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## Thoughts on migration

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## Thoughts on Migration



St Patrick was a migrant...article for Intercom magazine

March 2006 | Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants

Saint Patrick's Day is a Day of Celebration. There are many aspects of his great tradition that we can reflect on and contemplate from a contemporary perspective. One which is worthy of consideration is the fact that Saint Patrick was a migrant.

Fr. Alan Hilliard, Director of the Commission for Emigrants reflects from his perspective and Fr. Bobby Gilmore, who is assisting the Irish Bishop's Conference as they plan a Pastoral Care response to those who come to our shore, tells a story from the perspective of an immigrant.

### **Fr. Alan Hilliard**

While in London recently the following conversation was relayed to me. The person telling the story had lost very little of their accent; 'we came on the boat with the kettle' they old man said. The listener asked 'was that for making the tea?' 'No the kettle, the kettle', he exclaimed. The person listening looked even more puzzled. Noticing the frustration the narrator went on, 'The 'kettle' was on the bottom of the boat and we were on the floor above them!'

I have strong memories from my time growing up on the North Circular Road of the 'kettle' (cattle) being herded down to the docks from the Cattle Market on a Wednesday morning. It was quite a frightening sight and for a young boy growing up in Dublin it was the closest that we would get to the Wild West. It has all the sense of excitement and energy of a cattle drive in Nevada.

Unbeknownst to me people at that time were being herded from all over Ireland to the same boat, as reflected in the story above. Those that arrived above deck had maybe a tinge of excitement as they boarded but my guess is that it was lost behind great sadness and confusion. The gap between loss of connection with what one knew and the unknown that was ahead must have created an unimaginable sense of desolation. For many this feeling was short lived and for others it lingered and lingers still.

Every emigrant faced what Patrick faced. There are times when one wants to run away and when one does move there is a longing to be somewhere else. The image of 'home' dwells in the heart and mind and often on returning finds the image is far more favourable than reality. For many years Ireland forgot those they exported now we try to remember, to reach out. We owe them justice not charity.

The SIA campaign which has run for three years has allowed us reach out to many who felt alone and abandoned. Thank you for all your help and support.

## **Bobby Gilmore**

The immigrants were without any deep consciousness of the role they were playing. They did not dream of history or see themselves as part of history. They partook of a mythology of the place to which they were going, but of the place they know little indeed. (The Immigrants; Howard Fast, Hodder and Stoughton 1978) They are the opening words in a novel about immigrants.

Immigration was never a popular subject because it implied separation, loss and change. Both the immigrant and those at home are left with memories. There always was the hope of return but for many seldom realised and for those who did return to what they thought was home wasn't home and the readjustment was almost as difficult as going away. Those left behind didn't understand the experience of the immigrant and the immigrant probably didn't fully grasp that those left behind experienced similar loneliness and isolation. Unless experiences were shared both sides in the immigration saga would really never be part of each other's journey. Ultimately, immigration is the human heart on a journey of hope.

In the early 1960s my younger brother left home unannounced. His sudden departure left a gap in the house and in our lives. My parents were distraught. A few days later a postcard arrived informing us that he was on his way to New Zealand. As we talked about his departure my mother was able to look at a positive side of things. Holding the postcard she said: well he is young, healthy, he has a trade, he works and the neighbours tell me he attends church, so all he needs is a welcome. He got a welcome at the Franciscan Church in Wellington. A teenager himself, he met another teenager, Kathy, from Australia who came to New Zealand for the Summer to pick fruit. They fell in love, settled in Wellington, raised a family of four. Kathy died of cancer last year. Her first grandchild was born the previous year.

Churches think that all immigrants should feel at home in the church where they arrive for worship. After all, it's similar to the one they left behind. There is an assumption that being a Christian, Catholic, Moslem, Hindu anywhere should be the same everywhere. The result is immigrants aren't welcomed and do not feel welcome. Both they and the local community do not meet and are not in each other's care and concern. Again, without a welcome they do not feel valued. They are made to feel the exclusion that drives immigrants into ghettos to form their own churches where they are assured of a safe social, welcoming environment.

Maybe, my mother was right - all they need is a welcome!

The history of salvation has known unpredictable and mysterious integration of peoples, cultures and races. In the future, too, we want to remain open to the plan of God, whose "providence, evident goodness and saving designs extend to all people against the day when the elect are gathered together in the holy city which is illumined by the glory of God, and in whose splendour all people will walk." (Nostra aetate, 1)  
(Cardinal Mario Martini. 1991)