

"Charity is contagious"

Netherhall Residents Assist Refugees in France

In response to Pope Francis' call for practical acts of charity during the Jubilee Year of Mercy, groups of students from Netherhall House, an intercollegiate residence hall in London, have been making trips to Calais to help the refugees stranded there.

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The day after the trip, my mobile phone was flooded with texts from the group members: “Thank you very much to every one! It was really an unforgettable weekend,” said Pio. “It was a pleasure to serve alongside you, gentlemen,” Luke wrote. “What an intense and amazing experience. Thank you for keeping up our good spirits and to Alvaro for organising the trip,” was Sergi's response.

I would never have imagined that spending a weekend collecting rubbish in a refugee camp could have brought so much joy and gratitude to a group of young professionals and university students. But that's how it was. Of course, it wasn't *what* we were doing but the *why* and with whom we were

doing it that made it a very special trip.

Netherhall House is a hall of residence for students in London. In the past we had organised volunteering trips abroad to faraway places such as Nicaragua and Cambodia. During this Year of Mercy, we were keen to continue this tradition, particularly now, when war and conflict had brought so many people in need much closer to our borders.

The idea of a trip to help refugees in Calais came up during a seminar organised by Caritas in February. It was inspiring to hear about so many initiatives organised by different groups willing to support the desires of the Holy Father to reach those in need. But among them all, the one that caught our attention was an account of a trip to the refugee camp

in Calais organised by some parishioners of a church in London.

On March 12th, a group of residents of Netherhall House, former residents and students of King's College London embarked on the first of two weekends to help refugees. Less than two months later another group also made their way to Calais. Right from the beginning, we felt a strong desire and willingness to share in this work of mercy among the different people we approached for help for the trip. The parents of one of the residents offered to pay some of the traveling costs; the school next door lent us a mini-bus that would carry not only the 9 volunteers but also 100 new travel blankets donated by a friend of the residence.

Once in Calais, we spent the weekend helping in a warehouse, located 5 minutes away from the main refugee

camp and working in the refugee camps. The warehouse operates as the logistic hub for the collection and distribution of donations. One of the first things one experiences is a great sense of being welcomed and needed. The day started with a briefing by a senior volunteer who gave an update about the situation of the refugees, explain some basics of what we were there and allocated volunteers into different teams.

There is a constant flow of donations of clothes, sleeping bags, toiletries and other essential items. So, a large amount of volunteering in Calais is helping to sort out and classify the gifts in the most effective way, so that they can be distributed according to the needs of the refugees. We were very lucky to get involved in all the different steps of the distribution of aid: from receiving and sorting out donations, to going dwelling by dwelling taking orders and

delivering the needed items in the migrant camp itself. Having our own mini-bus was instrumental in being able to help with the transportation and direct distribution of aid.

During our first trip, the group was sent to help in “Utopia 56,” a brand new refugee camp in Dunkirk built and run by “Medics Sans Frontiers.” Our group was assigned to help with the insulation of the small wooden huts occupied mostly by Kurdish men.

In our second trip, we went to “The Jungle,” a more precarious and ethnically diverse refugee camp where we helped distribute aid and clean the camp. We spent Sunday morning picking up litter only to find out that the task that awaited us after lunch was cleaning up a dumping place for all sorts of solid and organic rubbish. The task was daunting, one that any single individual or group

would have easily abandoned. However, it was seeing the other volunteers so totally committed to the task that gave us the encouragement to keep going, till the mountain of rubbish little by little disappeared. The truth is that all the volunteers were, in fact, helping each other and strengthening each other in their resolve. Charity is contagious. We all helped each other to be generous in our efforts.

One of the highlights of the trip was meeting refugees in the “Jungle Books,” an evening activity taking place in a hut used as a public library, where volunteers and refugees mingle together to share their cultures and language.

Another of the highlights was coming across a Coptic Christian church set up by an Eritrean community inside the refugee camp. This unexpected encounter with a church was a real

blessing. The simplicity and cleanliness of that small hut set aside for the Lord, poor in its structure and materials yet rich in the love of God of the people who built and cared for it, inside a dirty and muddy refugee camp spoke to us very eloquently of the presence of God in the middle of so much suffering, uncertainty and need. Fr Gerry, the priest who came with the group, led some common prayers that were particularly heartfelt and we spent some time in silent prayer.

The second trip had started on Saturday May 21st with a 4.15 am Mass at Netherhall House and finished in Folkestone with Sunday Mass at 7.00 pm. In between the two Masses, we had made many acquaintances and friendships. We had experienced both the suffering of refugees but also the kindness and generosity of many volunteers from all walks of life totally committed to

helping them. We had gone to help others, and yet we realised that we ourselves had been helped by that very fact of being together and sharing in that act of mercy. Before midnight we were back in London ready to get a good night's sleep but with the joy of knowing that in this Year of Mercy, we had made our small contribution to improve the lives of those in need.

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