

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

Potatoes to paninis

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Hilliard, Alan F.;Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants
Publisher	Intercom magazine
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-08 23:49:37
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/174790

Potatoes to Paninis: a reflection on Irish migration



Article for Intercom magazine: by Fr Alan Hilliard, Director of the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants

October 2007 | Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants

Migration and Irish History

Beneath the songs of streets paved with gold, low lying fields and broken hearts lie economic realities that cause migration. The failure of the potato crop caused the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of people. Some were packed onto Canadian timber ships that otherwise would have made an empty and unprofitable return to their home ports. Most went south to the United States; those who stayed behind provided a pool of cheap labour that allowed Canada to become one of the great industrialised nations in the world. We can recount numerous stories that reveal remarkable contributions by Irish migrants to many nations. These achievements can anaesthetise what was a painful experience. The journey was traumatic for families and for the Irish nation. We cannot deny the wonderful opportunities that migration offered. For those escaping poverty it created what were previously unknown opportunities that could never have been imagined before departure. For the receiving countries, like Canada, the migrant provided an opportunity for the nation to grow, expand and develop.

Migration and Family

Within living memory we can recall family members who were part of the world wide phenomenon of migration. They graduated from third level colleges as engineers, architects or scientists and yet despite all their qualifications they travelled to New York for work and served 'hash browns' and 'eggs easy over' in diners. They pulled pints of Bud and Miller lite in down town taverns. In Ireland today we have engineers, architects and scientists continuing the Irish Migration experience but they come to us now serving Paninis and pulling pints. The economic benefits to them and their families offer an incentive to work hard and reap rewards, akin to the Irish of bygone days.

Migration and Lifestyle Choices

The benefits of migration do not lie solely with individuals. Migration is proven to sustain the economic growth and increase life style options for the receiving nation. When a country, like Ireland, improves its standard of living her citizens are less likely to want to work in the service industries. Most young Irish people now go to college and have degrees. Today's parents for the large part wish to remain in the work place. They need the services of people to mind their children and carry out other chores because these chores not only get in the way of their work but also of their valuable leisure time and activities. In that vein imagine trying to explain the concept of a personal trainer to your grandfather. Wouldn't he encourage you to go out and train the local GAA under 21's or dig up row of spuds!

Migration and Domestic Need

And if the Irish economy did go into recession how many of our graduates could we persuade to take on a job in the service industries. Would they too not opt to emigrate like so many before them? Even though we see much outsourcing of jobs to low cost countries there are many services that cannot be outsourced. Our houses have to be cleaned locally, children cannot be emailed to a child care centre in Eastern Europe, dishes cannot be washed in rural China nor can we send out elderly to the Philippines to be cared for in their sunset years. This goes to prove that immigration aids the development of nations. The fact that migrants are prepared to undertake these tasks in our society in no way underestimates their ability and qualifications. Many are over qualified, like many of the Irish who were prepared to work in the US. It is just that the financial incentives on offer are far greater than if they worked in the trade or profession for which they are qualified in their country of origin.

Migration and Fears

While the benefits are evident we can exhibit a fear towards migration. We are fearful that on some dark day economy will collapse and 'they' will have our jobs. Our policies can reflect these fears and communicate uncertainty among our citizens. Let's base our beliefs on the facts. Four fifths of the migrants to Britain from Eastern Europe are between the ages of 18 - 24. These are hard working industrious people who are not in search of welfare but are here to enjoy the benefits of paid work. If there is a shortage of work they seek it out elsewhere. Many of the Irish who were involved in construction in Sydney are moving to Brisbane as the demand for construction workers increases. The fact that you make it in one place gives you the courage and confidence to make it in the next. The migrant journey as the US Catholic Bishop's outline is 'a journey of hope'. One American Bishop tells of an encounter with a Haitian refugee who risked life and limb to get to the mainland. When he inquired as to why he put his life at risk he replied 'Sharks teeth are sweeter than misery'.

Migration and Faith

This hope lies at the heart of the feast we celebrate this week end. If we reflect on scripture most of God's revelation was to people on a journey:

- Moses - a journey from slavery
- Abraham - a journey from wealth and comfort into the unknown
- Elijah - a journey from persecution
- Jesus, Mary and Joseph - a journey from the perils of undocumented status
- Paul - a journey from abusive power

However on these journeys God's love is revealed. Whether Patrick discovered God on Sliabh Mish, on the boat that delivered him from slavery or in his restlessness when he got home; God sought him out. Patrick discovered a hope so deep on his journey that he was compelled to share his discovery with those who were prepared to walk with him. For the large part those who fled Ireland when the potato crop failed encountered God on that

journey. The Irish brought blessings to the places they went. Their contribution made a difference. The God that sustained them in difficult times wasn't forgotten, the God they discovered, they shared. As the story of Irish Migration takes on a new dimension we already acknowledge the expanding tapestry of faith that is enriching blessing our churches. Saint Patrick's life highlights that behind the economic circumstances that cause migration, be it failure of the potato crop or the need to serve paninis, it is human beings that contribute to the growth and development of the Church. 'This meeting - characterised by attention, welcome, sharing and solidarity- reveals the constant solicitude of the Church, which discovers authentic values in migrants and considers them a great human resource'. *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* para 101