

The thief comes in only to steal; I have come that you may have life and have it to the full (John 10.10)

We are 'a space to be' and 'a space to become' and we enable those we serve to gain an awareness that they are people cherished and loved by God.

To allow this to happen, we have developed meaningful relationships built on trust, honesty and integrity. Deep and focused conversations are part of the ongoing process.

Despite the language difficulties, the obvious poverty and in many cases a sense of helplessness, we believe that in addition to compassion and kindness we must also hold people accountable for their actions and expectations.

Recently, a Roma woman was upset as her daughter's school uniform had been stolen from the washing line. With almost no income, this was a major issue for the family.

Later that morning, the lady pointed out that the boy she suspected had stolen the clothing was in The Space with his grandmother. The boy, his gran, an interpreter and the lady were all invited to a private conversation.

Initially, both the 12 year-old boy and his gran denied he stole the clothes.

Our worker reminded everyone that The Space was a Christian project. Then speaking directly to the boy, she told him she knew that in his heart he was a good boy and also dearly loved by the Lord.

She explained that she recognised how hard his life was and how in very difficult circumstances we can all do things we wouldn't otherwise do. She reminded him how much he was loved and yet some of the things he was doing were not good and these should stop.

The boy dropped his head several times and said he had stolen the clothing. His gran was visibly moved. We agreed that the project would help to replace the uniform but it couldn't happen again.

The conversation then moved on to the consequences of what he had done. The girl was left with nothing to go to school in, no money to buy another uniform.

The boy knew he was in a safe place where it was okay to be open about vulnerabilities, about mistakes – where he would be accepted, not judged.

He was enabled to be truthful, to be honest and with that there was an obvious sense of relief. If he hadn't told the truth he would then have had to continue telling lies.

The boy was treated with respect and compassion but he was also held accountable and given the opportunity to reflect on the effect his actions had on the other family.

At one stage he was slumped in the chair with his head in hands, but he left with his head held high – not in arrogance, but he seemed to have a grown in moral stature.

The Space expands outreach from its new base

Throughout the Jubilee Year of Mercy which comes to an end this month, the whole Church has been reminded of its mission to show forth the merciful face of God to the world, especially in areas of greatest need. The call to live out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy has been heard and responded to down the years in varied ways. The work of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, in which most Glasgow parishes are still engaged, is one example. The Space project in Govanhill is a more recent expression of the Vincentian charism of serving the poorest in society, and exemplifies the call to bring the faith-inspired good works to the margins of society, as VINCENT TOAL reports

WHAT started out as a small drop-in service, in a former shop on Allison Street in Govanhill, has proved so popular that new premises were needed.

For a project simply named The Space a bigger space was required.

And so the initiative, devised by the Daughters of Charity as a service to the area's often despised Roma families, has moved into the former hall of Community of the Risen Christ on Bellisle Street, across the road from Holy Cross church.

The space within has been transformed allowing The Space to expand its support and broaden its outreach.

Project manager Margo Uprichard explained: "We offer three streams of support – a community drop-in, integration service, and building better futures."

"Three days a week, people can come in for a chat, access basic needs and just 'be' in a place where they know they are welcome and not judged."

The integration work enables families to access statutory and voluntary services,

like education, housing, and debt management.

"Building better futures is where the greatest impact can be achieved but which takes most time," said Margo. "It reflects our aim to enable families to be all they can be and live a flourishing life."

Rejection

The obstacles are immense. As well as the obvious physical poverty, there is a deeper poverty rooted in alienation, isolation and rejection.

"You cannot take someone on a journey of self-discovery until they have a sense of their

own value, dignity and worth, so this is where our greatest work lies," said Margo.

"Among young Roma women, especially, their levels of aspiration are shockingly low. I've never encountered such low self-esteem and self-worth."

"So we work with them and get them to realize how valuable they are, get them to see and appreciate their own potential, and aspire towards skills which will improve their life chances and enhance their family's wellbeing."

Concepts of value and self-worth are completely alien,

however. Asked what their hopes are, they fall silent.

"Their children are the key to unlocking what they are good at," Margo pointed out. "The children give their parents their character and when that happens it is a blessed and sacred moment."

Funding to expand the project and renovate the new premises has come through the Daughters of Charity who also contribute to The Space's outreach work in the person of Sr Agnes McGarvie.

Tough

"There is no doubt that in Govanhill we have some of the greatest need anywhere in the city," said Sr Agnes. "Conditions are unbelievably tough, but they are better than where people have come from, which tells you a great deal."

Roma are a rural, semi-nomadic people who have come from Slovakia, Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania. Wherever they go, the Roma are often despised, looked upon with suspicion and become an easy target of abuse and discrimination for anybody who always wants to have an enemy.

To some people's eyes, they can be their own worst enemies – lacking basic hygiene and social skills. Rather than scapegoating them and despite the effort it demands, opening doors of welcome is what gives The Space its identity and drives it forward.

"We are guided by the values of St Vincent de Paul of being led by those we serve," explained Margo. "The poor are our masters and the volume of need among the Roma population is immense, so we have to respond."



Margo Uprichard and Sr Agnes, left, with Sr Moira and project worker Helen McLeod



As the service expands, The Space has taken on additional staff who assist at the drop-in facility, visit families at home and assess other areas of need in Govanhill.

Among the benefits that the extended space offers is a fully-fitted kitchen where clients can develop cooking skills, nutrition and hygiene.

Other facilities include a communal area with space for playing, computer bay, private rooms for personal conversations and an extended staff area.

Strong links have been forged with local churches of all stripes who share facilities and expertise in particular areas like literacy, craftwork, budget support, food access and event hosting.

The Society of St Vincent de Paul has helped sustain the project financially and with volunteers, while support has also come with grants from the St Nicholas Care Fund

Rapid

Alliances have been forged with schools, housing associations, health services and the library. Because their culture is so different, the Roma families need coaxing to make best use of their services.

Since it first opened in March 2013, The Space has built up a register of clients which now runs to some 200 families.

For Margo, a former industrial microbiologist, who went on to set up a project for disabled children, and whose involvement with The Space was a "faith decision", there is no surprise at its rapid development.

"The Daughters of Charity

felt called to serve the Roma community and that initial call has been confirmed by the people who come to The Space.

"The Sisters have been totally pioneering. They placed great faith in this work and have been rewarded with grace and blessings from the Lord."

Breaking down barriers of fear and distrust in order to build relationships based on respect and dignity takes time. It also needs space.

And in their new Bellisle St premises The Space has found an ideal home where fear diminishes and dignity and self-worth can grow.



THEY are disliked even among their own – the lowest of the low. Bitterness and anger consume them. Their hardships never leave; never let go – a faithful companion indeed.

She has borne nine children and now he has left her. Her burden is unimaginable, her poverty extreme, her brokenness masked by an aggressive exterior.

There is no softness left in her, she has to fight every day to survive.

She and her son fill the air with a foul stench. They haven't washed, their clothes are dirty and at 14 years-old he is like a small

child and incontinent. They came to The Space for some food and he pointed out his sore feet – dirty, sodden and cramped into shoes too small and saturated by the rain.

Early the next morning shoes and socks were purchased for them to collect at their next visit. They appeared later that day.

I removed the boy's old shoes and socks and carefully placed his feet on a towel, cleaned them, dried them and put on his new footwear.

She watched me, almost disbelieving her eyes and then she wept... and wept – her thanks immense.

The poor are our masters, we must obey them



Let us weep for the misfortunes of our oppressed brothers, and let us weep for the cruelty of our brother oppressors.

These poignant words of Blessed Frederic Ozanam, founder of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, were voiced by Brian O'Reilly, former national president for Ireland and international vice president of the SSSVP.

In a keynote speech at the Scottish national meeting at Celtic Park, Mr O'Reilly focused on the call for greater mercy which has echoed throughout the

Jubilee Year, especially in the outreach to the poor and marginalised.

He said: "Genuine service of people who are marginalised and oppressed expresses itself by working side-by-side with the hungry, unemployed, the addict, prisoner, the homeless man or woman – people who exist on the very fringes of society."

"We must be Christ's good news for them, assuring them they belong, that they are included."

"St Vincent instructs us to go to the poor because there we will find God." For Vincentians engaged in the Soci-

ety's apostolate, the poor are not faceless people, Mr O'Reilly stated.

"We know them as friends and neighbours, and from them we know about social exclusion, the struggle to survive, the trail of broken commitments and promises."

He added: "The challenge before us is not just to think differently but to act differently. To be the person who reaches out with affection and tenderness towards the poor, showing them that God loves them."

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Roma pupils join in celebrations marking 80th anniversary of Holyrood Secondary
Picture by Paul McSherry



A real sense of space at the new facility in Bellisle St