

## Homily at the Mass for Migrant Workers

by Archbishop Kevin McDonald  
at Westminster Cathedral  
on Monday, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2007

In this special Mass for migrant workers we come together and bring to our prayer all those people, especially here in London, who have come here looking for work, looking for a new life, coming very often from situations of great need and sometimes finding themselves in situations of great difficulty and deprivation, and unable to have their situation regularised. This Mass is for *you* and for thousands of others who are in similar circumstances. We celebrate the Mass of St Joseph the Worker and the readings present us in different ways with a very deep reflection on the reality of work: work which is an expression and exploration of our identity. In one way or another, we all need to work. Today's readings lead us to reflect on the work of God in creating the world, as well as the work of Joseph, the carpenter; and we come together in Eastertide having celebrated the work of Jesus Christ, Son of God – his suffering, death and resurrection, which is the pattern that marks all our lives and all of our work, and is also the source of hope for all of us and must remain our constant reference point.

In the scriptures there is also a strong and consistent connection between moving from one place to another and doing the work that God calls us to do. Abraham, the father in faith for Christians, Jews and Muslims, is told by God to "go" – to leave his own place, his own people, and go to the place and to the people to whom God sends him. Many of us here today can identify with that. I certainly can. Indeed, we could say that leaving home, or leaving what is familiar and secure, is in often a key part of the way God calls and deals with his people both as individuals and all together. We need only think of the Exodus, when the people of Israel were freed from slavery and made their journey through the desert to the Promised Land.

The migration of peoples has always been a feature of human life and is complex. Forced

migration and, at its worst, ethnic cleansing, constitute some of the darkest pages of human history and the darkest aspects of modern times. But the movement of peoples *can* also be a source of great enrichment, and we must acknowledge that. One of the words that has become a part of our vocabulary is globalisation. The experience, the reality of being just one world has many positive aspects. The Vatican document *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* speaks of the enhanced experience of catholicity that can be the fruit of different ethnic groups coming together as a result of migration. Certainly we can bear witness to that in our parishes, schools and communities in London. We must thank God for that. But migration, as I have said, also has its darker side as well as its potential and opportunities.

Last year, a senior Vatican spokesman addressing the United Nations said some things that merit our reflection today. He said: "migration is an essential element of the interdependence and exchange among nations that forms part of the phenomenon of globalisation." And he has this very important distinction to make which we and all who are concerned must never lose sight of when dealing with migrant workers in our midst. He says: "a migrant's legal status is quite separate from his or her human dignity, since all of them without exception are endowed with inalienable rights, which can neither be violated nor ignored." And again: "One particular concern of the Holy See is the situation of migrants who are forced to migrate against their will, not only refugees, but all those who are trafficked, many times for immoral purposes and human slavery. They are the most vulnerable of what have become known as irregular or undocumented migrants."

Of course, the situation of migrant workers has long been a concern of the Catholic Church, and it is fitting that in the present situation in this

country that we should look at a programme of well considered, just and generous openness to migrant workers and their families who seek to settle in this country. It is consistent with the work that we have already been doing for a long time. Our charitable agencies and our ethnic chaplaincies have been vital to our response to the situation. Perhaps one word which takes us to the heart of our response is the word "welcome". Interestingly, it is a word that features more and more in the language of Catholics today. The various consultations, renewal programmes and pastoral strategies being developed by dioceses throughout the country all propose *welcome* as something that must be a feature of Catholic parishes and Catholic communities. Not that our parishes have been unwelcoming but we have not always thought about going to Mass in those terms. Now there is a growing conviction that we should. And it has a particular importance for migrants. For Catholics who come to this country the Catholic Church may be one of their few reference points, places that are recognisable from their previous experience. This is especially important given the traumatic change that many experience. Change of location, as I have said, is difficult for everyone; very costly, physically and psychologically. For people, change is hard and we need to be communities that can be open and can receive, and so bring help, assistance and healing to the process of change.

And so it is that in the Church, a key role of ethnic chaplaincies and of Catholic parishes is *both* to integrate new ethnic groups into the already existing community and also to create space to explore and celebrate ethnic diversity, culturally and liturgically. This is a delicate task and a continuing challenge and opportunity for our dioceses and parishes. A positive way of expressing it is in terms of the sharing of gifts, being generous with what we, the host nation, have received and being receptive to what people from other cultures have to offer us. After all, we already share in the gifts God bestows on the Church. We are all members of the Body of Christ, we participate together in the Body and Blood of the Lord. The Word of Life is proclaimed to us all. We are – in a word – in communion, and we need to be open to *everything* that being in communion can mean: open to the unique bond and the great

opportunities that are the fruit of receiving and sharing God's gifts.

For this reason, the Catholic Church has a unique and distinctive contribution to make to the social cohesion of our society. This is true of our parishes and also very much of our schools. We see all humanity as created in Christ. We seek to strengthen the unity of the Catholic Church. We seek greater unity with all other Christians and it is wonderful to welcome fellow Christians here today. We seek to dialogue with members of other religions, trying to identify and explore in a positive way the values we hold in common. And we reach out to all people of good will, and all of this contributes significantly to social cohesion and peace in the world.

So a Catholic community, a parish or a school, can be both a place of enhancing Catholicity because of the different groups that make up the Catholic community, but also a seed-bed of social cohesion because of the spirit of dialogue and openness which is now deeply embedded in the consciousness of Catholics, especially because of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent teaching of the Popes. A key text that we can return to again and again is that the Church is a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate unity with God and of unity for the whole human race.

This Mass is a moment of deep unity and communion. We now look to the Holy Spirit to take us forward. Just as the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire led the children of Israel through the desert, we look to the Lord to take us into a new and unknown future. Unknown to any of us, a hard and testing journey, but motivated by our faith that there is a future for everyone if we respect and cherish one another. Today let us seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as to how each of us as individuals and in the groups we belong to can contribute to a future that is just and peaceful. Together we can have faith that the Lord is leading us to a Promised Land.