

Homily at the Mass in support of London's Migrant Workers
By Bishop Patrick Lynch, ss.cc
on Monday, 4th May 2009
at Westminster Cathedral

Mass in honour of Saint Joseph the Worker

(Readings: Genesis 1:26 – 2:3, Matthew 13:54-58)

Our readings today - for the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker - invite us to reflect on how we are called to be prophets of hope in our world today. The first reading from the book of Genesis reminds us of some of the key principles of social life for the People of Israel.

- The importance and dignity of every human being. Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and should therefore be treated with dignity.
- The importance of community and solidarity. As human beings we belong to a family, to a particular society and to the human community.
- The responsibility (and duty) we have as human beings to contribute to human development, to care for the human community and to care for creation.

Our Gospel on the other hand is taken from the discourse where Jesus teaches his disciples through a series of parables about the Kingdom of God. Each parable is a statement of hope and confidence in God's power and each parable confronts the discouragement of the disciples. In this passage Matthew describes the reaction and hostility evoked by Jesus' prophetic teaching.

Our feast day and our readings give us two very helpful images for our social ministry in the world today: first the image of "solidarity" and secondly the image of "prophecy". The primary reason we are gathered today is to celebrate the feast of St. Joseph the Worker. We honour Joseph not just as a husband and father but primarily as a worker – a carpenter, an artisan and a tradesman. Matthew reminds us that Joseph was a carpenter and the assumption is that he taught Jesus how to be a carpenter as well.

The Catholic Church here in England and Wales has a long tradition of standing in solidarity with workers especially migrant workers:

- be it those who worked in the fields – before and during the Second World War,
- be it those who worked in the docks in London or Liverpool,
- be it those who worked in the car industry in Birmingham, Coventry and Dagenham,
- be it those who today up and down the country work in construction or catering, in the cleaning or caring services or in farming, fishing or food processing.

I would like, therefore, to affirm the contribution migrant workers have made to Britain especially in recent years. You have contributed culturally and economically to the nation and you have contributed spiritually and socially to the Church bringing with you your deep faith, your commitment to the family and your loyalty to the Church. So my first prayer today is that during a time of recession when there will inevitably be job shortages we as the Church will do all we can not to allow migrant workers from within or outside the European Union to become scapegoats and targets of peoples frustration with the economy.

The second image Matthew gives us in today's Gospel is the image of prophecy. If we look at the Gospels we see that Jesus exercised his prophetic ministry in two ways – through his Prophetic Words and through his Prophetic Witness.

Today's passage occurs at the end of a section where Jesus teaches through parables. The parables are messages of hope re-assuring us about God's presence, God's power and God's patience but they are also stories that challenge us to open our eyes to the reality that God is always close to us, speaking to us and working through us. The parables do however present us with a choice. We can respond positively like true disciples or negatively like the people of Jesus'

home village. Likewise, if we are to be a prophetic community we too must bear a message of hope – a message that God is close to the poor, the vulnerable, the exploited, those seeking asylum and those who are undocumented.

The Church is concerned about all workers – their living conditions, their families and their human rights. Everyone – those working in cleaning or construction, those working in hospitality or hospitals, those working in offices or in schools – deserves to be paid fairly for what they do. That is a basic principle of Catholic Social Teaching. Likewise everyone deserves to live in adequate accommodation and not live 4 to a room and 20 or 25 to a house. Thirty years ago when I was working with Irish immigrant workers in the sugar beet industry, I first became aware that housing is one of the areas where there is constant exploitation of migrant workers.

The Church is also concerned for workers' families. A family does not cease to be a family because one of its members emigrates overseas. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (16.3) recognizes the family as "the natural and fundamental group unit of society entitled to protection by society and the State". The right of re-uniting families should therefore be promoted and should be seen as a priority.

Thirdly, the Church is concerned for all workers - documented and undocumented. A migrant's legal status is quite separate from his or her human dignity. A human being's worth is defined by their God given dignity, not by the papers they do or do not carry. There is clear moral case that undocumented workers who have lived and worked in this country for five years or more should be given the opportunity to build a future in the United Kingdom and continue to contribute to British society. You have worked here: your children have been born here and attend school here: you are part of our parishes and our society here and a way should be found so that you can remain here.

Finally, and most importantly, Jesus also exercised his prophetic ministry through prophetic witness and action. He ate with and forgave sinners and tax collectors; He greeted, He touched and healed the sick especially those who were most excluded. He helped people to experience the closeness of God's presence. He didn't simply preach a message of hope. He was by the way he served others and accompanied others a sacrament of Hope.

Likewise we too are called through our witness and service to be sacraments of Hope. I would like to affirm and thank the many parishes, priests, religious and Religious institutes, Church and community organizations throughout London who have welcomed and walked with migrants and those seeking sanctuary. Through the welcome and support you give and through the advocacy you carry out you are indeed beacons and sacraments of hope to many people and to many migrants.

In conclusion, I remember about 15 years ago while giving a retreat to priests in Japan I was invited to celebrate Mass for a community of Filipino Catholics in the city of Shimodate. For me it was both an inspiring and informing experience. It was inspiring to see the commitment of so many young Filipinos and young families really trying to live their faith in a very challenging environment and in a very different culture. It was informing in the sense it was the moment I realised how migrant workers were a key part of the globalized economy of our modern world. Migrant workers are a gift to our society and especially to our Church here in England and Wales.

However, as we enter an uncertain economic future let us pray that God will also give us as the Church the words to speak clearly, the compassion to witness lovingly but most of all the courage to be a prophetic community that is a sign, an instrument and a beacon of hope for workers today.