



Catholic Parish of Our Lady and All Saints

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Dear Friends

Calais – a year of bringing aid to those in “The Jungle”

After fourteen months, the parish Calais project is – for now – at an end. As you will have seen on the news, the Calais jungle was completely demolished three weeks ago. The refugees living there were sent to “welcome centres” across France. The reports being received by charities indicate that these are of varying quality, but the nature of the dispersal means that the type of aid we have been bringing, in the way that we have brought it since September 2015, is no longer practical.

The needs have not disappeared, of course. During the next few weeks it will become clearer as to the best ways to continue to support refugees, and in the meantime I commend to you the charity HelpRefugees. They are working in camps in Greece and Syria, amongst other places, and through their “choose love” campaign are doing everything possible to keep the plight of refugees at the forefront of media and political attention. Their website is www.helprefugees.org.uk and they also have a facebook page, as does Care4Calais. Seeking Sanctuary – www.seekingsanctuary.weebly.com – also has regular updates. Around 1000 refugees are in a camp in Dunkirk, being fed each day by the charity Calais Kitchens (www.calaiskitchens.net).

The treatment of the children that were in Calais until recently is a particular cause of scandal. After the demolition, 1600 unaccompanied children waited a week, living in metal containers, and guarded by riot police with no youth workers or social workers allowed in, reliant on food from charities like Calais Kitchen. That week – with no clear information about what would happen next – added deeply to the stress and trauma the children have already suffered. Some of them are suicidal.

The reality is that many hundreds of the children have the right to be in the UK, either with family here or under the Dubs Amendment in relation to unaccompanied minors. It is a matter of both outrage and deep sadness that the British and French Governments have been so slow to act to help these children. They are now dispersed across France, and await visits from officials of our Government. Nearly three weeks after the children were moved from Calais, not a single visit by a British official to a welcome centre has been reported. In the absence of any clear information, or any action, these desperate and traumatized children are, in some cases, simply running away, trying their own luck after everyone else seems to have given up on them. **Please write to your MP, to maintain political pressure now that media attention is elsewhere. The longer the children wait, the more likely they will run away: they are very vulnerable at this time, and need and deserve urgent help.**

The experiences of the past decade and more suggest that it is highly likely that another large settlement will emerge in Calais in the weeks and months ahead. It is interesting and probably indicative of this that the French authorities – supported by British Government funding – continue to build the wall along the road that leads out from the port of Calais. Personally, I remain firmly of the view that had these millions been spent on dialogue, care and legal support for the refugees, the situation in Calais would have looked very different. To meet people with tenderness, mercy and compassion will always elicit a very different result than meeting them with hostility and fear. Pope Francis repeatedly encourages us: “Build bridges, not walls.” He also exhorts us to remember that the refugees are not faceless numbers, or statistics, but “every one of them has a face, a character, a story. Every one of them is a son or a daughter.” And pre-eminent here are the words of Christ himself: “Whatever you do to the least of my sisters and brothers, you do to me.” As Christmas approaches, it is poignant to remember that the Holy Family had to flee the terror and persecution of Herod; in his very first months of life, Jesus was a refugee.

Before concluding this letter, and by means of summary and thanks, I should just note that beginning from the parish in August 2015, our project gained attention in the town with wonderful support from many local churches. More recently the work was given greater coverage by *The Universe* Catholic newspaper and in *Independent Catholic News* online. This meant that we delivered, in the end, about £107,000 in aid in the last fourteen months. A drop in the ocean for the 10,000+ who lived in the Calais Jungle in that time, but every pound donated meant shoes, or toothpaste, or soap, or a pair of socks, or a blanket – essentials that, throughout this time, were only provided by charities. It has been faith in action: **thank you** to all who have donated, and all who have sorted goods, packed the minibus, and travelled to Calais over the last year.

We will continue to be guided by those in Calais about the needs, and will support through fundraising for the charities I have named above. If and when it makes sense to once again take large aid deliveries to Calais we will resume such deliveries. There is already a suggestion that with warehouses and volunteers in place in Calais, it could become a “hub” to take aid to camps across Europe, and we would support that in all possible ways.

For now, for a while, one particular chapter has closed, but – sadly – this story is far from ended for hundreds of thousands now in Europe and millions across the world fleeing violence and terror. Please pray for them.

With every blessing and thanks

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fr Dominic Howarth', with a horizontal line underneath.

Fr Dominic Howarth