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Doubling the Size of Our Family

A Polish saying goes: “a guest in the house, God in the house.” The story of a Polish family that has opened its doors to Ukrainian refugees.

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My wife Agnieszka and I, along with our eight children, live in Milanówek, a suburb of Warsaw. The youngest is Kajetan, who is now a year old; another child of ours is already in heaven. Wojtek, the oldest, is preparing for his final

examinations for high school. This examination opens the doors to the university and is often the age when children leave home for the first time. Wojtek has taken some steps in that direction, since he has moved recently to Filtrowa, a small residence of Opus Dei in Warsaw.

We have a fairly big and comfortable house, so my wife and I began mulling over the idea of accepting some migrants from Ukraine.

The fire department's list

Before making this decision, we wanted to ask our children for their opinion. We explained to each of them, in accord with their age, that the situation could last for months and would require sacrifices from each of us. We were happy with their responses and with the suggestions they offered about organizing daily life in our family, which was on the verge of doubling.

The first step was to consult the town fire department, since they are the ones who have taken on the job of relocating the families that want to stay in our country. Once placed on the list, it was only a question of time.

Everything took place very quickly. In the first days of March our family suddenly increased from ten to seventeen. One family came from Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, about the same size as Warsaw. Kristina arrived with her younger sister Sonya and her year-old son.

The other family that came to live in our home was from Kryvyi Rih. They were four women: Irena, the mother, and her three daughters, Diana, 14, Karolina, 10, and Miroslava, 6 years old. Kryvyi Rih has 750,000 inhabitants and is located in southern Ukraine. As you will have

noticed, both families were incomplete, since the husbands of Kristina and Irena have stayed behind to defend their homeland.

An opportunity for growing as a family

Before going on with our story, I want to mention that for some years now Agnieszka and I have been the organizers of courses in Family Development. Last year we had a lot of work to do, since the number of courses in the schools near Milanówek have increased, fruit of the personal initiative of people in the Work and Cooperators. This year, almost all the new families in the schools have signed up for various courses, with almost 100 couples taking part.

Little by little, some of these families have begun to receive families displaced by the war into their own homes. On some occasions, it was the

children who took the initiative, since they were the ones who asked for their parents to be added to the “fire department’s list.”

Daily life at home

In our now expanded family we decided to keep up the practices we had incorporated into our daily life. The children have jobs to do, with a set time for study and for meals; we look after order, use electronic devices and social media with moderation, etc.

Kristina and Irena were at first surprised to see the habits that our children live so naturally and cheerfully. One day Irena wanted to help our little Horacio, five years old, to carry his dinner plate to the kitchen. To her surprise, Horacio held on to his plate and said with determination: “I’ll bring it the kitchen, I’ll bring it to the kitchen.” We couldn’t help laughing out loud.

From almost the first day a home-like atmosphere was created among all the children. While some prepared meals, others studied or competed in a board game, and then we all sat down to eat together.

One problem of course is that now some of us speak Polish and others Ukrainian. The two languages have many similarities, but the great difference is that Ukrainian uses the Cyrillic alphabet and Polish the Latin one. The little ones hardly noticed it. We older ones are learning some phrases in both Ukrainian and Polish.

Together with other families connected with our schools we decided to try to find work for our guests. This would help to bring more peace and avoid possible problems in the future, since no one knows how long this situation will last.

For Kristina and Irena we have found baby-sitting jobs in other homes on some mornings. This has enabled them to live a more natural routine, without the restlessness of feeling unoccupied and also learning from the different families in our area.

Irena's youngest daughter, Miroslava, attends our nursery school, where a special group for Ukrainian children has been organized. The adolescent Diana is now attending our children's high school, while Karolina is taking classes at the local public school.

Sonya, Kristina's sister, takes care of her year-old nephew while her sister is working, and attends a language school in the afternoons, where she is learning Polish.

Naturally, all of us have a lot of things to talk about and share in our

family meals, which often evolve into long conversations around the table.

Sharing the faith

As is customary in my family, we have continued praying some daily prayers, in which the newcomers happily join in. Thanks to the new friendships that have been forming, one of the girls began going to Sunday Mass with our daughter and asked her to teach her how to make the sign of the Cross. Spending so much time together gives them the opportunity to talk about the Catholic faith.

A guest in the house, God in the house

An old Polish saying goes: *Gość w domu, Bóg w domu!* “A guest in the house, God in the house.” We have been able to experience this every day, on seeing how much our own

children are benefitting from this new situation in our family.

Now it is almost four weeks since our family almost doubled in size. And all of us seem to have tripled in our maturity and generosity, thanks to God being in our home.

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