

Poland: Focolare welcomes refugees from Ukraine

In addition to the shock and disbelief at what was happening, there was immediately a wave of solidarity from the Polish people towards the refugees, over 90% of whom were women and children. Men up to the age of 60 are not allowed to leave the country at this time.

Before the first State arrangements were put in place, many families, parishes, religious congregations, local associations made themselves available by opening their homes to the refugees, not knowing how long it would take. The Focolare Movement is part of the solidarity response. We already had several connections: one of the members of the Kiev community lived for many years in Poland.

Already since 2014 many Ukrainian emigrants (300,000) had moved to Poland, where they found work and friends. In fact, it was not uncommon to hear the Ukrainian language in the streets, to see billboards in Ukrainian. The emergency caused by the war was deeply felt as these people weren't strangers, they were already known with family members or friends of those already in Poland.

The generosity of the Polish people has been incredible and, a phenomenon that is by no means taken for granted, has united people of various opinions and political persuasions. On my frequent business trips, I see train stations packed with refugees, and a sea of orange hi-viz vests of volunteers ready to translate, explain, accompany them to reception points, serve a hot meal. Refugees travel on public transport free of charge, Ukrainian children are welcomed into public schools, while teachers are given the opportunity to attend a basic Ukrainian language course or workshops on how to interact with children coming directly from the war situation. In parishes, meetings and masses are held in Ukrainian. Thousands of packages are offered for the families left behind in Ukraine (Caritas has a sample pack containing food for one family for a week). There are moving scenes, but there are also, among both Ukrainians and Poles, many questions, fears, worries for the future.

At the Focolare Movement's centre/'little town' (Mariapolis Fiore), an hour from Warsaw, 16 refugees have been welcomed, including eight children. (At first when the children heard the sound of planes overhead, they threw themselves face down on the ground). In another nearby centre there are other refugees. We try to keep them company, make them feel at home and try to alleviate at least a little of the trauma they have experienced. We play with the children, celebrate their birthdays, do gardening together in anticipation of spring. There are those who teach them Polish to help them integrate. We also buy their typical food (pierogi) which the women make to earn a little money.

Their dream is to return to their homeland as soon as possible and to be able to welcome their Polish host families to spend their next summer holidays in Ukraine.

The network of solidarity has continued to widen: the men's Focolare community in Katowice has been able to host people from the Nuovi Orizzonti community in Italy who stop overnight on their way to the border to pick up refugees and bring them back to welcome into Italian families.

In Warsaw we've created a Facebook group called "size 42 shoes" to share the needs and offers of practical help or material goods ... clothing, a guitar. The name refers to one of the experiences of the initial Focolare group during the Second World War - they prayed and received a pair of size 42 shoes for an elderly man in need.

The impact of the war is unimaginable but in the face of so much pain the Gospel law of love can make some small difference to the lives of many."

Noreen Lockhart & kasia Waiutynska (focolare community in Katowice)