

Humanitarian Relief for Ukrainian Refugees – with love from Poole!

St. Mary's Poole 9.30am Mass Sunday 13 March, a snatched conversation between two of the Welcomers Team: Mike Abreu already decided, and determined, to transport aid - and David Chamberlain volunteering to assist him. St. Mary's "hands on" part in the humanitarian relief operation began (the Parish was already collecting donations in support of Cafod/ Caritas). The project received enthusiastic backing from Fr. John Webb and very generous support from parishioners – also aided by help from family and friends

Mike approached Eva, a Polish woman who owns a café in Poole; Eva is in regular contact with volunteers in her hometown of Ostrow Mazowiecka about what supplies are needed and appealed to the people of Poole for help - and collected the vital necessities: medicines, hygiene products, nappies and warm clothing, especially for babies and children, all of which were proving to be difficult to source in Poland. Only to encounter difficulties in obtaining transportation – with a long wheelbase van load waiting to go! The loading of Mike's van took place on Saturday 19 March - Mike's wife Terry gamely sorting the paperwork for the trip and overcoming obstacles!



Departing in the early morning of Monday 21 March we arrived at the sports centre in Ostrow Mazowiecka in the early evening of Tuesday 22 March, being met by some of Eva's friends who are members of a Polish folk & culture group, now volunteers running a depot in the sports hall premises for distribution of supplies to Ukrainian refugees in the locality. The van was swiftly unloaded.

Wednesday 23 March saw a visit to the nearby town of Brok to meet some of the Ukrainian refugees living in what is, normally, a holiday camp situated in the forest, the site owned by the local Catholic Diocese and now given over to refugee relief.

Mateusz, the volunteer Manager, in normal life a senior paramedic, met us. He leads a team of young adult volunteers in running the camp under the auspices of the Polish Catholic Youth Service.



We were pleased to be able to pass on to Mateusz £1,000 in donations from both Eva's collections and from the parishioners of St. Mary's.

Mateusz explained about the camp, introduced us to a couple of other volunteers [*Mateusz on the left and Iryna, the Ukrainian primary teacher for children in the camp on the right of the photo*] and some of the Ukrainian residents; acting as our interpreter when required – but leaving us to mingle and talk freely with the refugees, a number speaking English.

The Ukrainian folks in the camp are mainly young mothers with children; the tension was palpable - mobile phones enabling contact with husbands left behind in Ukraine, many

apparently now in the defence forces, but generating anxiety when contact could not be made. Clearly worried people, for many not knowing whether their homes still exist and with livelihoods disrupted and dependent on the kindness of strangers – but putting on a brave face for their children, as Mums do!



We spoke with Marina, a Mum with three children, her description of her circumstances gave us something of an idea as to just how horrific it is for Ukrainians to contemplate the fratricidal nature of Putin's aggression: her husband was a business owner now a soldier defending Kyiv. Marina is proud to be Ukrainian, but she is the child of a Ukrainian mother and a Russian father, and her first language is Russian. Marina wants her country to be free and at peace.

Three of the people we spoke with told us they are grateful for the offers of sanctuary now being made by countries, and people, across Europe – but all of them stressed they really want to return to their homes in the Ukraine – and will do so as soon as they can, to a Ukraine completely free from Russian control and at peace. Mateusz confirmed the truth of these comments; he told us about the difficulties he had faced just a couple of days before, a number (about fifty we think he said) of the refugees being offered homes in Sicily – it took a lot of encouragement to get them to board the transport as they were adamant they wanted to stay, feeling close to their own country, homes and culture.

We must think of the courage it takes to live as a refugee!

Finally we spoke to an old couple clearly in their late eighties – sitting quietly on a bench in the sun, they had no English but on hearing we had come with help, they managed a smile and a quiet, “God bless”.