

# THE LONDON CATHOLIC WORKER

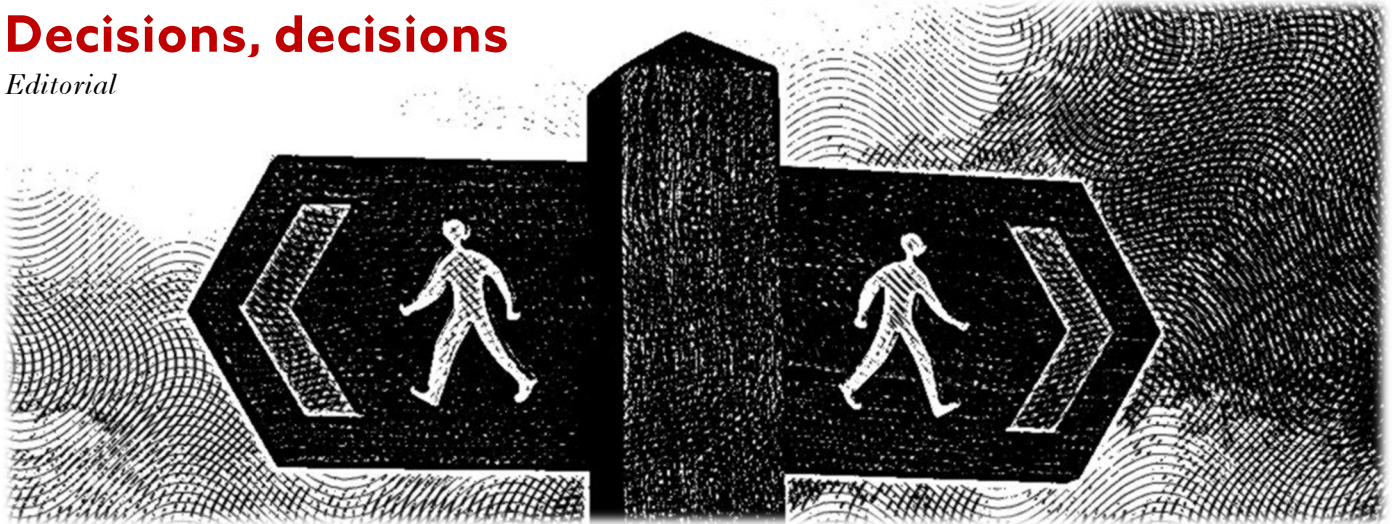
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## Decisions, decisions

Editorial



Siaron James, *New Decisions (edited)*, 2016, CC BY 2.0

**T**his advent we have a lot to think about. For those of you who don't use the church calendar, the first of advent this year started on Sunday 28th November and will run up all the way to Christmas. In the Gospel reading for that Sunday we hear Jesus say 'Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy...' (Luke 21:34). As advent is the time of preparing oneself for the birth of Christ, it's supposed to be a time of soberness – the opposite of Black Friday or pre-Christmas shopping. In some churches, advent still means fasting: to leave behind the abundance of food, drink, television, and maybe today even social media. All attempts to sober up our body, mind and soul. In our Western world of abundance and manifold addictions this can be an ecological as well as spiritual necessity.

There is enough to think about and decisions need to be made urgently: the climate change crisis, the refugee crisis, economic injustice, and religious life itself. You might wonder what you as a single person can do about these global issues, but we are all in it together. There is no escape. The choices we and our societies make will profoundly determine our future and that of our children and grandchildren. Make no mistake, it is past five to midnight!

The articles in our newsletter all have one thing in common: making choices. Fr Martin Newell CP, writes about why he chose to join the Insulate Britain actions. Syrian-Orthodox Fr Georg Koenig speaks in a moving interview about why he chose to dedicate 38 years of his life to serving refugees in Germany and internationally. Henrietta Cullinan's look back on the life of Sr Megan Rice reminds us of one religious sister's radical choice to devote her life to fighting for a nuclear free world. Tom Caddick writes about the Synodal process and the importance of churches choosing to open their doors to the homeless. And finally, in my article on Calais, I talk about the decision of a Jesuit priest and two activists to go on hunger strike on behalf of the refugees in Calais.

Most choices we make aren't so big and life changing, but being a Christian is itself a daily choice to anchor our lives in Christ and in love of neighbour. In the words of Pope Francis: 'Let us pray that we all will make courageous choices, the choices necessary for a simple and environmentally sustainable lifestyle, taking inspiration from our young people who are resolutely committed to this'.

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# A New Exodus

*Fr Georg Koenig is a reverend deacon in the Syrian Orthodox Church. He was born in Syria but raised in Germany, where he now resides at St Antonius Monastery, Hessen. Witnessing the 'exodus' of indigenous Christians out of the Middle East, he began work with refugees at home and abroad, and over the past 38 years has become a passionate advocate of their cause. Invited to speak in London recently on the plight of Libyan refugees, he stayed at the London Catholic Worker for a week. In this interview, Fr Koenig speaks about his work and today's refugee crisis.*

## **Fr Georg, how did your work with refugees start?**

I'm a reverend deacon in the Oriental Orthodox Church and have been working since 1983 with refugees. My first office was in Berlin where we mostly followed Orthodox refugees all over Europe. After that, I worked in different countries, even in the US in the refugee services of our church. In 2013, HH Ignatius Zakka I, ordered us to open the Syrian Cross (Orthodox Caritas) in Germany, to work specifically with refugees from conflict regions in the Middle East. Many of these refugees were spread around Germany and Europe. We had a whole generation of people that were dispersed. We did not want to lose these young people from our regions and we wanted to bring them together locally. The Syrian Cross opened its doors for all who needed it, Christian and Muslim. We are especially thankful to the Roman Catholic Church and the German Protestant Church for the use of their buildings and facilities even up to today.

## **In London you spoke specifically about the situation in Libya and Egypt, how did you learn about the situation there?**

In 2011 the war in Syria started and the situation for people in the region became worse, less security, more killings, more hunger. HH Ignatius Zakka I, saw that nothing was being done by governments, nor occupiers, and asked us to open the Orthodox Cross.

In 2017, the Syrian Cross organised delegations to the Middle East, Africa and North-Africa to see the situation for refugees themselves. I came to talk about the situation of refugees in Libya and Egypt after visiting Eritrea, Ethiopia and Egypt.



Albrecht Dürer, *The Flight into Egypt*, 1504

What happens in Libya and Egypt is horrific and is really like a holocaust. People are burned, tortured, killed and sometimes organs are harvested from people or new drugs are tested on them. The delegations wrote reports to the governments of Israel and Egypt but nothing happened. In 2017 in Cairo (Egypt), we had to cut our conference short when one of our priests, Father Samaan Shehata, a 45-year-old was murdered – pulled out of his car and knifed to death two blocks away from the conference at the Cathedral.

## **These delegations were dangerous?**

Yes, one of the other delegates, a deacon of the Church, got killed on the Turkish –Syrian border and all the reports and information he collected was taken from him. We never even got his body back.

## **Who were the refugees in Egypt and Libya you saw?**

Mostly refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia but also smaller groups from other countries like Ghana, Rwanda. One of the routes goes from Egypt to Israel and there is a route from Libya to Europe. In both countries,

Egypt and Libya, you have these horrible camps – and this in 2021!

When crossing the border from Egypt into Israel my camera, phone and electronic material with pictures of body parts of refugees in camps was taken by the Egyptian border police and never given back. The Egyptian and Israeli government know about the situation and the existence of these illegal and horrific refugee camps and do nothing. They do not care, because they are refugees who are not registered. I think that the border police and local police are involved, because they must know this has been going on for many years.

## **When you are exposed to these horrific scenes and terrible suffering, what do you think?**

It shows that humanity doesn't want to know and that we don't want to learn from past wars. It shows who we are, what we are, we are inhumane – it is a jungle law. We have not learned from the past and we will not learn tomorrow, as long as we don't learn how to live and to let live and accept the other next to us as fully human.

### **What are the effects of historic Western colonialism on Africa today?**

The wars that we have run along the borders the Europeans created. Families and communities were torn apart. The West never took responsibility for what it did and caused. Look at Belgium with its ten million deaths in the Congo, and Portugal during its colonial history. Belgium and other Western countries have never taken responsibility, this is the mentality of the West. Before I die, I want to visit 10 Downing Street, where on May the 16th 1916 they signed the Sykes-Picot agreement, drawn up by two officers who divided the Middle East amongst the world powers – that led to a hundred years of war in the Middle East.

### **How does the situation in Egypt compare to Libya?**

In Libya they at least bury the bodies, but on the Egyptian-Israeli border there is a no-mans-land, operated by people with rifles in their hands. These people come and go with trucks, they come and steal peoples body parts. We saw the trucks after three days waiting, but we could not get close to them. One of the border guards said they were not able to get to them. In the desert in Egypt we found peoples' bones and body parts. You see that sometimes an attempt was made to make graves. Both countries are aware of these crimes. In Libya, Marshall Haftar brought our delegation to these places – what the delegation found was horrible.

### **In addition to work abroad, what work does the Syrian Orthodox Cross do at home in Germany?**

We actually have four Monasteries now that help refugees. It first started in the Netherlands with the monastery of Saint Efraim the Syrian, close to the Dutch/German border. The monastery had a print shop, theological training and in 1980 they started taking in refugees that came from the exodus of Christians fleeing the Middle East. A great exodus had started as Christians there feared a genocide, even before ISIS existed.

In 1989, two Coptic Orthodox Monasteries, St Antonius (close to Kroffellbach, near Frankfurt) and St Mary (Brenkhausen, Hoxter), joined us in giving and organising support to refugees and people in need. It was run by the monks, priests, and deacons who had fled themselves from the Middle East. I live at Saint Antonius and since November 2019, after coming back from the Conference, we started the Caritas office there.

### **How many refugees live with you in the monastery?**

We accommodate around 54 refugees in our monastery, a bit like in student studio flats. They each have their own kitchen, toilet and shower. We originally had planned to have our theological students there, but we took in refugees. Most of them today come from Eritrea and Ethiopia but also people from other countries. Many are rejected asylum seekers, the German government makes it difficult. At the monastery they are waiting to do a fresh claim, they have to wait one year to put a fresh claim in.

### **What support does the monastery offer the refugees?**

Most of the work is accompaniment of refugees, like finding a doctor/GP and going with them to the hospital. Sometimes we need to go to private doctors, the refugees have no documents and so are not insured for medical care. We help them in their immigration paper work – we need to help them as they do not have money for lawyers. We take care of their mail. We also provide 'zielenzorg', or pastoral care. We only have twelve monks, but we have lots of local volunteers and also the refugees participate with us, otherwise we would never be able to handle all this work.

### **Do you have specific tasks?**

I personally organise the collecting of food and clothing donations from supermarkets and other places. I have a lot of miles on my car. And I also do a lot of the mail and paper work with refugees.

The situation in Germany for refugees is bad. Refugees live under stressful situations, which is a choice by the government to keep refugees away from Germany. Germany is also very inhumane when it concerns family reunion – it is inhumane and we condemn it! Few people get asylum and there are a lot of people who commit suicide, people who are tired of waiting and became hopeless. Many leave Germany to seek asylum in other European countries, like the UK. Others are traumatised and need to be hospitalised. Across Germany there were 74 suicide cases in the last 5 years of people we tried to help. But the real number across the country is far higher.

### **How many people do the Monasteries together accommodate at any time?**

The four Oriental Orthodox monasteries together accommodate 250 refugees, most of them in the Netherlands. This work is done in an ecumenical context with close collaboration of the other sister churches within the ACK – Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen.

### **You have been doing this work for more than 38 years? How has this work affected you?**

It makes me think about the world, the way we treat people. That we don't learn from the wars we had. Our leaders are not looking for solutions. Nothing has changed since colonialism, not a bit! The ideology is the same. I find myself very honoured to be amongst the lower classes, the poor, I find myself one of them.

If you constantly work with people in need and suffering it makes you silent, you do not enjoy things as much anymore as other people. Your social and family life suffer under it. Especially the camps in Egypt, the people farms hurt me deeply. You lose hope for humanity. The world leaders are not able to find solutions for the poor, even if this is just pocket money for them – the world does not treat the poor as human.

# Prophetic or Pathetic?

*Martin Newell reflects on his recent participation in the Insulate Britain protests*



**I**nsulate Britain have been blocking motorways, ports and other major roads for a month. It has provoked a furious response from many of those directly affected. At the time of writing, an eleven day pause has been announced, 'to give time for the government to respond to their demands' to insulate social housing by 2025 and the rest of the British housing stock by 2030.

Personally, I took part in these controversial actions for the first two weeks before discerning that I needed to pull back. I was arrested five times, so far without being charged. Before starting, I believed the Insulate Britain campaign was necessary because everything else has been tried. Now I see a deeper dimension too.

According to scientists and engineers, what Insulate Britain are calling for is the cheapest and largest single way to reduce UK carbon emissions. It would reduce fuel poverty and would clearly create a large number of good jobs. Although very costly, it would greatly reduce our energy needs. Very relevant given the current energy supply issues. And a response to 'the cry of the poor' and 'cry of the Earth' that Pope Francis is calling us to hear.

Last week, heavy rain led to more flooding in London and the south east. Climate change is making such events far more common. The M25 was affected and part of the M3 closed. This led to some partly humorous, partly serious, posts on social media. 'Flood waters blocking motorways. This is outrageous. Stopping ordinary people going about their daily business.

The police should arrest them and clear the roads as soon as possible.' This is exactly what has been said about Insulate Britain.

It reminded me of an article I read years ago in the 'Priests and People' magazine, which said 'a prophet is one who brings the future into the present'. I say this because one reason we are slow to respond to climate change is the lag effect. The carbon we put into the atmosphere now will not have a warming effect for ten to twenty years. And the full effects of that warming take even longer to come through. So the disruption being caused by Insulate Britain is really only a small foretaste of the disruption that flooding and other events will cause in this country if we do not act now. In comparison, Covid will pale into insignificance. In that sense, what Insulate Britain protestors are doing is a truly 'prophetic act'. It is making present and real now the disruption we face in the future if we do not change course. That is to say, if we do not 'repent'. It is like the Prophet Hosea's warning to his people in the Bible: 'If you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind' (Hosea 8:7).

Often I have thought that the 'future' which the prophet brings in to the present is to be the Kin(g)dom of God, which we pray every day will come 'on earth as in heaven'. The promise of God's reign among us is one of peace, justice, freedom and the fullness of life. But in a world of injustice, sin and violence, that same Kin(g)dom can manifest as challenge and disruption of 'the way things are'.

Taking part in Insulate Britain was

difficult. I did not want to disrupt ordinary people going about their ordinary business. Especially those who are struggling to provide for their families. I can fully understand and accept the anger and frustration of those who saw us as merely getting in the way of their struggle to live normal lives.

However, the truth is that the economy, the human family, needs to be disrupted. We cannot go on the way we are. We are killing ourselves, each other and God's creation. Radical conversion to the Kin(g)dom of God always brings with it radical disruption of the way-things-are. And the way things are is already disrupting the lives of millions of people around the world every day. I know this reality closely as a result of living and working with refugees and asylum seekers for more than 15 years.

When the prophets spoke, they often also used symbolic action to demonstrate in a small way what it was they were talking about. So, from a Christian perspective, Insulate Britain is truly speaking God's prophetic Word for our times. It is demonstrating in a small way what so many are saying and even experiencing now. It is bringing into the present some of the reality of the future we face on our current path. If we continue to sow the wind, we will reap the whirlwind. It is a cry for repentance. So help us God.

**Martin Newell** is a Passionist and a member of the London Catholic Worker

# Sister Megan Remembered

*A reprint of Henrietta Cullinan's recent Independent Catholic News article on the late great Sr Megan Rice SHCƆ*

Catholic Workers and peace activists in the UK are saddened by the news that Sister Megan Rice of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus died this week [October 10, 2021], age 91. Sister Megan Rice was a member of Transform Now, a ploughshares group that broke into the Y-12 National Security Complex at Oak Ridge, Tennessee in 2012, putting the nuclear facility out of action for two weeks. Born in New York in 1930, her parents were friends of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker. She joined the Society of the Holy Child Jesus straight from school. After studying Biology, she moved to southern Nigeria, where she was a teacher for 40 years. When she returned to the US she dedicated her life to activism and was arrested more than 40 times. The Transform Now ploughshares action of 2012 resulted in her, along with two others, being convicted of sabotage and sentenced to 35 months in prison, in February 2014.

A ploughshares action is a kind of direct action that originated with the Berrigan Brothers and the Catholic Left in the early nineteen eighties and which has been recreated hundreds of times ever since. Usually a small group of committed activists engages with Isaiah's prophecy, 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares' through physically disrupting the sites of nuclear destruction and war making into something life giving. In May 2015, the three's sabotage convictions were quashed in the High Court, and they were released. In January 2016 Sister Megan made a visit to Britain with peace activist, Paul Magno, and, in a hastily arranged speaking tour, she spoke at the London Catholic Worker.

Sister Megan told us that she was inspired by the Disarm Now ploughshares action of 2009 and followed the progress of the subsequent court hearings which continued for a whole year. She asked for

permission from her order to spend a year researching nuclear weapons. To gather support and participants for Transform Now, she visited Catholic Worker communities, travelling by Megabus, and found the community at Knoxville, Tennessee, who welcomed the action. There were eight members of the group and, up until the last minute, they didn't know who would take part. They called themselves Transform Now, intending to be hopeful, as if to say, 'Let's see how we can make this life enhancing instead of destroying this planet.' She was an excellent story teller. I was transfixed as she told us how, after two weeks in retreat, they set out at one in the morning. They walked over a steep ridge, through tangled undergrowth, cut through four fences and found the building that housed the highly enriched uranium, one of the ingredients for nuclear warheads. They poured human blood, donated specially for the action by supporters, and wrote Biblical slogans on the walls. They brought with them symbolic objects: crime scene tape, hammers, candles, Bibles, white roses and a freshly baked bread. When they were stopped by a security guard, they invited him to share in the ritual breaking the bread.

'It was easy to do the action,' she told us, tucked into one of the many sofas in the cavernous living space at Giuseppe Conlon House. Nora Ziegler, a member of the community there, writes: "There's one thing I really remember from her visit. She told us how she'd spent a lot of time as a teacher in Southern Nigeria and that when she moved to back to the US she knew that, because of this experience, she wouldn't be able to just live a normal life; she would have to dedicate her whole life to resisting the American state, fighting against imperialism, and capitalism. I remember really relating to that very strongly because of my own experience of growing up in Kenya. Moving to Germany as a teenager I was confronted

with a world view that completely contradicted my childhood experience. This radicalised me but it was also often lonely. So it was inspiring and encouraging to hear her relate a similar experience."

Shortly after this talk, Sister Megan went to Glasgow to visit the Faslane Peace Camp. Sister Katrina Alton remembers spending the day with her there: 'I was really struck by Megan's simplicity, energy and commitment; a really holy and wise woman. She knows how hard it is to try and be a peace activist within a religious order, and how lonely it can be at times. I really appreciated that.'

Fr Martin Newell, who met Sister Megan when she spoke in Birmingham, writes: 'Sister Megan was gentle, challenging, humble and inspirational: an example to us all that, at 86 years of age, and having recently served two years in prison, you do not retire from living, preaching and witnessing to the Gospel.' Remembering the talk and looking over my notes, I am struck by the faithfulness which she brought to the ploughshares way of bringing Isaiah's prophecy into being, not only at the nuclear facility but in court rooms, in talks and beyond. She accepted the prison sentence gladly, saying it would be an honour to die in prison. On the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima she said: 'I don't feel like I'm free. I'm not out of prison. None of us is out of prison as long as one nuclear bomb exists.'



## A home as well as a dome

*Thomas Caddick discusses Peter Maurin's and Austin Smith's complementary visions of Church renewal*

In 1933, Peter Maurin sent a 'plea for houses of hospitality' to the Catholic Bishops of the United States, begging them to provide shelter in their parishes to some of the millions of homeless people during the Great Depression.

In that same year, Maurin co-founded the Catholic Worker movement with Dorothy Day and began to establish a series of houses of hospitality for the poor and destitute across America. But here he spoke of the bishops' own personal duty to care for the poor in their dioceses. After favourably citing the fifth-century Council of Carthage, which had instructed all bishops to set up houses of hospitality (*hospitium*), Maurin pleaded for the bishops to heed the same call once more:

*'Today we need Houses of Hospitality as much as they needed them then if not more so.*

*We have Parish Houses for the priests, Parish Houses for educational purposes, Parish Houses for recreational purposes, but no Parish Houses of Hospitality.*

*Bossuet says that the poor are the first children of the Church, so the poor should come first.*

*People with homes should have a room of hospitality.*

*So as to give shelter to the needy members of the parish.*

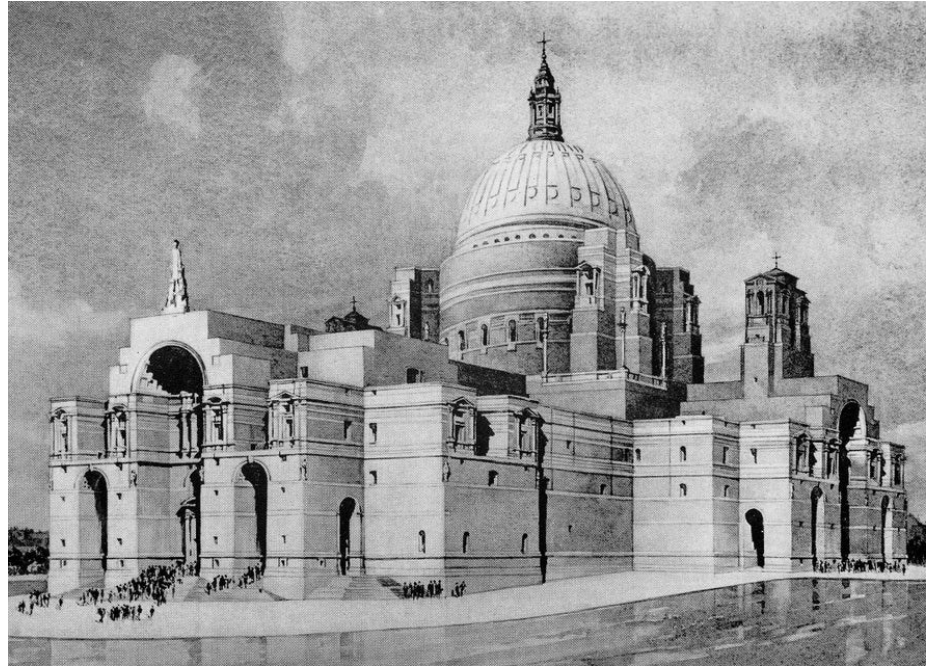
*The remaining needy members of the parish should be given shelter in a Parish Home.*

*Furniture, clothing, and food should be sent to the needy members of the parish at the Parish House of Hospitality.*

*We need Parish Homes*

*as well as Parish Domes.*

*In the new Cathedral of Liverpool there will be a Home as well as a dome.'*



Edwin Lutyens, *Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral Plan*, 1933

As a Liverpudlian myself, this 'easy essay' unsurprisingly stuck out me. Still, the 'new Cathedral of Liverpool' mentioned here was not the much-loved 'Paddy's Wigwam' we know today, but instead an uncompleted cathedral designed by Edwin Lutyens in the 1930s. And the 'Home' Maurin referred to was an unbuilt narthex Lutyens' designed to shelter the city's destitute – in part because the Cathedral was to be built on the site of the Liverpool Workhouse, where thousands of homeless people in the city had previously received board and lodging in return for work.

Sadly, this hugely ambitious building project – it would have been the largest cathedral in the world – was scuppered by the onset of the Second World War. Work on Lutyens' cathedral was abandoned in 1941, when the largely completed crypt was used as an air raid shelter during the Second World War. Then the financial strain of the post-war economy, combined with the astronomic (and rising) cost of Lutyens' design, meant that the project was abandoned altogether.

But, in the 1960s, a new modernist cathedral designed by Frederick Gibberd was built over Lutyens' massive crypt. And a short while later, one of the priests in the diocese, Fr Tony Smith, worked to establish a homeless shelter in the crypt; a fulfilment of Lutyens long held dream for the cathedral to care for the poor.

In 1973, shortly after the shelter had opened, Dorothy Day visited Liverpool and saw first-hand the 'hospice in the crypt of the immense Cathedral'. Writing about her visit to the UK in the Catholic Worker newspaper, she said that 'Peter should celebrate this in Heaven'.

Sadly, Peter Maurin's celebrations would prove short-lived, as the Cathedral shelter closed a few years later. Today, after a multi-million pound renovation of the crypt, Lutyen's 'masterpiece' comes attached with a five pound entrance fee and is available to be 'hired for private corporate events, such as dinners, conferences and awards ceremonies', including the annual Liverpool Beer Festival.

This is not to presume that the archdiocese acted without *any* justification. Fr Peter Morgan, my parish priest growing up, explained that the Cathedral authorities have cited governmental health and safety regulations to explain why the shelter cannot be restarted in the crypt, plus they suggested that such work is more the domain of Caritas, seen as the ‘social justice arm’ of the Church, rather than churches themselves.

But Fr Pete himself models a different possibility. In the parish presbytery of St Anne and St Bernard, Toxteth, he has housed thirty destitute asylum seekers with him over the years, all but one of whom has managed to escape the trauma of deportation. For him, it is important that charity in the Church does not become ‘deeply controlled by rules and regulations’ but is instead a point of encounter and closeness with the poor. ‘When you give money, look in the eye of the person you give money to,’ he says.

This does not mean he is averse to assisting and setting up institutions. Currently helping to set up a new foodbank initiative, he has also founded a local credit union and his parishes have been home to a number of registered charities for asylum seekers. But even in these endeavours, he has witnessed the dangers of institutionalisation. Citing the example of a local charity for women refugees that used to be run from his parish, he speaks with concern about how it has increasingly moved away from providing sustained interpersonal support for these vulnerable women, to a more timetabled drop-in clinic model – a change which has undermined one of the charity’s central early initiatives of providing birthing partners to isolated pregnant refugees who tragically are often victims of rape.

This concern about institutionalisation reminds me of Peter’s mentor and dear friend, the late Austin Smith, who founded of the Passionist Inner City

Mission in Liverpool. I knew Austin a bit from my childhood, but learnt more about him when our very own Passionist priest Martin Newell, who recently returned to the London Catholic Worker after his time at Austin Smith House in Birmingham, lent me a book written by Austin entitled ‘Passion for the Inner City’. There, Austin wrote about the necessity of institutions – ‘institutions are for my development, they are to assist in my liberation’ – but also of the problems that arise when they become closed and unresponsive. ‘I cannot sleep easy in the bed of institutional certitude and at the same time expose myself to new beginnings’, he wrote. ‘There must be genuine openness and risk to disturbance of life.’

In Austin’s life, like Peter’s, this ‘openness and risk to disturbance’ came in the form of living with and for the poor. Austin believed that such a life should never be reduced to the activity of service, as this ‘prevents me from seeing creation’. Instead, Austin believed that our service must be founded on a transformational encounter with the stigmata of society, since ‘where human beings suffer, Jesus is crucified’.

As many readers will know, the Catholic Church has recently embarked upon the first phase of a lengthy synodal process, as it consults with local parishes on questions surrounding Church ‘renewal’. As well intentioned as such a process may be, the danger is that such consultations become bound up not in ‘listening’ and ‘encounter’ as proposed, but rather in lobbying and control. This is because plans and policy proposals ultimately cost nothing, whilst true spiritual renewal costs everything.

It is for this very reason that Austin chose in 1971, without any real plan, to simply move into a small impoverished flat in Toxteth and live alongside the poor and mentally infirm – he wanted to give up all the dependencies that were holding him back from spiritual renewal. And it is from this same act of letting go

that he became free to truly share in and help alleviate the spiritual and material burdens of his community.

Peter Maurin’s 1933 call for parish houses of hospitality should be seen in the same light – it is less a policy proposal and instead more of an invitation to the wider Church to join the Catholic Worker movement in living alongside the poor, ‘the Ambassadors of God’.

Writing myself from a Catholic Worker house which cares for God’s Ambassadors – on property generously provided for us by our diocese, I might add – I simply echo and extend this invitation to the Church today and pray that we are soon renewed by seeing many more churches, cathedrals and crypts providing the poor with homes beneath the domes.

**Thomas Caddick** is a volunteer at the London Catholic Worker

## Postscriptum

We would like to draw your attention to the upcoming launch of the ‘Disciple, Priest, Prophet and Teacher’ project. This beautiful website and newsletter features writings and talks by three Liverpool-based priests: Fr Austin Smith (1928-2011), Fr Kevin Kelly (1933-2018), and Fr Tom Cullinan (1935-2019), a close friend of the Catholic Worker. The project aims to bring together ‘the learning and insights these three remarkable priests gained, sometimes with difficulty and pain, misunderstanding and resistance, but always shared with humility and conviction in the presence of a living God’.

The website address is [www.fr-tom-cullinan.co.uk](http://www.fr-tom-cullinan.co.uk) and a launch event with Christine Allen, Director of CAFOD, is to be held on Sat 15th Jan 2022, 1:30 – 5:30, St Francis Xavier Church, Liverpool.

## Night and Day

*Inspired by Nora's white saviourism article from the Spring issue, Henrietta Cullinan draws on her own experiences to explore the challenges that relationships in volunteering present*

**M**ake yourself at home! is an aggressive command. How fortunate I am to have a place to offer! But save me from the trouble of serving you! By default I am host, and however many human and non humans stop by, invited or not, there are always plenty of misunderstandings and misstepping on boundaries.

In voluntary settings my role is much more confusing. As a middle class white woman, I can make myself available as much or as little as I want. I can look about me and wonder what needs to be done and what I can offer. As I grow older, I experience this work as no

longer much of a sacrifice but a privilege and a gift.

Working at various grassroots hospitality settings that serve marginalised women, I have found the organisational structures and work relationships of volunteering hard to navigate. While having received excellent training, provided by various NGOs, on how to recognise my own power and white privilege, I still find myself observing and attempting to understand the shifting power dynamics of volunteering and my own poor skills at picking my way through them. Often knowledge of my own frailties and vulnerabilities has come to the rescue.

At one corner of a benevolent triangle are the women who benefit from our attentions, variously called users, women, ladies, guests, residents, even students. I am aware of the hierarchies that seem to go unremarked and unchallenged amongst both volunteers and users. For instance, at a day centre where I taught English, there was an obvious pecking order amongst the women, who arranged themselves according to country of origin, language spoken, education, age. As a teacher it should be my duty to challenge but as a volunteer I felt I was on shakier ground.

Keeping Paulo Freire, the Brazilian





pedagogue, as my guide, I tried to always take direction from the women – bodies and minor illnesses were a favourite topic. In the chaos of a drop-in class, though, to persuade the women to gather, focus and work with each other, I drew on all sorts of classroom strategies, especially circle games, in which I had to be bossy. Attention spans did improve and I could even claim the classes were transformative. But I was conscious I was disguising one informal hierarchy with another, more recognisable one.

The minute lockdown began, the random interactions that had taken place in a draughty church hall or empty office space were replaced by phone calls and the cells of a hazardous, Google spread sheet. Instead of beginners' English, I could now allocate foodbank vouchers, phone credit and small cash payments, and apply for deliveries of sundry items such as toiletries, nappies and baby clothes.

Pre-COVID, the women had chosen to travel to the centre. Once there, they could choose how far to engage with activities. Now, receiving a call from 'No caller ID', they must have felt they had no choice but to answer or risk missing out on handouts. I soon realised, through our pared down conversations, that what the women really wanted was autonomy and for that they needed money. In particular, they needed money to buy the food they liked.

Along the way I heard stories of women in hostels with nothing to eat, not even hot water for tea. One woman endured months of a diet so poor she ended up damaging her digestive system. COVID restrictions produced a cruel intensification of the hostile environment, that left women who had caring responsibilities of their own dependent on a list of separate charities.

The one place that stayed open throughout the lockdowns, in various forms, was a night shelter for women. Taking the overnight and breakfast shift, opened up a different set of questions about relationships and power

dynamics. Again, I was part of this triangle of residents, volunteers and charitable organisation. I was expected to enforce the rules of the shelter. I must check all the guests are home at night, calm and able to sleep and persuade them to leave on time in the morning.

**'ANY SITUATION IN WHICH SOME INDIVIDUALS PREVENT OTHERS FROM ENGAGING IN THE PROCESS OF INQUIRY IS ONE OF VIOLENCE. THE MEANS USED ARE NOT IMPORTANT; TO ALIENATE HUMAN BEINGS FROM THEIR OWN DECISION MAKING IS TO CHANGE THEM INTO OBJECTS.'**

**PAULO FREIRE —  
PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED**

There was the obvious unequal relationship: me with a house and the guests without, me as a volunteer entrusted with keys and phone numbers, the guests entrusted with much harder demands, like sorting out their immigration status and finding a place to live. The guests themselves seemed to want to disrupt this curious power relationship. Some brought me tea when I arrived, an electric heater or an extra blanket at bed time, and would hover around the door until I've locked up. Others, on the other hand, called me 'staff' and expected me to serve them or help them in quite intimate tasks. On occasion it seemed again there were hierarchies among the guests, that I should mediate, but then, I wonder, in what way was I qualified to do this.

Again with Paulo Freire in mind, I try to work out what is expected of me. I accept tea and biscuits from one, I help another into her Sunday best, I accept the extra blanket and an electric heater. As I often discuss with Catholic Worker friends, it is I who is the guest in the

women's space.

As residents come and go, groups form and reform, certain dynamics take hold for a while then fade away. Some women I meet in the street. Sometimes we even discover acquaintances in common.

Friendships that spring up, however fleeting, feel like bridges, feel transformative despite the racist and classist power structures that make a homeless shelter necessary.

Amid what I find messy and confusing about voluntary work partnerships, solidarity is possible. In modern terms, allyship is possible, and insights of injustice are valuable and necessary. In one organisation, I could be one of fifty volunteers from different backgrounds and with different commitments. Relationships and accountabilities in volunteering may not be clearly defined: we need to just let that be, stay with them, and work within them while trying to challenge them if necessary. To help us there needs to be regular check-in sessions, such as we used to have at Urban Table, which are taken seriously and properly facilitated. There needs to be a community of volunteers, something most charitable organisations do realise but find hard to allow space for.

**Henrietta Cullinan** is a member of the London Catholic Worker

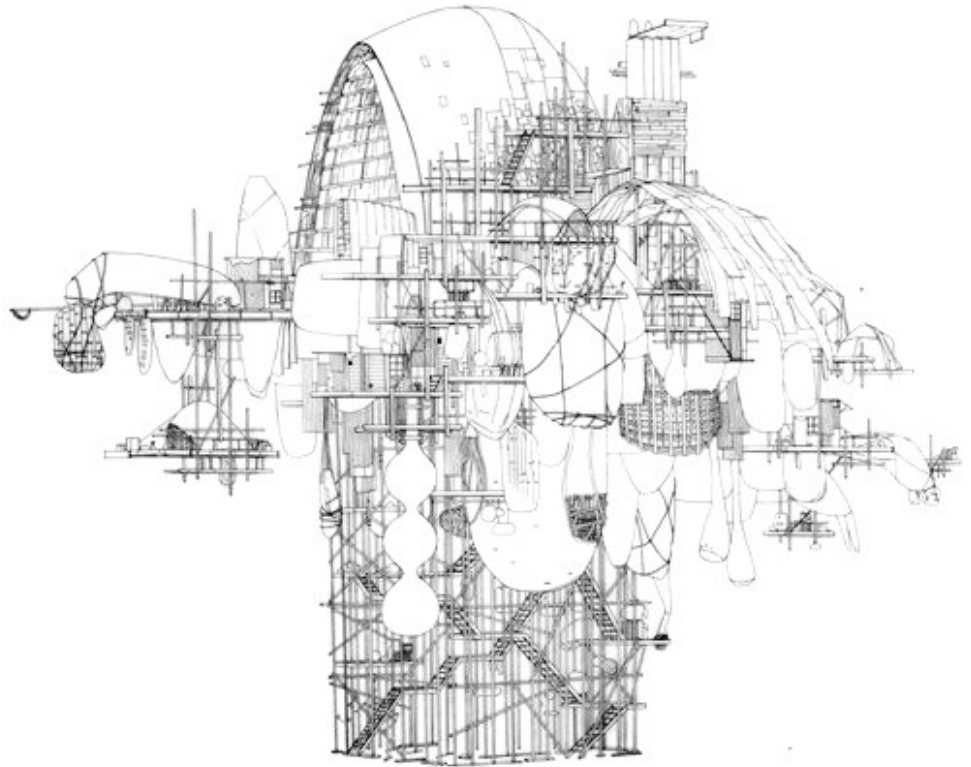
# Calais: Hunger strike at a hostile border

*Br Johannes returns to Calais during a Church campaign to end camp evictions in the town*

When I heard that Father Philippe Demeestère, a French Jesuit priest who is also a chaplain for Caritas, had gone on a hunger strike with two other volunteers to denounce the maltreatment of refugees in Calais, I felt obliged to go in support of their Christian witness. The hunger strikers started their strike in a local parish church shortly after the death of a 16-year-old Sudanese refugee called Yasser.

Juliet Kilpin, a UK based Baptist minister, and myself drove from the shuttle train into Calais, a city marked by high fences, barbed wire and concrete walls – the physical presence of what has become for many an aggressive and deadly French/UK border.

My first impression was, ‘where are the refugees?’ All the way from the town centre through to the women’s safe house, we could not see many if any refugees. Even in the previously populated fields and the derelict industrial sites, no refugees were visible. It has been an active policy of city hall to make the refugees invisible; to make them disappear. Alex, a long-time volunteer in Calais, guided us to one of the camps nearby the city hospital; a network of fields and bushes stretching all along the intersecting motorways that a few days earlier had been erased by the police. Police were still present, as labourers removed foliage and bushes and anything else refugees could use to shield themselves from the wind and rain. A few hundred meters away, two tall, slim refugees walking through the erased field were searching for their lost belongings. They escaped the coaches which were forcibly deporting people to far away corners of France, but in the process they probably ended up losing what little they had.



Daniel Maggs, *Refugee Ark*, 2012

These evictions now happen almost daily. Refugees get up before sunrise to escape this kind of harassment. ‘If only they would let us sleep one day a week,’ a young man tells me.

In recent years, Calais has systematically erected fencing and barbed wire on sites that used to be shelter areas for refugees. It runs like a scar through the landscape and through our humanity: dehumanizing refugees, reducing them to a mere number or a problem to be dealt with, and making them invisible – stripping people of their personal stories, and pushing them outside the city, to the periphery.

At the Caritas Day Centre, a few hundred refugees start to gather, with many more still to come. It is the only public place where refugees are openly welcomed and given a cup of tea. There they can charge their phone, hand wash

their clothes and meet with local volunteers. It is a place where the Church opens its arms to the refugees, but the volunteers old and young are from all confessions and some from different countries. A few religious sisters, French volunteers and a handful of staff keep the Caritas day centre open on weekdays. On one side are the men, with women and children in another more private area. The men, mostly young, look tired. A young Iranian couple with kids strike up a conversation with me, telling me how they were Christians who fled from Iran.

Mariam, a staff member who is fluent in French, Arabic and a bit of Farsi looks around at the many different faces. ‘The women will arrive soon,’ she says. ‘Everything has to be ready to welcome them.’ Mariam tells me that the situation for woman and children is ‘very bad’.

‘Can you imagine a mother with her young child, without any protection in this weather, just sleeping outside? There are around a hundred such women here, some with small children.’

In the past two to three years, the city has used injunctions to block NGO’s from helping refugees in certain areas. When people go out and give food or clothes to refugees, they are at risk of being fined by the police. Another tactic is to block access to roads and fields with rocks so that support groups cannot get to the refugees in their cars and vans.

For vulnerable migrants, such measures have made their situation more dangerous, and it is worsening. Mariam tells me that when the campsite near the hospital was dismantled, she lost touch with an Ethiopian woman called Yudith. She tells me that Yudith is a vulnerable young woman, who is an easy target for predators.

Such cases are all too common: driving out refugees and obstructing of NGO’s

only serves to push vulnerable migrants into arms of smugglers and people traffickers.

Later in the evening we go to a small camp where Eritrean refugees sleep in small tents, the kind you can easily roll up and take with you early in the morning.

We are welcomed with some tea and they quickly start cooking us a simple meal on a wood fire. I am talking with Henok, a young lad who speaks proudly of his grandfather, who is an Orthodox priest back home – a warm conversation amidst the biting cold wind. His friend Anan, who himself appears no more than a teenager, sits on a plastic crate and catches the heat from the campfire. Talking in limited English they forget their worries for a while and dream of a life in England. We tell them about Father Philippe, Anais, Ludovic, and the hunger strike. Henok finds it sad these people have had to go to such extremes and do this for them, but he tells me they have ‘great heart’.

While not all parishioners are happy with a hunger strike in their place of prayer, the local bishop, the clergy team of the parish, the head of Caritas France and several artists have expressed their strong support.

Whatever happens, the hunger strike at least achieved one thing: making the invisible visible again. For that alone, it is important to speak up. As Bishop Olivier Leborgne says, ‘are we supposed to just be silent while people are treated so badly?’

Tragically, during Fr Philippe’s twenty-five days without food a further four more refugees died at the Calais/UK border trying to reach the UK. It is therefore vital that we continue to speak out against this inhumane immigration system in the hope that it one day comes to an end.

**Br Johannes Maertens** is a community member of the London Catholic Worker

## House Update

*A quick roundup of the recent comings and goings in the community*

There has been quite a few significant changes in the house in recent months. We recently welcomed Fr Martin Newell CP back to the community following his recent return to London from Sparkhill, Birmingham. Already he has left his mark on the house through his many thoughtful tweaks to our unthinkingly burdensome habits, including revising our decision to keep all of our soya milk stored as far away from the kitchen as possible! He has also been very involved in the recent Insulate Britain protests, as his article notes (p.4). We hope and pray that the many sacrifices of Martin and his fellow protestors bear much fruit in bringing about a change in hearts and minds surrounding the climate emergency and ecological breakdown we are currently witnessing.

Just as Martin was returning, however, Roland and Mirjam also moved out to a place nearby in Stoke Newington. But don’t worry, they are still closely involved in the day to day work of the house – we’d surely be at a loss without their devotion and thoughtful contributions to our mission! We wish them every blessing on their new adventure in Hackney.

We also had a few more temporary comings and goings in the house. We received a two-week visit from Fr Georg Koenig, who had many insightful things to say about the current migrant crisis, as indicated by Br Johannes’ fascinating interview with him (p.2-3). We were also without Bramble for a short time, as she went away for a month-long visit to see her family in Canada. This was the first time Bramble’s family had the opportunity to meet her young Finnian, who surely was a source of great delight for all. And finally, Br Johannes had his own rather shorter trip away from the house to visit his friends and former colleagues in Calais, after hearing about Fr Demeestère’s hunger strike against migrant camp evictions. Not only did Br Johannes write about the protest for this issue of our newsletter (p.10-11) but he also wrote about it for ‘The Tablet’s website (‘Hunger strikers act to help the desperate migrants of Calais’ – 31/10/21), which we heartily recommend you search for online.

# Giuseppe Conlon House Wishlist

## FOOD

Chopped tomatoes  
 Peanut butter  
 Cooking oil  
 Kidney beans  
 Lentils  
 Chickpeas  
 Oats  
 Couscous  
 Noodles  
 White vinegar  
 Hummus  
 Nutritional yeast  
 Tahini  
 Soy sauce  
 Spices & herbs  
 Honey  
 Muesli  
 Breakfast cereal  
 Fruit juice and squash  
 Herbal teabags  
 Chilli sauce  
 Nuts and seeds



## TOILETRIES

Toilet paper  
 Toothbrushes  
 Toothpaste  
 Deodorant  
 Shampoo  
 Liquid soap  
 Razors



## CLEANING

Eco-friendly products  
 Anti-bacterial spray  
 Bicarbonate of soda  
 Multi-purpose cleaner  
 Toilet cleaner  
 Laundry detergent  
 Floor cleaner



## MISCELLANEOUS

NEW Men's underwear M-XL  
 Candles and tea lights  
 Umbrellas

## SUPPORT OUR WORK

We are a part of the radical, Christian, pacifist Catholic Worker movement started in 1933 in New York by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. There are now over 150 houses and communities in the United States and in other countries. Catholic Worker houses are financially independent. There are no headquarters, nor is there a central organisation. For more on the international movement visit: [www.catholicworker.com](http://www.catholicworker.com).

At Giuseppe Conlon House we run a house of hospitality for around twenty homeless, destitute asylum seekers who are not allowed to work or claim benefits. In collaboration with two local churches we also serve a meal for over fifty people on Sunday afternoons.

## DONATIONS WELCOME!

We are not paid for this work. We receive nothing from the government. For reasons to do with our political witness, we are not a registered charity.

We rely on our readers' donations to pay utility bills, volunteer and guest expenses, for building repairs, printing, and household supplies.

**Please do not donate pork or pork products! Many of our guests do not eat pork for religious reasons. Also, please do not donate soup, tinned spaghetti or baked beans as we already have enough.**

## WAYS TO DONATE

**Cheque:** send cheques payable to 'London Catholic Worker', to Giuseppe Conlon House, 49 Mattison Road, London N4 1BG

**Online banking:** London Catholic Worker, Triodos Bank, Acc No: 20066996 Sort Code: 16 58 10 IBAN:GB98NWBK60000410018573

**Paypal:** visit our home page [www.londoncatholicworker.org](http://www.londoncatholicworker.org)

**Standing Order:** to arrange a standing order use the adjacent form (left) or visit [www.londoncatholicworker.org](http://www.londoncatholicworker.org)

Standing Order Form <small>Please use block letters</small>	
I wish to pay the London Catholic Worker £10/ £20/£40/other amount _____ per month/ other _____	
Payments to be made monthly/ other First Payment to be made on: ...../...../21 and monthly thereafter	
Name of your bank	_____
Address of your bank	_____
Your account name	_____
Your account number	_____
Your bank sort code	_____
Please pay:	For the Credit of: London Catholic Worker
Triodos Bank	Account Number 20066996
Deanery Road	Sort Code: 16 58 10
Bristol BS1 5AS	Until further notice the sum of the value indicated above
Signed _____	Date _____
Please return to :	Your Name and Address _____
London Catholic Worker	_____
49 Mattison Road	_____
London N4 1BG	Email _____