

## **Catholic Worker Glasgow - a previous incarnation**

The Catholic Worker movement is a response to the Gospel which creates little sparks of life in countless situations. Sometimes these sparks burst into flame and are sustained over the long term in communities which last for decades, for generations. Sometimes the spark glows brightly for a few years, but doesn't find the fuel for a long-term blaze, and eventually ceases.

Here in Glasgow such a spark did glow for a few years. In 1998 a group of people attracted to the Catholic Worker came together and identified a need. At a time when refugees, fleeing terrible situations in their home countries, were fleeing to Britain, they were met by a bewildering array of torments from the UK government. Included in this Home Office 'welcome package' was the fact that many would be made destitute. This was designed into the policy.

The Glasgow Catholic Worker came into existence in 1998 in response to that situation. We got hold of a very large flat in Maryhill, furnishing and equipping it with the help of the St Vincent de Paul Society and various well-wishers. Two young Glaswegians moved in and it began to be 'home'. We made it known that we would try to get offer a bed and support to any destitute asylum seeker in Glasgow.

Within a short time a London organisation rang to say they had a Colombian human rights investigator who had been forced to flee Bogotá after death threats had been made against him. He had arrived in London, but had been homeless for weeks. We had a room for him. They paid his bus-fare, and we met him late at night at Buchanan Street bus station. And so it began.

Our Colombian friend was a man of enormous talents and energy, and a real gift to the community. He stayed with us for several years, welcoming new asylum seekers, running salsa classes, giving advice and support to other asylum seekers, all the while continuing his involvement in Latin American human rights work.

Every so often someone would phone to say, 'There's a woman from Burundi sleeping in a doorway at Central Station', or 'A refugee from Algeria has arrived at our office, and he has nowhere to go'. And someone would go out in the car, usually late at night, to find someone, to bring them to a warm flat, a bowl of soup, some friendly faces.

Prayer happened around a green table in a very old-fashioned but very large kitchen. And constant discussion, including a regular Sunday evening

session of 'Clarification', to which people came having read something, to discuss it in some detail. There was always food at such events, too – the mind and the body being nourished together.

The community attracted university students and staff who would befriend our refugee members. People offered all kinds of help: preparing legal papers, translating application forms, taking people for interviews, tracing relatives in distant countries, looking after children, arranging picnics. Real and abiding friendships emerged.

Members of Catholic Worker communities in Oxford and London came to visit, and valuable ideas were exchanged. We took part in actions protesting against Trident nuclear weapons, and offered hospitality to protestors from other parts of the country.

Gradually more people arrived than we had room for, so we started recruiting 'hospitallers' – people with a spare room in their own home who could take in a refugee and care for them, for a few weeks, or for longer. One retired teacher reported, having looked after a Rwandan refugee for a few weeks, 'I have never been happier in my life.'

In this way the community lived and worked from the flat in Maryhill for eleven years. People came and went. Sometimes they came alone and left with friends. Sometimes they came sick and left well, or at least a little better. They brought their own gifts and shared them.

Eventually, however, more people went than were coming. It became impossible to sustain life in our own house, and for a while the Glasgow Catholic Worker was simply a network of friends, supporters, hospitallers and their guests. The last entry in the house diary (in 2009) relates that one of our Congolese refugees had just been given indefinite leave to remain in the UK, his asylum claim accepted after six years of struggle and frustration: 'Tonight we are partying with him ... a great night, even though sorrow is all around us. The party is full of interest, humour, passion and ideas. But mostly thanksgiving that G- can begin his life again.'