

**REMARKS BY PRESIDENT McALEESE AT THE CONFERENCE OF THE  
INSTITUTE OF HOSPITALER STUDIES, ST. JOHN OF GOD  
BROTHERS, STILLORGAN, CO. DUBLIN**

**WEDNESDAY, 17 JUNE, 2009**

**“Hospitality towards the Immigrant Community”**

Dia dhíbh a dhaoine uaisle. Tá an-áthas orm bheith i bhur measc anseo ar an ócáid speisialta seo. Míle bhuíochas díbh as an gcuireadh agus an fáilte a thug sibh dom.

Good afternoon everyone. It is a great pleasure to be here with you today and thank you all very much for your warm welcome. My thanks in particular to Brother Gregory for his words of welcome and to Brother Kilian for his kind invitation to speak at this Conference in this very special place.

This is a house of healing and of hope. People come here, their lives broken, their relationships damaged, their mental health precarious for a whole variety of reasons. They come here with burdens that seem unbearable until they realise they do not have to carry them alone, that there is help if they are willing to be helped and to help themselves. It has to be a place where they are welcomed and respected, where they know their lives matter and their futures matter. They come here as strangers, fearful, even desperate, praying that in this place with the help of the strangers who will befriend and help them, that the seeds of a new beginning will grow.

Today's conference deals with another group of people who have come to Ireland as strangers, anxious and worried about their future yet hopeful that they will be accepted among strangers and made to feel at home. Our specific focus at today's conference is “Hospitality towards the Immigrant Community”. Every one of us at some time in our lives has felt like an outsider. We have been in a situation in a new school or college, in our first job or joining a new club where we knew no-one and no-one knew us. We know the tension and the anxiety we felt and then the overwhelming relief when someone smiled at us, drew us into the crowd, made space for us and invited us in. To belong, to be needed, to be loved, respected, welcomed and wanted are important to each one of us individually. The stories told in the recent Ryan Report paint a dreadful picture of what happens to the human person when he or she is deprived of love, is made to feel unwanted, resented, is subjected to rejection and brutishness. The downstream consequences for

the person are appalling - they can blight not just a childhood but a lifetime and all the relationships that are made over that lifetime.

Those who come here as strangers know that in leaving behind all that is familiar, comforting and supportive and making their lives in a new land that they have to make a huge effort at befriending new neighbours and adapting to a new culture. Those who have always lived here have a huge responsibility too, to do the smiling, offer the handshakes, create the welcome that will allow our new citizens to settle quickly and easily and live the fullest, happiest lives possible. Wherever there are barriers of racism or resentment, there is wilful waste that makes community life fragile and diminished. Wherever there is hospitality and welcome there is an energy and positivity that make community life buoyant and dynamic.

One of the defining issues of Irish life in recent years has been inward migration. We came to it later than many of our neighbours and with our own unique and personal history. There has been an almost poetic symmetry about the way in which the traditional paradigm of letters from Boston or the Bronx by the Liams and the Marys has been replaced by e-mails or texts from the Jans and the Mareks recounting for their families back home in Poland or Latvia, how they are doing in their new life in Ireland. Like generations of Irish emigrants, they send the money orders home so that their family can know a better life - a life built on their generosity, hard work and sacrifices. Many were attracted by the economic boom which was good to them and to all of us for a while but which is now another Ireland, another world. Many have already returned home but many more have stayed, figuring that they trust Ireland to get through this crisis and they like Ireland enough to face the challenges as part and parcel of Irish society. I meet their children in our schools every week - many were born here and so they are Polish-Irish, Chinese-Irish, Filipino-Irish. They play Gaelic football and hurling, they greet me with the familiar - Dia Dhuit a Uachtaráin. Their mothers hold exhibitions in the schools of their own native cultures and crafts and foods, bringing a whole new dimension to our education and our cultural heritage. They are working hard to make their lives here good for themselves and good for Ireland.

There is an old Irish sean-fhocal, a proverb, which says “aithnitéar cara i gcruatán” – ‘it’s in hardship that you know a friend’. God knows, hardship was our lot as a people for long enough - we got more than enough opportunity to practice it - and frankly hospitality and solidarity were essential to our very survival as a people, not just in Ireland but wherever the Irish scattered to in search of a living. They knew what it was to be despised and treated as second best but by sheer effort they did us proud.

Our new citizens are looking for that same chance to prove themselves as our friends, colleagues and neighbours.

There is no easy way to build bridges of friendship between strangers. It has to be done the hard way by befriending, getting to know one another, taking responsibility for one another, building the structures which facilitate comfortable social integration and yet remain respectful of ethnic and cultural identities. The history of Irish immigrants has taught us how complex these things are but how surmountable with the right attitudes and outlook.

In these tough times we need as many hands to the wheel of effort as possible. Hope is what you get when people give leadership in the teeth of uncertainty, and each one of us is called to give that leadership which will see Ireland beat the odds once again and write a chapter in Irish history which will be spoken of with awe, about a people who took their disappointments, worries and righteous anger and distilled them into a creative force that tackled our problems with a creativity, energy and imagination that drew its strength from a widely diverse but strongly united citizenry.

Our new immigrant citizens are not problems, they are problem-solvers; it was that get up and go which brought them here in the first place. The more effective our welcome, the quicker we will see the new energies that Ireland can release when we turn our faces and our hearts to that Ireland dreamt of in the Proclamation, where all the nation's children would be cherished equally. Last week I visited a Dublin school which has children from twenty eight nations among its pupils. They all waved their hand-made flags as I arrived. I saw flags from England, South Africa, Nigeria, Lithuania, Ukraine, Brazil, Phillipines, United States and many more. On the reverse of every flag there was the Irish flag, the common denominator.

We are united under that flag. Wherever it flies it speaks of our character as a people who yearn for peace, for an absence of fractures and fault-lines because we know from bitter experience how hard it is to build peace when mistrust and conflict have taken their grim grip. We are blessed to have made peace on this island and between these islands. We are blessed to have standards of living which are still among the best in the world. We are blessed to have the courage to face into past secrets and to deal with them openly and genuinely. We are blessed to be wiser about so many things which now allow us to chart a path to a better Ireland. Could we be the country that got hospitality to the stranger right? We have the chance and time will tell. This conference will be a help. I wish you every success as you invest in our country and its future by asking such important questions.

My thanks again to Brother Kilian and the Institute for a most timely and important conference. May the spirit of hospitality of St. John of God himself infuse your deliberations as we seek to chart our way through these difficult times.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.