

Celebrating Nostra Aetate in Upton Park

Brentwood Diocesan Interfaith Lead Fr Britto Belevendran and his parish of the Church of Our Lady of Compassion in Upton Park hosted a very meaningful celebration of *Nostra Aetate* recently. It took place at St Edward's Primary School on Green Street, in one of the most culturally diverse areas in London.

The event to mark the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* was remarkably well attended on a dark and rainy Wednesday evening at the end of October. This groundbreaking declaration by the Second Vatican Council on the Catholic Church's relations with non-Christian religions has for six decades fostered better understanding, friendship and working relationships in the search for truth, justice and peace. The event promoted much needed inter-religious dialogue and revealed how powerful it can be to heal wounds, build partnerships, prevent conflict and create bridges in a fragmented world. One speaker, Bala Balaraman, a Hindu, noted the strength of the spirit of this neighbourhood: "There are more places of worship than pubs in Newham."

The event was opened by Fr John Armitage, Dean of Newham, who emphasised the universality of catholic faith. The main speaker was Fr Adrian Graffy, who delivered a detailed and informative presentation about the history of *Nostra Aetate*, entitled 'God of All People'. A photograph of Pope Francis and leaders from both Jewish and Arab communities in a warm and intimate embrace was the backdrop to this much appreciated talk.

The second part of the evening was opened by a graduate of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), Vivianna Cabral, who gave a moving and dramatic portrayal of 'a search for the child', missing in the psyche of communities, religions and nations suffering the trauma of war.

The interfaith panel contributed and reflected in inspiring ways, chaired by myself, Jocelyne Quennell. An experienced psychotherapist, I have worked for many years developing wellbeing services for children and young people and highlighted that when we put the child at the centre of decision-making this usually leads to better decision-making. Bala, a retired solicitor, a Hindu, and active member of the Sathya Sai Organisation is the former Vice-President of Newham Association of Faiths, and the Former President of Sathya Sai Organisation UK. His speech drew on many years of interfaith dialogue and he challenged the community present to think more about lesser-known or marginalised faiths, not just the Abrahamic traditions.

Rozina Iqbal is an active member of the Sufi Alliance, dedicated to exploring the essence of love, unity and self-awareness. Her work focuses on fostering understanding among all faiths and beliefs, and she was moved to compose a beautiful poem during the event that underlined how

humanity is one family under one God: 'From Abraham's vow to Christ's pure light, / From Muhammad's grace to the soul's true sight, / Each prophet sang what hearts still know / That mercy is the seed from which we grow'.

These ideas were developed in Raphi Samuels' speech which referenced his own experiences and appreciation of religious and cultural diversity growing up in London. Raphi is a master's student in modern literature and culture and shared his thoughts on the power of multiculturalism as a tool to maintain respect for the human dignity of all people, regardless of creed or colour. Finally, Rev. Paul Fox related his experiences of childhood in a mixed household, having both Jewish and Christian heritage. He made clear the necessity of taking action to fight racial injustices, and of embodying values and principles in practice.

The panel was excellent and was well-received by the parishioners of Newham and elsewhere, some of whom had travelled from Fr Britto's former parish of Wickford. Among the friends who came was Hannah Kelly, chaplain for diversity in the Essex Police Force, the Deputy Mayor of Newham, Amar Virdee, whose remit includes community safety and homelessness, and several other Newham councillors. There were representatives present from Westminster Interfaith, and the event evidenced that there is a clear appetite for more interfaith dialogue. It is hoped that Fr Britto Belevendran will continue to take the lead in facilitating profound opportunities to develop enriching opportunities for reflection, growth and learning.

Rozina held the space at the end with a moment where people felt moved to hold hands with recognition of our shared humanity and universal peace. Thank you to all who took part.

Jocelyne Quennell

Jocelyne Quennell is a Psychotherapist and Director of the Wellbeing Faculty at the Institute for Arts in Therapy and Education (IATE). She has over thirty years' experience in Higher Education, training therapists to work across the life course, with children, teenagers, young people, adults, and older adults within community contexts. She has worked extensively to increase access and enhance culturally attuned delivery of therapeutic approaches in health, education, social care, independent, statutory, and voluntary sectors. She is the lead on Training Standards for the European Interdisciplinary Association for Therapeutic Services for Children and Young people (EIATSCYP) <https://eiatscyp.com/>