

'Be prepared for surprises'...

.... was the message sent by someone already involved with the community refugee resettlement programme in Canada.

Over the last three months the education and welcoming teams have experienced one surprise after another.

We thought we knew what we were about, encouraged by Pope Francis' exhortation that every parish in Europe welcome one family.

So, we were about planning, researching, preparing to welcome a refugee family into our parish community. Specifically, the education and welcoming tasks included ensuring 'our family' was able to make a life for themselves here: accessing community activities, language skills, and education. Crucially, we needed to be sensitive to the family's cultural and faith needs.

The tone was set at the March meeting by the words of the **Jesuit hospitality prayer:**

'Hospitality

starts at the heart; willing to help one another;

is the opening of hands; is being present to the other; means opening your heart to others and sharing what we have..becomes sharing life'

No surprises here, then ~ we knew what we were about?

Only as we shared our resources that first evening did the penny begin to drop ~ ***our everyday working and family lives were the gifts on offer.***

Offered here were : teaching skills and experience at all levels; the stories of newcomers with young families as well as old hands and parish stalwarts; pastoral care skills; health professionals working within a culturally diverse setting ; school managers and governors ; digital skills experts; young Justice and Peace workers; a motley crew of European language speakers : Italian, Welsh, Flemish, Hungarian, French, Spanish ~ and then finally, Arabic!

The gift list for the hospitality table kept growing.

Another surprise was how 'our project' was touching so many people's lives, likewise energised by the shared vision, bringing their gifts to the table, too.

Little did we anticipate the goodwill and encouragement that would greet us at almost each turn. For the teams visiting schools, and those meeting local councillors and officials found not only professional support and advice, but also positive, affirming feedback. Indeed, 'good news' provided 'good cheer' to busy, working days.

Most importantly, though, has been the growing friendship with members of the local Muslim community whose gifts of time, prayer and practical support have been simply extraordinary.

Like a jigsaw picture, only to be completed by the missing pieces that many others have - in the words of the **Jewish mystic, Lawrence Kushner**, which opened our April meeting:

*“Everyone carries within them at least one and probably
Many pieces to someone else’s puzzle...
And when you present your piece
Which is worthless to you,
to another, whether you know it or not ,
Whether they know it or not,
You are a messenger from the Most High’ .*

In the words of **Blessed Oscar Romero**:

‘We are prophets of a future not our own’

And just like that beautiful, fragile - looking, blue and green planet, enclosed lovingly in strong hands, painted by **Bishop Eton Primary School children**.

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