



Migrants Making a New Start

As we mark International Migrants Day, Sr. Mary Crowley gives an insight into the life of migrants who have recently arrived in Ireland.

This Sunday (December 18th) is International Migrants Day. Each year, millions of men, women and children are forced from their homelands due to war, famine or the lack of opportunities. New beginnings have new realities. Some migrants find themselves in a distant land with a different culture and a new language. In Ireland, many groups have been set-up over the past twenty years with the aim of assisting migrants as they make the transition to life on these shores. The *Welcome English Language Centre* is a voluntary community initiative coordinated by the Sisters of Mercy. The centre was opened by Sr. Celestine Forrest in October 2000 and is now managed by Angela Murphy. It utilises the skills and talents of dedicated volunteer tutors to provide English language classes to the most in need in Cork. Sr. Mary Crowley, OLA is one of the volunteer tutors. Here Sr. Mary shares some thoughts on the *Welcome English Language Centre* and how it plays a key role in integration of those who have recently arrived in Ireland.



Sr. Mary Crowley (left) pictured with Syrian native Mayasa, a student at the Welcome English Language Centre.

What drew you to working with migrants?

I enjoy working with people from different cultures and countries. I find it life-giving and energizing. Yes, there are times when one can feel helpless given that many have lived through difficult war situations. Some may get a little upset during class time but by building relationships with each student enables us to support them as best we can.

What have the students taught you?

In the classroom you have people from all walks of life, from many different backgrounds and cultures. It is important to affirm and respect each individual and their story. One needs to be a good listener and sensitive. For example, in terms of educational attainment - while all have the same need (i.e. to learn English), some may have a previous university degrees while others may have left formal education after primary school.

During the past year, I have encountered students who have come from difficult and challenging situations and I accompanied them by being compassionate and offering whatever solace that is possible. A Syrian woman – a mother of five children - attended classes here in the past. When you think about how difficult it must have been for her to take her children from their home in Syria. You leave behind your whole life as you knew it. Say goodbye to your mother and father, not knowing when you will meet them again. Then, coming to Ireland and getting used to how things work here. Even simple things that we take for granted like going to the supermarket, paying bills, getting children into school, learning a new language etc. You can only imagine what she must think when she hears about another bombing in Syria. I guess it would be like if we were living in the US and we went home every evening to hear about another bombing in Ireland – you would be sick with worry thinking about your family and friends.

What is the greatest difficulty that migrants face in their day-to-day life?

Language is a huge obstacle for asylum seekers. If you don't learn English, you are more likely to stick to your family with no integration and little opportunity to socialize outside the family circle or to find work. Language really gives a great freedom and a sense of belonging and helps one to feel at home in a new country.

At the *Welcome English Language Centre*, we try to help with integration through celebrations at the end of each term and coffee breaks each day which enables students to chat informally.

We encourage students to listen to the Irish news and, if possible, to read newspapers or join their local library which helps integration into the Irish culture. Knowing a little of the Irish news could be a conversation point at the local shop or with their neighbour and helps establish some sort of relationship.

We also encourage students to speak English with their children at home, which helps their children when they go to school and can make friends more easily. In some cases, it is the children who help their parents to learn English.

For migrants, it is a little different as they may be already working – some of these in very low paid jobs. They may have little English and could benefit from the confidence that comes with greater proficiency. Language schools can cost up to two thousand euro per term which may not be feasible given their low wages and lack of available time to study with their work commitments.

What practical things can we do this Christmas or any other time of the year to help the migrants who live among us?

I remember back to the SMA-OLA pilgrimage to Knock last May which had the theme '*Know your Neighbour*'. It encouraged people to get to know their neighbour and to welcome new families into the neighbourhood.

While it may be challenging to visit due to language etc., we should try to ensure that people don't feel isolated - even a simple 'hello' or 'welcome', is always very much appreciated.

It helps them to experience our '*Céad Míle Fáilte*' and build a relationship .