

Editorial

James Trewby, Co-ordinator of the Columban Justice, Peace and Ecology Team

Welcome to the first all-electronic copy of 'Vocation for Justice'. Thank you to all those who have journeyed with us from the printed edition, through the consultation process, to this edition. It has been a difficult process, and there are many people who are owed gratitude – thank you all! Welcome too to new readers. We hope that 'Vocation for Justice' will continue to encourage and inspire, inviting readers to put faith into action for justice, peace and ecology.

Two requests:

- 1) Please get in touch (education@columbans.co.uk) with feedback on format and content.
- 2) Making a success of the new format will depend on growing the list of readers. Please share the materials, encouraging people to sign up to receive the newsletter electronically via the Columban website.

Seeking sanctuary: Responding in faith, choosing welcome

This edition of 'Vocation for Justice' is focused on 'seeking sanctuary'. The 'hostile environment' policies of successive governments towards refugees in Britain and other similar policies around the world stand in opposition to the call of faith. Catholic Social Teaching makes clear the call to 'welcome the stranger' – and this edition celebrates and emphasises this choice to welcome, listen to and respond in faith.

Three articles are edited versions of the **winning entries from this year's Columban Media Competition** (full versions can be found on the Columban website), and these are accompanied by the three winning images. The words inside the artwork on the cover – from the third place image by J. from Loreto Grammar School, Altrincham - all mean refugee in different languages. Young people were invited to submit articles or images on the theme of "Becoming a refugee is never a choice, but how we respond is", a quote from the United Nations Secretary General-Secretary, António Guterres.

The annual competition attracted a record 349 entries across Britain and Ireland, our highest ever number. Entries from 31 schools in England, Wales and Scotland were judged by media experts who praised the high quality of all the entries shortlisted. Every entry was positive about the Church's stance of 'welcoming the stranger' despite recent threats and animosity against people seeking sanctuary. In Britain, a difficult decision was made to anonymise winners' names amidst the tensions. It is a testament to the courage and commitment of the schools that they are willing to stand up and witness to living out Catholic Social Teaching.

Winners were then invited to join a day of celebration and learning at Fatima House in Birmingham. This was a joy, an antidote to hostile rhetoric, meeting students, parents and chaplains who are willing to stand in solidarity with refugees. On the day, Mauricio Silva, Columban Interreligious Dialogue Co-ordinator, and Lay Missionary Nathalie Marytsh, who coordinate the running of Fatima House, spoke to the group about the realities facing people seeking sanctuary and the upcoming 10-year anniversary of the project which provides safe accommodation to destitute female asylum seekers in the city. Columban Regional Director, Fr. John Boles, reflected on the commitment to accompany refugees and migrants and thanked the young people for their support of the competition, praising their talent and their compassion for those living on the margins.

The other articles in the edition bring further perspectives to the issues around seeking sanctuary. Columban Justice, Peace and Ecology team member Sr MaryAnne's article **'We say their name'** explores her attendance at the monthly ecumenical refugee vigil outside the Home Office: "It is very poignant to stand and pray for those in power and for those who suffer, at the foot of the imposing Home Office building". **'Letters from my life'** is made up of extracts from letters written by participants from the group 'Stories of Hope and Home'. It brings us the voices of people with lived experience of the hostile environment. Columban Missionary Fr. Alvaro Martinez's article **'I Am Just Another Migrant'** is rooted in his experiences of migration, including his current ministry at the Mexico-US border.

Finally, continuing the 'Vocation for Justice' practice of inviting action, the **'Resources and Action Ideas'** page includes upcoming conferences, the campaign to 'Lift the ban' on asylum seekers working, weeks of action for Laudato Si' and refugees, and information about the Columban Faith in Action Volunteer Programme – please share!

Blessed are the meek

A. (aged 18) from St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School and Sixth Form, Birmingham (1st place)

No one plans to become a refugee. No child dreams of crossing borders in the dark, carrying only a schoolbag filled with documents instead of books. No parent chooses to leave behind the house they built, the neighbours they loved, or the language that shaped their childhood. To become a refugee is not an ambition, a lifestyle, nor a preference. It is the consequence of danger so great that staying becomes impossible. And yet, whilst those forced to flee have no choice, we - those who receive them - do. Our response is the part of the story that is still in our hands.

Public debate often reduces refugees to statistics or headlines. However, behind every statistic, there is a person whose life has been disrupted. Catholic Social Teaching asks that we do exactly this: to picture the child not the statistic.

My own understanding of this did not come from personal displacement, but from the environment I grew up in. As a white boy in a primary school where most of my classmates were from Middle Eastern or African backgrounds, I was, unusually, in the minority. Many of my friends had parents or grandparents who had fled conflict in Pakistan, Syria, or Afghanistan. Growing up in that environment taught me something hugely important: refugees are not "others." They are classmates, neighbours, and friends.



1st place image - 'Between Borders' by G. from The Holy Cross School, New Malden

So when I hear refugees portrayed as enemies or strangers, I think of the people I grew up with, the people who lived the story of resilience, of hope, and of safety. "Welcome the stranger," is a moral imperative grounded in Scripture itself: "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). This moral imperative needs to be taken up with solidarity, combating fear of the stranger as outside threat and embracing diversity as a blessing in itself.

Across Britain and Ireland, there are countless examples of ordinary people choosing compassion. Parish halls converted into warm spaces for asylum seekers. Schools organising uniform drives for newly arrived pupils. Community sponsorship groups preparing homes for families they have never met. These acts may seem small, but they form a culture of encounter - one in which strangers become neighbours.

Catholic Social Teaching reminds us of the common good: the idea that society flourishes when the most vulnerable are protected. Refugees are not drains on our communities; they are contributors. Many become nurses, engineers, teachers, entrepreneurs. Their resilience is not only personal: it strengthens the places where they settle.

Moreover, the Church teaches the principle of preferential option for the poor, urging us to prioritise those in greatest need. The question, then, is not whether refugees deserve help: they do. The question is what kind of people we choose to be. Do we construct walls of indifference or bridges of compassion? Do we allow our policies and our approach to be dictated by our fears, or our loves?

To be a refugee is not one's choice. To be empathetic is. Responding with justice is. Responding with welcome is. And these choices define not only the lives of those who seek sanctuary, but the moral character of the societies they enter.

In the end, the theme of this competition is not only about refugees. It is about us. It is about whether we believe that every person, regardless of birthplace or circumstance, carries an unchanging dignity, as Pope Leo XIV said, a dignity that remains whether we are "living in our native land or in a foreign country." It is about whether our communities of faith will choose to embody the love we profess.

Refugees do not choose their journeys. But we can choose to walk beside them. And in doing so, we may discover that welcoming the stranger does not diminish us, but it transforms us.

We say their name

MaryAnne Francalanza, fcj (FCJ Centre for Spirituality and Eco Justice)

On the third Monday of every month, rain or shine, a group of people gather in front of the Home Office Building on Marsham Street in London for a time of prayer for those who have lost their lives trying to find safety in Europe. A significant part of the prayer is taken with saying the names, and a little bit of information about those who have died.

Sometimes we do not have their names, and they are just mentioned as 'a woman,' 'a girl,' 'a man,' or 'an unknown number of people,' ... Sometimes we know a little bit about their circumstances - we know that there are two brothers, or a pregnant woman, we hear their country of origin. There is a quality to the attentive silence as we say their names. It is infused with a deep awareness that these are people with dreams, hopes, and relationships; that they are people with previous lives, talents, others who love them; that they are people whose circumstances have pushed them into making a decision to risk their lives... and an awareness that they paid the ultimate price for seeking a better life. I am always very aware that 'There but for the grace of God, go I.' It is just an accident of geography, that I was born in a country where there is security, health care, a stable climate, and safety.

During the prayer vigil we pray, in words and song, for forgiveness because each of us, whether we like it or not, is complicit in European politicians and media's actions to create a culture of distrust, lack of welcome, suspicion and fear.

It is very poignant to stand and pray for those in power and for those who suffer, at the foot of the imposing Home Office building in Marsham Street. This is the place where the policies are made, where the 'hostile environment' was thought out and made a reality, where individual cases are deliberated and people are rejected or accepted into the UK. We invite those who pass by, sometimes workers at the Home Office, to join us for a few moments and to find out about why we do this. Some show interest and support; many others do not have the time and look away.



A focus for prayer at the vigil outside the Home Office

This year the theme of Refugee Week (15-21 June 2026) is COURAGE! and we will welcome Bishop Paul McAleenan on 15 June at the Prayer Vigil who will share some reflections with those present. The Columbans in collaboration with the FCJ Centre for Spirituality and EcoJustice have invited a group of sixth formers for a day event to join this vigil. We hope that this powerful formative experience will enable them to gain a greater understanding of the Christian call to 'welcome the stranger,' the challenges facing people seeking sanctuary in Britain, their own political power, and of how faith can be put into action. The young people will gather at the FCJ Centre to engage with input about migration and Catholic Social Teaching, before travelling together to the Prayer Vigil outside the Home Office. We hope that a few of the regular attendees at the vigil will take time to share their reasons for attending with the young people. We will return to FCJ Centre to reflect on the experience together, before the young people travel back to their respective schools to share the message and inspire others to action.

If you are in the London area, do join us on Monday 15 June, or any third Monday at 12.30pm in front of the Home Office. Contact homeofficevigil@gmail.com for more information.

Now I carry two worlds

A. (aged 18) from St David's Catholic College, Cardiff (2nd place)

Becoming a refugee is never a choice. No one wakes up and decides to leave everything they know behind. No one dreams of becoming a refugee in an unknown country where all feels strange. But when any hope of a future is disappearing, leaving is the only choice to survive. I am aware of this, as my family and I experienced it first-hand.

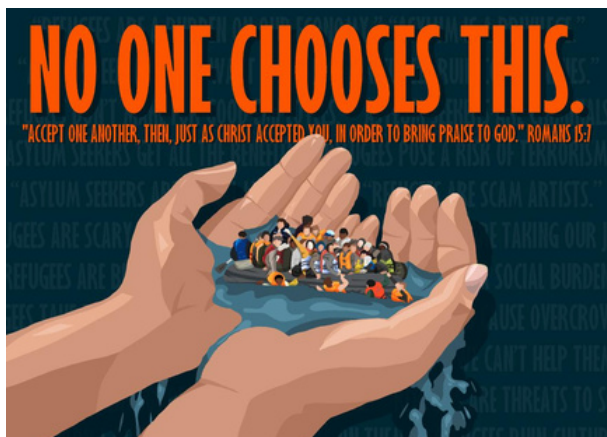
I was 12 years old when I moved to the UK. I did not want to leave my country. I was forced to flee due to the violence from the gangs in El Salvador that made every day feel unsafe. You could feel violence in the air; it was not something you only see on the news. As a result, we learned to stay quiet, walk faster and avoid eye contact. Entire neighbourhoods were controlled by gangs, people disappeared, and children were influenced to join by being threatened if they refused.

I left everything that was once familiar to me. My family, my friends, the streets that watched me grow and a sense of belonging without even trying. I remember seeing my mother packing the little we could carry. At that age, I had to understand that the place I called 'home' was becoming unsafe. I did not speak English. Suddenly, I abandoned the language that once allowed me to express myself freely. I was surrounded by voices I could not understand and unfamiliar faces. There were times I felt invisible and like I didn't belong anywhere.

Although my story is personal, unfortunately, it is common for many people to experience it. In 2025, the UN Refugee Agency stated that 117 million people were forced to leave their home country because of persecution, war, violence or conflicts. Behind that number are stories like mine, where families leave because they have no other choice. Refugees are not people who happily plan their journey; they are people who fear returning to an unsafe country and are entitled to protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

While becoming a refugee is not a choice, how we respond is. Catholic Social Teaching teaches us different principles, such as dignity. All human beings have dignity, for each person is made in the image and likeness of God. Dignity does not depend on someone's nationality, language or qualifications, and it does not disappear when a person becomes a refugee. Arriving in a new country made me feel lost. But every act of compassion from people made me feel seen. I realised that how we respond is a choice. Those who patiently helped me learn English, those who included me even when I struggled to understand, and those who welcomed me made a foreign place feel like home again. All their actions restored my confidence and reminded me of my worth.

There is also the principle of solidarity, recognising that we belong to each other. Solidarity requires us to see each other as brothers and sisters rather than strangers. The preferential option for the poor reminds us that God's love is universal, and the common good teaches that the gifts of creation belong to everyone and no one should be excluded from them.



Over time, I learned English, I made friends and adapted to a new country. Even though it was different, I still hold onto my own culture. Now I carry two worlds within me: the warmth and the roots of El Salvador and the opportunities and safety of the UK.

My story is no longer about leaving; it is about starting a new life. Although El Salvador has undergone positive change, I have integrated into this country. Integration isn't instantaneous. It requires effort from the person arriving and the welcoming community receiving them. When this works, it strengthens society.

2nd place image 'In Your Hands' By K. from Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School, Upminster

Letters from my life

Stories of Hope and Home

Stories of Hope and Home is a Birmingham-based charity which seeks to offer safe space and a sense of community to people seeking sanctuary; and to facilitate ways to amplify their voices.

In our most recent project, “Letters from my Life”, participants have written letters from different moments in their lives, to different people they have encountered along the way. Eventually, it will become a published resource to give those who read it an insight into their lives and thoughts. In the meantime, we are offering you some snippets of their writing here. We hope you will find their words encourage and inspire you ...

From a letter when someone has newly arrived in the UK:

“I am writing this letter to ask you not to judge me at first glance. I might look untidy or sloppy in my unstitched clothing and frizzy, dirty hair. It is not really who I am but the result of what the circumstances of this life forced me to be. I am not feeling good enough to explain more right now after a few days without any food or drink in my stomach. I have no words to indicate how exhausted I am. I just look for someone who can listen to me and take me to the right place to rest and eat. I don’t know exactly who you are or how you behave and to what extent you will be able to open your ears to me; but I believe the Holy Spirit will guide you and make it happen. I am really looking forward to meeting you.”

From a letter to someone who supports sanctuary-seekers:

“I’m writing to you today to acknowledge your support and love you show to asylum seekers. You have given us the reason to survive. You supported us and loved us as part of you. You have shown sympathy and love when we needed it most. You have fought our battles in so many different forms. We really appreciate the advice, the support and the love. You comforted us in our distress and encouraged us to stay positive and to keep fighting. All of you that spent sleepless nights because of our problems may you be blessed and may that love come back to you. This struggle would have been much more difficult if you did not choose to help. You were the fuel that kept us going. Please continue to be the bridge between the migrants and those that are hostile. Your presence will calm the storm. We long for an integrated community that sits together and laughs and does things together. We very much want to learn from you and also teach you a few things that we know. Our diversity makes us stronger so let us unite and make this world a better place for all of us. Please keep up the good work and let your light shine on those that have not seen it yet. We will forever be indebted to your love and care.”

From a letter to someone who wants to help but isn’t sure where to start:



“I can see that you want to help. It is easy to feel stuck at the beginning to wonder what is the right thing to say or do. You don’t need to fix everything. It starts with showing up. Sometimes helping looks like listening without interrupting. Sometimes it’s asking a gentle question.

These things can feel small but they are not. They are often exactly what someone needs. You can be honest. Honesty builds trust more than perfectly chosen words ever could. Helping doesn’t mean carrying everything yourself. You can reach out to people, family and friends trying to support or encourage them to keep showing up by taking one step at a time. And stay kind. The fact that you’re asking where to start means you’re already closer than you think.”

Stories of Hope and Home logo

(The Columbans have the privilege of working with Stories of Hope and Home on education outreach work, such as 'Festivals of Encounter'.)

A light in the dark

J. (aged 15) from Holy Trinity Academy, Telford, Shropshire (3rd place)

One crisp autumn morning, the people of St. George's Church faced a challenge. A group of refugees had arrived in town. They'd fled war, violence, and persecution, crossing seas, deserts, and dangerous borders in search of a safe place to call home. Many were traumatised, their lives torn apart by conflict, and they arrived in Britain with only the clothes on their backs and stories of heartache that no one should have to bear.

At first, the locals were unsure how to respond. The world outside had become increasingly divided, and fear and uncertainty surrounded the influx of refugees. But one Sunday, Father Michael stood before his congregation, feeling compelled to speak about the call they had as a community of faith, to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable with love, generosity, and dignity.

"Brothers and sisters," he began, his voice steady but filled with emotion: "We are a people of faith. We follow Christ, who called us to love our neighbour as ourselves. And when we see someone in need, we are called to reach out, to offer not just charity, but our friendship, our solidarity, and our hearts." He paused, as his words settled. The congregation looked back at him, unsure of how they could live up to such a call. But Father Michael knew that love wasn't just a feeling it was an action.

Father Michael read from Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35). "We're called not just to welcome the stranger," he said, "but to see the face of Christ in each person we meet. These refugees are not 'them' - they are our brothers and sisters in need. And our response will show the world what it means to be a community of faith."

Inspired by these words, the people of St. George's Church knew they couldn't sit idly by. They had to act. They also knew that their faith was the foundation of their response, and it was through their shared values of love, solidarity, and hospitality that they could begin to make a difference. The church became a beacon of hope in the town. The parishioners gathered after Mass to discuss what they could do to help.



This year's competition poster

"We may be a small group," said Rachel, a schoolteacher who had been volunteering at the local food bank, "but we have hands, hearts, and a faith that calls us to act. Let's start by opening our doors." The idea resonated with everyone. The church hall, usually used for community events and tea gatherings, would now become a place of refuge and sanctuary. They began collecting food, clothing, and donations for the refugees, but more than that, they committed to offering their time and companionship. The church became not just a place for material help, but a place where stories could be shared, where pain could be expressed, and where hope could be reborn.

Refugees from across the town and nearby areas started to visit the church, finding more than just charity - they found a community that was willing to listen, to help them navigate their new lives in Britain.

An unexpected bond began to form between the long-time residents and the newcomers. Though the refugees spoke different languages and came from distant places, they shared something fundamental with the people of the town - a desire for safety, dignity, and belonging.

One cold winter evening, Father Michael stood before his congregation once again. The church was filled with people, both locals and refugees, who'd come together to celebrate Mass. "When we welcome the stranger," Father's homily started, "we're not just opening our doors; we're opening our hearts, our communities, and our very souls to God's love."

I am just another migrant

Fr. Alvaro Martinez SSC

Fr. Alvaro Martinez runs the Columban mission centre in El Paso, at the U.S./Mexico border. He assists stranded or detained Latin American migrants. You only have to cross a bridge to be in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and he does it in 20 minutes on foot.

"I'm just another migrant," he says. His life has been a continuous crossing of borders that has led him to understand the pain of the immigrant. The mission centre in El Paso is a few feet from the border barrier wall. Its work is to listen, welcome, and give hope to migrants fleeing violence, poverty, or persecution. Many will not pass. Others are being held by ICE - United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement. They all have a story that, according to Fr. Alvaro, "is a broken Christ."

He joined the Columbans in 1993 and training took him first to Fiji and work in a leper clinic. Then to Chicago to study theology and to Hong Kong, where he worked for six years with Filipino domestic workers. "Every place transformed me," he admits. It was in Hong Kong where he understood something key: "I don't work with migrants, I share with other migrants. I am a migrant." Awareness of being a foreigner became the engine of his faith.

In Juárez six years ago, "600 people were sleeping outside a church waiting for food and 22 shelters were operating." Under the current U.S. administration, the flow has been reduced "almost to zero," but the problem has not gone away. "Today, the wall is gigantic; they put barbed wire on top of barbed wire and are painting it black so that it absorbs more heat," he reports. Those who manage to cross – many illegally – stay in El Paso or continue to other cities. But most are stranded in Juárez, caught between desperation and violent gangs.

"Behind each migrant there is a brutal story," he says. He gives examples: A woman from a Latin American country borrowed \$12,000 to pay a trafficker. When she finished paying – \$20,000 with extortionate interest – she was arrested by ICE. "She's detained and will be deported." A couple with two small children walked, took trains and buses, but were kidnapped and had to pay ransom. They are still in Juárez. "Migrants take on a face, smell, and colour when we sit and talk," says Fr. Alvaro.

He visits two ICE detention centres in El Paso. "Many people are there just because they are migrants. There have not been charged with anything." They are transferred from one city to another: two months in Miami, two weeks in Florida, two months in El Paso. "The process drags on." He hears of mothers detained while their children are left with an aunt or a neighbour; parents do not know when they will hug their children again. The mission centre gives practical help and is open to all religions.



Fr. Alvaro Martinez (pictured left) in Ciudad Juárez

In the 1980s, some of Fr. Alvaro's Chilean family went into exile in Europe and he understands uprooting. That historical memory prevents him from being indifferent. "Venezuelans are coming out of a dictatorship. They leave because they have no other choice, or because they are being pursued, or they need food. And there are lots of parallels with migration from Nicaragua."

He rejects any sugar-coated vision of migration. He talks of people who abandon everything they built because one night gunmen threatened to shoot their family. "You have to look at the face of the migrant beyond our own fears," he insists. "I am a migrant. Each of us, at some point, can be the foreigner." He asks not to judge those who cross borders without papers. "Behind it there is a history of violence, of debt, of broken dreams... and also of hope. Despite everything, they continue to walk."

Resources and Action Ideas

COLUMBAN FAITH IN ACTION VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

The 2026/27 programme, based in Birmingham, offers young adults a transformative year of faith formation. A year-long, it offers a unique opportunity to accompany disadvantaged communities while deepening personal faith and understanding of justice and peace. Mauricio Silva, Columban Interreligious Dialogue Co-ordinator in Britain, coordinates the programme along with James Trewby, Columban Justice and Peace Co-ordinator. He explains: "In a climate of mistrust and indifference toward the suffering of the most vulnerable, this year offers young people the opportunity to engage with and reflect on issues such as migration, dialogue, and environmental responsibility." Contact: education@columbans.co.uk

SUMMER

CONFERENCES

The National Justice and Peace Network 48th Annual Conference in Derbyshire on 24-26 July will help participants challenge disinformation and divisive rhetoric, change narratives, foster dialogue and encounter, and speak truth to power. Book at www.justice-and-peace.org.uk

Christians Aware's annual summer school 26-31 July takes the theme: 'Interconnected.' It will look at Integral Ecology and the work of Thomas Berry, Vandana Shiva, Wangari Maathai and others. Contact 0116 254 0770.

ACTION:

REFUGEE WEEK

Refugee Week 2026 runs from 15-21 June, and this year has the theme 'Courage.' Catholic communities in the UK will celebrate by promoting solidarity, hosting events, and highlighting the contributions of refugees, aligning with Catholic Social Teaching to welcome and support displaced persons. It includes arts, education, and community events to foster understanding and inclusion. Find info at www.refugeeweek.org and www.jrsuk.net

ACTION: LIFT THE BAN CAMPAIGN

The Lift the Ban coalition calls on the Government to allow people seeking refugee status to have the right to work. People seeking asylum in the UK are only able to apply for the right to work after they have been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim for over a year. Even then, the few people who are granted permission are rarely able to work in practice. Download the 'activism' pack which gives suggestions about how to raise awareness and take action on this issue from www.lifttheban.co.uk.



LAUDATO SI WEEK

Each year, the global Church unites to celebrate Laudato Si' Week - a time of prayer, reflection, and action inspired by Pope Francis's encyclical. 17-24 May. Resources at www.laudatosiweek.org

EDITORIAL LIST

James Trewby, Ellen Teague, Kevin McDonagh SSC, Ed O'Connell SSC, Anna Blackman, Jane Lavery, Fr. Joe Ryan, MaryAnne Francalanza fcj

Front cover image - see Editorial