

An Easter Story



'No limit' to the number of Ukrainian refugees welcome in Ireland, says Taoiseach

It was a Friday when the first Ukrainian guests came to their new home, looking tired and frightened. I was there when they arrived, along with other representatives of the Brothers and of the Emmaus Retreat Centre's management and volunteers. We welcomed them and then joined them for a light meal.

Afterwards our new friends received the keys to their rooms and expressed through broken English or gestures how happy they were to be in such a safe and beautiful place.



Ukrainian Refugees arrive in Ireland

One boy of eleven or twelve, with good English, was so surprised when he opened the door to his family's room and saw three freshly made-up beds that he gave off a 'Wow' reaction and then the impulsive comment, 'How lovely the room is.' He expressed further delight on behalf of his family when he saw the ensuite. The smile on his face said it all.

At that moment the whole family seemed to relax, as if aware that they had finally arrived at a place of security, peace and safety.

Some of us sat with the visitors and listened to their stories. Tears flowed as people related their experiences of the previous six to eight weeks. One fifteen-year-old girl told of how she was in her hometown on the previous Monday when they were forced to run because bombs were dropping close to where they lived. Within five days she and her family chose what seemed their only option – to uproot themselves and escape. She turned fifteen in April. Now she was in Emmaus with her mum and aunt and with a big smile. Her siblings are in Italy.

One elderly man who went for a walk in the grounds could not stop taking photos of his new surroundings. (In fact, I would hazard a guess that by now he has photographed every tree on the property.) He obviously felt exhilarated by the loveliness of nature – such a contrast to the scenes of death and destruction which he had left behind.

A little boy of seven or eight just loved walking in and out of the building. He would leave it, walk around the circle of shrubs in front of Emmaus, and come back in again. After that he would go to his family room, only to repeat the process half an hour later. Any time he saw me, he gave me a 'high-five'. His joy was the result of being able to move in and out without fear of injury or death.

We met more of our guests on the Saturday and once again sought to get to know them and respond to their questions – many were anxious to know how long they could stay at Emmaus. They were afraid of being moved somewhere else and did not want to lose the little comfort that they had just found. In addition to their natural anxiety, parents expressed their desire to start learning English, get their children into school and find employment for themselves.

During that first week Emmaus provided a home for forty-two refugees – not refugees, but our sisters and brothers in need – and another forty-two arrived a week later. Beyond that, it is our hope that Ireland will be able to provide a new, secure home for large numbers of these friendly people.



They have many needs. At Emmaus a playroom has been set up for the children and toys were quickly donated. Clothing has been supplied for adults and children and more is promised. Teenagers need entertainment, so we are hoping to find Xbox's and consoles, a table tennis table, a pool table and a few guitars.

At Emmaus Retreat Centre in Ireland we are offering our new friends a welcome, a home, food, clothing and other items which they need. But this is not essentially Ireland's story. It is yours, too, wherever you live, because we are all obliged to offer a profound hospitality to the desperate stranger, a concealed Christ figure, when she or he arrives among us. What is happening at Emmaus is, in fact, an expression of the Edmund Rice story.

Pope Francis says that *"the stranger is made welcome when we make room for them at our table."* That is the invitation given to all of us. Welcoming refugees, our needy sisters and brothers, helping them to find a new home, a new life, is not somebody else's responsibility; it is ours. So let us not be found wanting.

The tragic events in Ukraine have resulted in many deaths and caused indescribable trauma and terror in millions of survivors. What is happening at Emmaus cannot compensate for that, but, it does offer hope for some because it provides them with a thread of the Easter story to cling to – that great archetypal narrative which tells how a terrible crucifixion is followed by new life.