

“Whoever welcomes a child welcomes me.”

(Mk 9-37)



NOWHERE TO GO

Those welcoming desperate migrants, bereft of everything, remind Fr Bobby Gilmore of Columban Fr John Meaney’s generosity towards a destitute Filipino family.

Watching the collision of hope and horror in Ukraine played out on television screens, people fleeing with their whole belongings in suitcases and plastic bags, I am reminded of stories of settlers from various parts of the Philippines flocking into Mindanao after the Second World War. As I see women and children arriving in safe havens in European Union Member states, including Ireland, I am reminded of Fr John Meaney’s arrival in Mindanao and the tragedies of Settlers there.

After the liberation of the Philippines from the Japanese, Mindanao, a sparsely populated island about the size of Ireland became the destination of thousands of Filipinos from the Northern part of the country and the islands in between. It was labelled the promised land giving the impression of being unpopulated with plenty of arable land available for settlement. Most of the population of Mindanao lived along the coastline making a living from fishing and subsistence farming. The hinterland of Mindanao was thinly populated by groups of indigenous people. A significant Muslim population occupied a large section of the island making a living from farming, fishing, trading and a variety of crafts.

First to arrive after the war were logging companies taking advantage of the pristine

forests laden with some of the most valuable timber anywhere in the world. As the loggers cleared the forest the new settlers staked a claim, ran up temporary shacks, began to clear the debris and produce basic foodstuff necessary for survival. There were few if any government services in the hinterland. The nearest town on the coastline was accessible usually after a long walk along an abandoned rutted logging road or on horseback.

This was the situation that John Meaney, a young Columban missionary, experienced on his arrival in the coast town of Baroy in Lanao del Norte in 1947. Being the provincial capital, it had the usual government offices with few resources to meet the needs of the unplanned arrivals seeking a new future. There were some services available but these were understaffed, lacking resources and stretched to the limit. There was no electricity, public water supply or sanitation services. Disease, tuberculosis, diphtheria, cholera, typhoid, hepatitis, scabies and worm infections were rampant. There was a local doctor, midwife and a small clinic in the town. People struggled to survive from one planting season to the next.

One day as John was going about his pastoral tasks he encountered a young destitute widow, her two little boys of about six and seven years old and their baby sister.

“Whoever gives a drink of water because he belongs to Christ he will not go without reward.”

(Mk 9-41)

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John blessed the corpse of her husband who died of typhoid the previous day. Not only was she destitute but like all migrants she had no extended family to lean on. She pleaded with John to take the two boys and the baby girl. After a conversation with the widow, he called his general factotum, Philipe and his wife, Maria.

After discussing the plight of this family John suggested that the mother leave the two boys with Philipe and his family. He suggested that the mother and baby girl should return to her hometown in Cebu at his expense. John promised that he would take responsibility for the education and welfare of the two boys who would reside next door with Philipe, his wife and their children. That he did.

The two boys attended the local elementary school with Philipe's children. Each evening after school John would sit the children around the kitchen table in the rectory where he would help them with their homework. When they graduated from elementary school John sponsored them at the local high school. Graduating from high school John sent them to the prestigious San Carlos University in Cebu where they both graduated with degrees in engineering.

Meanwhile he sponsored their baby sister though high school at home in Cebu with her mother and then to university from which she graduated as a state registered nurse. After they graduated and were employed, they returned annually with their families to visit John and help with any repairs needed in his house or in the church.



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What John did all those years ago is repeated in Europe and elsewhere in a troubled world today. Mothers fleeing with children leaving their menfolk behind to defend their homeland are arriving in adjacent free countries bereft of everything they took for granted as integral in their lives. Memories of a horrid past are a savage reality visible in their faces as they arrive. People are stepping up with a welcome which tells them they are in a safe haven. Their memories of home are raw. They have little time for the luxury of looking back. Hopefully, a welcome will open to them an opportunity to look back, heal, and look forward more in hope than in anguish.

Those welcoming them are trying to match the hope in their eyes offering them not just physical safety but the opportunity to begin trying to make some sense of the turmoil in their inner landscapes. Sadly, Europe is not as civilised as it was thought to be. It seems the only certainty we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. ●

Fr Bobby Gilmore writes and campaigns on migrant issues. He was ordained in 1963 and worked in the Philippines from 1964-1978. From 1978 to 1992 he was Director of the Irish Emigrant Chaplaincy in Britain. He was on mission in Jamaica between 1992-1999. On returning to Ireland, he founded the Migrants Rights Centre Ireland.

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