

ITALY: CITY OF ROME

Cities throughout the world – and consequently the single person households and the families who live in them – are facing a myriad of challenges. Both urban planners and urban governments are realising the emergence and growing complexity of increased multi-cultural and ethnic concentrations of peoples in more than 100 cities around the globe, which are expected to accommodate over 10 million inhabitants over the next 50 years. Increasingly, these populations include desperate displaced people – forced economic migrants and political asylum seekers. The problems and challenges facing both individuals and families, as well as religious and social institutions, in these urban environments include serious issues such as safety, equitable work opportunities, physical and psychological health, poverty, air-quality and pollution, excessive noise and traffic, and the growing need for good educational and social centres and affordable housing. All this, and much more, contributes to the unique challenges and at times debilitating stress people experience in living in an urban environment.

In this article, I would like to consider how our contemporary urban environments – focusing specifically on the multi-ethnic and inter-cultural population of the city of Rome – challenge our local and the wider Church with the baptismal vocation of spiritually nurturing a broader and more dynamic understanding of family identity and life; and also enable, through the Church's ministries and sense of mission, a global consciousness of humanity's interdependence as well as an appreciation of every individual's importance. The global concept of 'the urban family' is certainly evolving in this 21st century.

For those of us who live and minister in urban centres, it is the sacramental rite of Baptism which addresses the present-day experience of family life and communal identity within the urban context. Unlike families who live quiet and somewhat isolated existences in suburbia, those who reside in the city experience the ongoing transformations of modern urbanisation which today is attempting to create an environment of 'urban villages' within the city culture; where people are able to know and relate to each other and feel a sense of community, of belonging to a larger family network. This is where the Church has a vital role to play in providing a variety of ministries which encourage



Refugees holding a party for their Italian teacher.

Photo: St Paul's Church.

and foster a conscious sense of an 'urban village' neighbourhood. For this to be effective, the Church needs to be a public witness and advocate. The urban church's 'public presence' – identifiable by its ministries and public mission – ought to be connected to the broad cultural life of its particular urban context. The social, ethnic, cultural, political, linguistic and religious disconnect which one can experience in city life can be overcome by a church's public presence and its clear sense of God's mission.

The mission of the Church as we describe it is 'to restore all people to unity with God and each other' (American Book of Common Prayer, p.855). This mission is one which not only enables a sense of connectedness among all people in the city but also, through urban churches, provides important places of open doors, welcome and hospitality, care, education and places of joyful worship where humanity's diversity and individuality is acceptable and honoured before God. The urban church should be a place where all people – both Christians and those of other faith traditions – feel valued and worthy of love. Those baptised in Christ acknowledge their being members of a new family, the Family of God.

In the city, the household of God includes an interfaith, ecumenical, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and ethnically diverse global family. St Paul's Episcopal Church makes a difference in the international city of Rome and daily exercises its public presence, as described in our mission

statement: "to bear witness in Rome to a dynamic and living Christian faith, open to all and rejecting none". Our church household, which is committed to radical hospitality, opens its doors daily to members of the urban Family of God: asylum seekers; political refugees and the poor; providing assistance in the Joel Nafuma Refugee Centre; to forced economic migrants in an ever-expanding variety of Latin American ministries; to elderly poor who come to our church office for food vouchers; to abandoned youth and minors who seek housing, as well as work and documents; and to many travellers. Our public presence in the city focuses not only on the poor, but also has artistic connections, with concerts several times a week, welcoming artists from around the world. Our community in this city is multi-cultural, multi-lingual, interfaith, ecumenical and embodies the 'urban village', where families and individuals know each other more intimately, where they can celebrate their diversity and their individuality as well as their membership within the urban family. The challenges of this 21st century in urban centres can effectively be met by a church which links with and reflects the culture, peculiarities and gifts of the urban context, especially as a welcoming neighbourhood family centre in the 'urban village'.

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