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Living ghosts

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Hundreds of asylum seekers are trapped in poverty, banned from working and banned from benefits. They are rarely visible except when being scapegoated for society's ills

They have nothing. They are destitute, they live without any kind of benefits, they are banned from working. They live on the margins of society: they are the forgotten, the people others would ignore. But not quite.

For in recent months, while the numbers of asylum seekers living in absolute destitution has continued to rise – and there are an estimated 180,000 unsuccessful asylum seekers in Britain – the unease among many in Catholic parishes, schools and refugee facilities has also grown, fuelled by concern at the plight of vulnerable refugees, often with young families, and shocked by the vitriolic response from some sections of the media. So what can concerned Catholics do?

First, it is essential to understand the law as it relates to asylum seekers and to the system as it affects them. The law, as it is framed, is clear on the position of refugees who have been refused asylum. Once the legal processes of application and appeal have been exhausted, asylum seekers have no right to support of any kind. In some cases, asylum seekers from particular countries where there is an acknowledged risk to returnees, such as Zimbabwe or the Democratic Republic of Congo, are being allowed to remain even when their applications have failed. But they are still destitute because they are banned from accessing benefits and support.

So while the State is acting within the legal parameters it has set when it abandons these asylum seekers to the streets, there is a human predicament here. Growing numbers of people find it impossible to ignore the plight of such individuals, which is in such contrast to the affluence of much of society.

Secondly, it is important to understand the deficiencies in the procedures that have brought many unsuccessful asylum seekers to this plight. It may now be too late to help individuals who have come to the end of their options, but there are urgent questions to be asked – questions which are coming from responsible lawyers themselves – about the quality of the decision-making process some newly-arrived asylum seekers have gone through and the quality of legal representation that has been provided.

Finally, it is vital to address the needs of asylum seekers: for food, accommodation and access to legal and advice facilities. At the Notre Dame Refugee Centre, in London's West End, along with other refugee services, we are stepping up what we offer in terms of food, clothing and help with accessing health care and education. In some London parishes, there are clergy who open their presbyteries to homeless families, and others which have offered space in their buildings to destitute parents and children. There are schools which mobilise community support for refugee families, and raise money for children otherwise unable to go on school trips. It is a struggle, though, because these responses go against the grain in Britain today.

However, this grassroots response is in line with two of the main pillars of Catholic social teaching: the principle of solidarity with the sufferings of others wherever and whoever they may be, and the principle of subsidiarity, which calls on individuals and communities, on encountering suffering, to take action at the local level, rather than waiting for statutory services to intervene. Individuals and local communities can make a difference to people's lives, whether it is an offer of practical help, such as the provision of food, or the response of social workers to government policy, which led to a climbdown over the removal of newborn babies and children from their (failed asylum-seeker) mothers in an effort to make them comply with removal.

The situation raises still more complex and radical questions. What does it do to us, as citizens, to share the streets of our cities with this invisible army of “living ghosts”? As the anthropologist and Catholic writer Rene Girard has pointed out, the unconscious criminalisation and dehumanisation of “the other” is an integral element in the dynamic of scapegoating. Thus for people of conscience, the stigmatising of migrants (or any other group) becomes possible only when society in general is able to convince itself that they are, as a group, either evil or less than human.

If the public can convince itself that migrants are all feral, dangerous animals with criminal or terrorist intent, then it is right to be fearful. But of course they are not. In truth, we stigmatise migrants not for what they are, what they have done or what they intend to do, but because we blame them for wanting to be here at all. And having done so, we feel justified in our criminalisation of this whole group, and absolved from the need to generate a human response when we see them being treated as less than human.

In Edmund Burke’s words: “For evil to triumph, all that is needed is for good people to remain silent.” The plight of destitute asylum seekers and their children is not just “not good” for themselves, it is also “notgood” for the rest of us. The principle of the common good is a further fundamental pillar of Catholic social teaching. It is not just the destitute who are dehumanised by this situation: it is the rest of us too, who are in effect saying “yes” to a situation which may indeed be legal but is manifestly sinful in the sight of God.

Pope John Paul II stressed the need for individual Christians to take responsibility for the structures of sin they inhabit. But it is the nature of structural sin to seem normal. We do not readily perceive it and, if we do, then we feel paralysed by it, and vaguely guilty, sensing instinctively that something is not quite right but convincing ourselves that there is no alternative. But God’s way is not to paralyse, or disempower, or leave us mired in helpless guilt. On the contrary, God motivates; God helps us to find our way through the darkness; God enables us to see what is real and to find hope there.

One crucial contribution we can all make is to be aware, before it becomes law, of the implications of planned legislation. For example, proposals to be positively encouraged include reported plans for improved procedures for monitoring removals and conditions of detention.

On the negative side, the new five-year limit on “leave to remain” creates uncertainty and makes effective integration less likely. It also raises questions about the inhumanity of removing people who, in good faith, have put down roots and started families in that time.

A further contribution we can all make is to not accept the propaganda that lumps all migrants together into the malign and threatening “other”, a myth that government, opposition and media have all invoked at one time or another. It is this acceptance that enables us to condone, subconsciously, the hunger and destitution faced by people who have sought refuge on our shores. We should not be able to convince ourselves that what is going on is morally acceptable. It may be legal: but it is not OK.

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