

On Tuesday October 3rd, Mary MacKillop Place hosted a Day of Welcome for members of the Christian Communities who have fled the wars in Iraq and Syria. The day was one of the Josephite Action Group's (JAG) response to the invitation of Pope Francis when he appealed to all people to '*choose solidarity as a way of making history and building friendship in society*' and to Mary MacKillop's adage to "Never see a need without doing something about it."

The Christian communities of Iraq and Syria were started in the first century by St Thomas the Apostle so their faith tradition is 'from the beginning'. In the recent bloodshed, almost all cathedrals and churches in both countries have been destroyed. These people have been persecuted, seen many of their families suffer physical and mental trauma and many have died because they are Christian, but throughout they have kept their faith and now share it with us.

The guests of honour, refugees from Syria and Iraq, were members of the school communities of MacKillop College Wakeley, Patrician Brothers Fairfield and Holy Spirit Lakemba. They gathered in the School House for morning tea before the celebration of Eucharist. Noise and laughter was what was heard when walking into the School House, a real joy to hear.

Following the morning tea, we gathered in the Mary MacKillop Memorial Chapel for Mass. On entering the Chapel one could hear the buzz of excited conversations and family groups coming in and greeting one another. The atmosphere was of community – groups of people who were 'at home' with one another and were now coming into a place where they seemed to feel at home already. All the visitors were welcomed by Sr Colleen Keeble, Mary MacKillop Place Director, and members of the Josephite Action Group.

For some of us, the locals, it may have been the first experience of the Eucharist in the Chaldean rite and in the Aramaic language. The celebrating priest reminded the congregation that the Aramaic language was the language that Jesus spoke – but that it was their language even before Jesus! That meant that all were hearing the Our Father in the words and language that it originally would have been prayed or chanted by the early church. The Mass was a real reminder of the universality of the church – the 'catholic-ness' that it is easy to forget being immersed in our own liturgical rites. How important it must be for any refugees to be able to touch into the rites that have been part of their home country and language.

After Mass all present were invited to go to Glenroy Green for a barbecue, and fun. During lunch Members of Parliament Trent Zimmerman, Federal, and Felicity Wilson, State, came to spend time with our guests.

The Josephite Action Group had organised face painting, bracelet making and games. It was great to see children young and old, including MP Felicity Wilson, skipping, dancing, just having fun while enjoying the beautiful day and good company.

Following are some quotes from participants of the day: *"I spoke with Doctors starting over, Dentists re-sitting Australian based tests and engineers seeking work. People with extensive qualifications all looking for a new and safe start for their families. I think maybe today, with our welcome celebration we somehow contributed to their happiness, their feeling safe at last, and most importantly we sent a message of love and inclusion in our Josephite community. What an honour!"*

"The generosity and commitment of the young Josephite Action Group (JAG) who ran the day is nothing less than inspiring. They're living in a very real way Mary MacKillop's motto of never seeing a need without doing something about it."

"Seeing their (our honoured guests') smiles and laughter reminded me that our God of universal love was certainly with us on the day. It reminds me also of what Helen Keller once said: "Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it."

"I was profoundly struck, as I watched the day unfolding, that these generous-hearted new arrivals to our land witness in much needed ways to the importance of life and the way that it can enable us and those we meet to build hope and love, even in the face of suffering and destruction."

"Whatever they have left behind, and however uncertain are their futures, our refugee guests took time out to enjoy being alive. Some smiled shyly, many laughed, said "thankyou" many times in their own languages or in English and mixed with visitors, Sisters and staff. It was a pleasure to be part of this small celebration of freedom."

It was said repeatedly that this Welcome Day was just a beginning that we hope will support and encourage these families as they leave behind the trauma of war and begin a new life here, in a land of freedom. It's wonderful that we've been given the gift of this day and the opportunity to strengthen solidarity with newly arrived families to our country. Australia is gifted by the presence of these resilient people.

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