

## Christmas 2008

Some people closed the door on the Holy Family when Jesus first came among us. Others welcomed Him and rejoiced at His coming. It would be sad news to hear that we were 2000 years too late to give room to Christ. The good news of the gospel is that Christ comes to us in the person of those in need - in the stranger and in the newcomer to Ireland - and asks us to make room for them in our lives.



Newcomers to Ireland appreciate being made welcome. They also want to be integrated into Irish society. This edition of JustNow focuses on recent efforts by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice and others to help newcomers integrate into Irish society and to become part of the local community.



# From Welcome To Integration

## Background to the VPSJ Work of Promotion of Active Citizenship

The V.P.S.J. in its effort to bring about a more just and inclusive society facilitates an Active Citizenship/Voter Education Programme with people in disadvantaged areas. Many members of disadvantaged communities feel alienated from mainstream society. They experience the democratic process as having no relevance for them.

Many associate politicians with broken promises and indifference. In order to help them take a step towards integration into the wider society the V.P.S.J. works with members of disadvantaged communities exploring with them how their vote can become their voice. During the past 12 years the programme has been facilitated with almost 800 groups throughout Ireland. The programme, which is non-party political, is based on the approach of Paulo Freire - a pioneer of adult education in disadvantaged communities in South America.

The 'transformative' impact of the programme has led to a greater voter turnout and to a new found confidence in speaking out about issues of importance to the local communities. Participants of the workshops discover their own power as citizens and recognise their need to play a more active role in society. The V.P.S.J. believe that we will not have a more just and inclusive society until the voices of all the people of Ireland are heard.

## Ireland's Newcomers - Dublin City Council's Response

In the early summer of 2008 the V.P.S.J. was requested by the Dublin City Council to facilitate Training Trainers Workshops for leaders of foreign national groups living in the city. The response to the Council's advertising of the workshops was much greater than expected and approximately 80 community leaders were trained to facilitate an Active Citizenship - Local Election Programme with their members. For 5 Saturdays in September and October full day workshops took place in The Dublin City Council Offices.

Representatives from the Chinese, Indian, Iranian, Malaysian, Russian, Kurdistan, Nigerian, Kenyan, Ethiopian, Somalian, Sudanese, Congo Republic, Polish, Lithuanian communities arrived shortly after 9.00am and left at 4.30pm. They spent the day learning how to register to vote, how to complete a ballot sheet, the need for and impact of Local Government, the role and responsibilities of Local Government, how to find out about Local Candidates and how to chose a candidate who would be likely to work for their issues.



## Ireland's Newcomers - Countrywide - Integrating Ireland's Response

While the Dublin Workshops were taking place similar ones were drawing large numbers to venues in each of the four provinces. The workshops were held in each area and members of Foreign National Communities travelled great distances to attend. These workshops were organised by Integrating Ireland - an independent network of community and voluntary groups working in mutual solidarity to promote and realise the human rights, equality and full integration in Irish society of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants.

Workshops in the regions/provinces were also organised by other groups which focus on the needs of foreign nationals.

# From Welcome To Integration

## The V.P.S.J. Response

As the V.P.S.J. team- Sr. Anne Neylon, Sr. Phyllis Lee, Sr. Joan Carey and Sr. Bernadette Mac Mahon travelled round Ireland we met very impressive people from a large number of countries.

There were people of many races and creeds. It was a very humbling experience to be in the company of so many courageous people who have suffered so much in leaving their homeland and who are unsure of their future in Ireland. The four of us learned a lot about the fate of the stranger and the different forms of injustice he/she encounters.

It was most encouraging to see how determined our newcomers are to use their vote as their voice and not just for themselves but also for the community in which they live. Unlike the membership of disadvantaged Irish communities they did not need to be motivated to vote. They wanted to vote. For many the experience of elections in their home countries was extremely negative.

## The Voices of Some of our Newcomers

"The whole experience was impressive and inspiring I have confidence now to share with the other people in my community. It is wonderful to have the right to vote in Ireland and I will use my vote for the local community not just for ourselves".

"The system in Ireland is much fairer than in my country"

"This will be the first time that I will vote without being afraid that the people I don't vote for will have it in for me"

"We need good representatives for our local area".

"We want to be part of Irish society - voting is a step to integration"

"Our vote will be our voice for the local community".

## Active Citizenship in Mosney

At present Bahroz from Kurdistan is a resident in the Mosney Asylum Centre. Thanks to his efforts and those of a few friends all the residents in Mosney are now registered to vote. When interviewed for the 'Drogheda Leader' he had the following to share.

"We need to show Irish people that we are active and that we want to be part of society here. This will be the first time for a lot of the residents in Mosney that they will be able to vote democratically. A lot come from places that would dictate who they should vote for. Because we are living in Ireland now we should get involved as much as we can. We should embrace life in this multicultural country because we are part of it".



## Some of the Issues for Local Government

Participants identified the following issues as being priorities for them - better housing conditions (*many are living in overcrowded sub-standard accommodation*), English classes and opportunities to attend educational courses, the opportunity to work and to be independent of the state and facilities at local level so that they can meet Irish people and become more integrated into Irish communities. When considering the issues they wanted to raise with candidates they stressed that they wanted to join their voices with the local people in order to get a better quality of life for all the people of the area.

# Reflection and Prayer



## Advent

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss --

This is true: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction --

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever --

This is true: For unto us a child is born, and unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of Peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world --

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you, even unto the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church, before we can be peacemakers.

This is true: I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young shall see visions, and your old shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for the liberation of humanity, for justice, human dignity, and peace are not meant for this earth and for this history --

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope.

Let us see visions of love and peace and justice.

Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage:

Jesus Christ -- the Life of the world.

*Source: Testimony: The Word Made Fresh, By Daniel Berrigan, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004*

