

# London Catholic churches see boost in illegal immigrants

LONDON – The size of the Catholic Church in the British capital is being boosted by waves of illegal immigrants, according to a new report.

Undocumented or irregular migrants now make up more than three-quarters of the congregations of at least three London parishes, said “The Ground of Justice: The Report of a Pastoral Research Inquiry Into the Needs of Migrants in London’s Catholic Community,” published Feb. 14.

Many migrants live in abject poverty and fear of deportation, said the report by the Von Hugel Institute of St. Edmund’s College, Cambridge.

The report, commissioned last year by the London dioceses of Westminster, Southwark and Brentwood, said that about one in six Catholic migrants in the capital – about 25,000 out of an estimated total of 150,000 – was there illegally. It said they often were exploited cruelly because of their irregular status.

The report said that more than a third of the migrants earn less than the minimum wage of 5.35 pounds (US\$10.40) an hour, and more than half share cramped rooms at high rents.

Many of the migrants interviewed said they suffered from isolation and loneliness, and two-fifths of them reported some form of depression.

The authors said they were told by some parishioners that they could not help with the survey because they were fearful of the consequences – such as deportation – if they were identified by immigration authorities.

The report said the irregular status of many Catholic migrants is a “reality that impacts well beyond the ethnic chaplaincies and cannot be reduced to a ‘minority’ fringe.”

“Today, irregularity is a core experience of baptized Londoners,” the report said.

Bishops must “appreciate the extent to which they are ministering to a church whose baptized members live in fear, and at grave risk, because of their irregular status,” it said. This means that there are dozens of clergy “knowingly and unknowingly ministering to thousands of parishioners who are irregular or undocumented in terms of their presence in the U.K.”

The authors of the report interviewed 1,000 migrants attending Masses in London, as well as speaking to organizations of national groups of migrants and to migrants who lived on the streets. Twenty priests were interviewed along with representatives of religious orders and agencies working with newly arrived migrants. Questionnaires, which could be answered anonymously, were provided in Polish, French, Chinese, Lithuanian, Spanish and Portuguese as well as English.

The three dioceses involved had a weekly Massgoing figure in 2005 of 285,000 covering Greater London and its outer areas. But congregation figures are estimated to be higher, having been boosted by recent waves of migrants from the eight Central and East European countries that joined the European Union in 2004.

Catholic migrants also have been arriving from countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. This has prompted speculation in the national media that the Catholic Church is overtaking the Church of England as the most active and worshipping religious community in England and Wales.

“These changes have been variously described as the Catholic community’s ‘greatest opportunity’ and its ‘greatest threat,’” the report said.

“For many immigrants from Africa, the Catholic Church is their first port of call,” it said. “They are often seeking refuge and protection from terrifying lives which leave them in ‘grave fear.’”

The report said the church had responded positively to the crisis but often had been “overwhelmed” by the scale of the challenge.

Last year, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor of Westminster said he supported an amnesty for illegal immigrant workers who have no criminal record.

In a Feb. 14 statement, Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor, Archbishop Kevin McDonald of

Southwark and Bishop Thomas McMahon of Brentwood said they would reflect on the findings of the report.

“London is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, home to migrant communities who have come to seek shelter from oppression and to improve their economic position,” they said.

“Migrants are very much the present reality of the Catholic Church in London and one of several sources of hope for the Catholic Church of the future too,” the bishops added. “In our view they are also a source of hope for the future of the nation.”