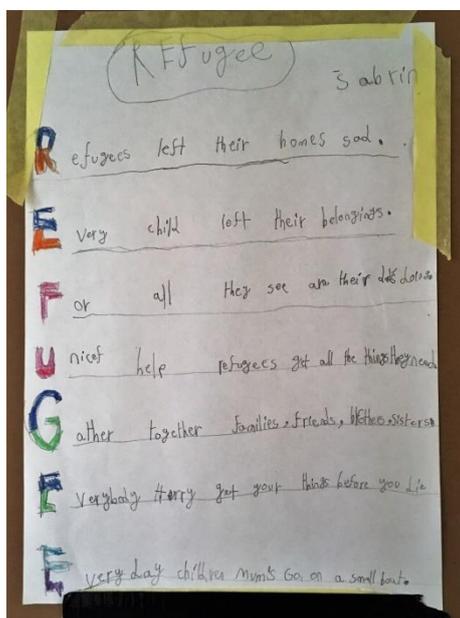


## Reflections on Visit to Calais, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2016

### “Everybody hurry, get your things before you die”

Refugees left their homes sad  
Every child left their belongings  
For all they see are their dads dying  
Unicef help refugees get all the things they need  
Gather together families, friends, brothers, sisters  
Everybody hurry, get your things before you die  
Every day children mums go on a small boat



This poem is taped to the wall of the Care4Calais warehouse. In the simple, evocative English of a small child these few words carry depths of sadness, trauma and violence that young eyes should never see.

It is a measure of the multi-national nature of Calais, and the fragmented nature of so many parts of Africa, Syria and the Middle East that these words could have been written by a child from perhaps twenty different countries. What these children have fled is unimaginable. And in Calais, in one of the richest parts of the world, they are amongst 9,100 people – mainly adults – who wait. And wait.

From Basildon, this is our eleventh visit – virtually once a month since last September. At that point the conscience of Northern Europe seemed to have woken up, as the little Syrian boy, Alan, was washed up on a Turkish beach, his drowned body cradled in the arms of a policeman in an image that made international news. In the last twelve months we have seen numbers at Calais rise, fall, and rise again – they are now at their highest ever. Seventy people a day are arriving here. We have also seen donations rise and fall – last time we travelled, in mid-July, the warehouses were almost empty. Today, at least, the Care4Calais warehouse has a new buzz about it.

In part, this is due to *Independent Catholic News* and *The Universe* giving great prominence to Calais – and an amazing response. **For the last six weeks, not a day has gone by without a cheque – and often several – landing on the presbytery doormat.** Often these are anonymous. The result is that readers have donated £40,000 since mid-July; we have already disbursed most of that. In the Care4Calais warehouse we see the delivery of jogging bottoms and hoodies that £8,000 donations have paid for – new, sorted, and ready to be delivered to the camp. We see 500 blankets that have been delivered direct – another £2500 from donations. And we have brought with us a further 350 blankets and 57 water containers. In looking at the warehouse it is very clear that many others have also stepped up their donations, and this gives a bit of hope.





**There is still a developing crisis over food.** From the recent donations we have given £10,000 to Calais Kitchens. They are providing 14,000 meals a week for 8,000 euros. This is an amazing achievement – all volunteer-run, and feeding 2,000 people a day. But with over 9,000 in the camp they – and all those providing food to the Refugees – are stretched to breaking point. There has been a particular cruelty of the last few weeks: the Mayor of Calais closed down the restaurants and cafes that were running in the camp. After four weeks, a legal challenge got this overturned, but there is still a ban on anyone selling food. Why is this so cruel? Because the restaurants and cafes were community hubs, places where refugees could meet, chat, and build a bit of fellowship. There was also a sense of purpose – pride in getting up each day, turning the ovens on, and producing tasty food – a little reminder of home. Over the months we have had chai in several of these cafes. They were hardly making much of a profit – and that is not why they existed. Now, in the ironically named “Theresa May Street” these once thriving little places are boarded up, empty shells – like the one pictured: how can they provide food if they cannot sell it, to meet their costs? Again –

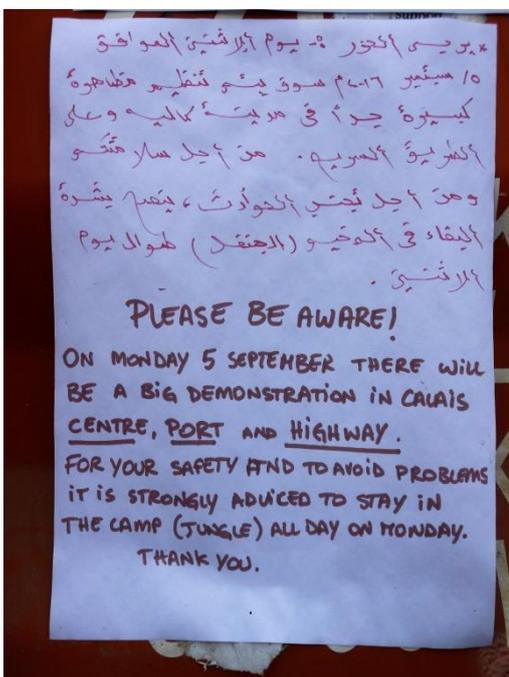
as the child’s poem so vividly and poignantly reminds us – we are talking about people who have fled absolute horror.

**So there is a modern parable in comparing the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp at Dunkirk with the situation in Calais.** The MSF Camp is purpose built, with proper sanitation and a Mayor who actively supports the conditions for the Refugees being as humane and decent as possible. Legal teams tour the camp and chat with the Refugees about their options. They feel safe, and welcomed. **The result?**

**Many from the Dunkirk camp are opting to stay in France.** In Calais, the UK Government has funded barriers and fences, and police patrol with rubber bullets and tear gas; in Calais the Mayor managed to get permission for half the camp to be bulldozed in February and the rest is under constant threat; in Calais the British Consulate won’t come near the place (even to process the 387 unaccompanied children that Lord Dubs and his team have identified as having a legal right to come to join family in the UK). **The result? In Calais the refugees cannot wait to get out of the place,** to get away from

this unremittingly hostile reception. And so they have no option but to try to scale the fences, to jump on the lorries, to risk life, limb and property (theirs and the hauliers) to get somewhere different.

The camp is subdued when we go in, sombre because on Monday a huge anti-camp demonstration is scheduled. The hauliers – British and French – have had enough. So – we are told – they are going to stop their lorries on the A16, above the camp, and wait. This is deeply provocative – the refugees will see the stopped lorries and will try to board them. This will – the protestors hope – generate the kind of media that portrays the refugees as criminals, and violent. The hauliers are, of course, also victims; all because the Calais camp is in a political context of antagonism and hatred. There are posters all over the camp urging the refugees to stay within the camp on Monday, “for your safety and to avoid problems.” Will they be heeded? We can only hope and pray that they will be.



We take time to walk up to the church and chat with the pastor there, Solomon. He is also worried about Monday – and about the future. **The little Eritrean Church stands – together with “Jungle Books” providing education for the refugees – in a very small island of buildings that were spared the last bulldozing. It feels precarious.** And yet within the compound they are trying very, very hard to make a difference, to bring brightness and colour. Flowers have been planted here, in the shape of a cross. We saw this a few weeks ago – now the plants are more established, and flowers are showing. Nearby a fig tree has been planted. Solomon asks us for more trees – and we promise to bring them. I will have to look at what will grow in such sandy soil; but there is no doubt they will be well and carefully tended.



The church is added to each time we come, with new icons. The beautiful picture of Our Lady with Jesus that we saw freshly painted in May is a little weathered now, and while we are there a steady stream of people come and pray in front of it, just outside the church. We promise to bring more candles and incense next time we come, and crucifixes – Solomon tells us that many of the newest arrivals are Christian, and they want to wear a crucifix. As ever, the faith and courage that this little church evokes is very humbling. **How much more useful and reconciling it would be if the hauliers stopped their lorries and came to pray with the refugees here, and at the mosques, together with the Mayor of Calais. How much more enlightening it would be if they could share chai in the once bustling cafes.**



On the way home I reflected with Liam, Conor and Niamh on the utter sadness that there seems to be no end in sight for the Calais Refugees. When will there be political and societal will to help these people – to see them not as a problem, but as individuals with all their unique giftedness that I have written about so often in these reflections. Today, as we left the camp, we met an Afghani who spoke to us in magnificent English and with tears in his eyes. I was a translator, he said, I helped when England and America were in Afghanistan. And then they left, and the Taliban came, and I had to get out. It is him – and 9,000 others – that we are leaving in limbo in Calais.



I am writing this on the day that Mother Teresa is canonised. She said, “The unwanted, the unloved – they are Christ.” The refugees are unwanted by so many – rejected, left at the edges. Jesus himself is crystal clear: “Whatever you did to the least of my sisters and brothers, you did to me.” The poem taped to the warehouse wall is written by one of our sisters and brothers: “Refugees left their homes sad ... Everybody hurry, get your things before you die.” **It is our sisters and brothers who need help in Calais.**

*We travel from Basildon approximately once a month with aid; you can read all the reports back to September 2015 at [www.basildoncatholics.org](http://www.basildoncatholics.org). **As ever, thank you** to all who have donated so far. Financial donations mean we can buy large numbers of the same item, at wholesale rates, which is the best way to supply aid in terms of both practicality and value.*

*We will continue to use all donations directly to support the refugees - **literally every penny is spent on aid**, delivered directly to the warehouse (our ferry and petrol costs are privately funded).*

*Cheques can be made payable to “Our Lady and All Saints”, and posted to:*

*Fr Dominic Howarth,  
Calais Appeal,  
Holy Trinity Church,  
71 Wickhay,  
Basildon  
SS15 5AD.*

*Many, many thanks for any support that you can give.*

## **USEFUL LINKS AND CONTACTS**

[www.care4calais.org](http://www.care4calais.org)

***The Care4Calais website and Facebook page has an up to date list of donations needed, which will change again as winter draws nearer.***

***If you would like to volunteer with Care4Calais you would be very welcome; you would need to make your own way to Calais and arrange accommodation – Care4Calais can give you links to help with that. Volunteers who can stay for a week, two weeks or longer are vital – the longer you can stay, the more you learn about the camp and its needs, and the more useful you can be.***

[migrantsupport@aol.com](mailto:migrantsupport@aol.com)

***To set up your own project, seek advice. Contact Seeking Sanctuary at the email above and Ben or Phil will offer you a host of useful connections and contacts.***

***Please do not just turn up at the camp with a car or van full of what you think will be useful items. There is a real art to successfully distributing items at the camp, and Care4Calais will offer you help and support, linking you with experienced volunteers. In any case, French authorities now require every vehicle entering the camp to have a written permit, which can only be issued through a recognised Calais charity.***