to be a real difficulty. As in most communities, apart from the Altar, the dining table is the heart of the community. We have an Ethiopian lady from one of our parishes in Ethiopia who cooks lunch for us Monday to Friday. It is sort of neutral and not really the dish of one or other but acceptable to all. On weekends, we prepare for ourselves, when at home. Basically, we have a happy and supportive community life, and each year the confreres get home for a month's holiday.

The future.

What is the future for this International Community? The need is great and will continue through Brexit and beyond. However, at a practical level, immigration laws are making it very difficult to get visas for confreres from outside Europe – which are the places from which we most wish to have them.

A further issue that needs to be addressed – the confreres we have had in this ministry for more than 12 years have not belonged to the Irish Province. The example of the Vice-Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Eastern Europe shows this is the way to go. Confreres have been changed from our community by their Visitor, which is completely his right to do, but with little reference to us and our plans, and they may be replaced or not. This leads to an inherent instability, and deprives our work and the Irish Province of great life and freshness of thought – which is much needed. It could be so easily addressed by the two Visitors agreeing to a simple contract,

perhaps for one year initially, and then, if all are happy, extending it to three or five years. A longer period in this work here, also offers the possibility of further studies on a part-time basis, which could lead to a good qualification and be a real enrichment to the Province of Origin when the confrere would eventually return home. An exciting aspect of this mission is the possibility of vocations to the Congregation. Presently there are two seminarians training for the Irish Province, and others showing interest, all this more than 25 years after our last priestly ordination. Neither of these seminarians is British or Irish-born, but seem destined for an international Vincentian mission in this part of the world.

The future of this mission involves a small number of confreres from different nationalities and provinces. It will not just happen. It must be promoted actively and planned inter-provincially. This has not been happening. Unless it happens, the whole thing may simply wither away, and an opportunity will be lost and a great need will go unanswered.

In thinking of the future, it will be good to think more widely than previously. There is a possibility, for example, of making a future International Community a Vincentian Family Community – or at least a joint one with the Daughters of Charity. The immigrant issue is likely to continue, and, even without a flood of newcomers, there are so many here already. The Vincentian Charism can enrich their lives and their faith, and we can collaborate at this level.

Note:

All the above was written before the death of Father Ernesto Atanes Payo, CM, on 4 July 2017. I took part in his funeral in his home place. The attendance there of up to 2,000 people, who came to pay their respects, and also the huge congregation, which gathered in the Church of the Holy Apostles, Pimlico, London on 5 July, testify to the great worth of his ministry in London since 1971 – “*By their fruits you shall know them*” (Matthew 7:16).