

## **Four Weeks at St. Mary`s, Blackheath**

**By Mansel Usher: Seminarian in Valladolid, Spain.**

I was delighted to be told that my four week Pastoral Placement would be with Monsignor Nicholas Rothon, whom I had met at the College in Valladolid during his visit with members of the parish in October last year. Since arriving in Blackheath, it has been so nice to meet again some of those who stayed at the College. Since my arrival I have been looked after extremely well and made to feel very welcome by so many people of the parish.

During my first two weeks I worked at the Deptford Churches Centre and I completed my placement with the Chaplaincy at Christ the King, Sixth Form College. Having had no previous experience of working in either of these environments I found the prospects exciting but also a little daunting. Through prayer, however, by the time I was due to start I was much more settled and prepared for whatever lay ahead.

The DCC is a drop-in centre for adults over 16 years old and who are vulnerable through homelessness, loneliness, mental ill-health, social exclusion and severe poverty. The centre provides a variety of services and facilities and is often a first point of help and access to services beyond its own capacity that can provide life changing opportunities for many of its members. Among the services and facilities available at the DCC are the provision of hot food and drinks, hot showers, haircuts, laundry washing and drying. Clothing is also available. Members can also receive medical advice and dental care from a visiting nurse and dental practitioner. A benefits advisor provides information on housing and employment benefits. There is also help with hearing voices, smoking cessation and classes in Italian, gardening, music and art. On different days of the week members can take part in various activities such as prize bingo, general knowledge quizzes and karaoke. I had great fun calling the bingo and running the quiz in which some members scored incredibly well. Far better than I could manage! I am not yet brave enough to have a go at the karaoke.

*Members who use the centre must sign in; this is important not only because of fire regulations but also it records the number of people using the centre on a daily basis. When new members arrive some personal details are taken, such as the person`s name, age, ethnic origin, address (many sleeping rough) and confidential information concerning any problem issues such as drug or alcohol dependency, health problems, housing and benefit problems etc. A lot of time is spent listening to different members who like to talk about their past and also their views on current situations in the world! The dining area has to be kept clean throughout the day, and it is important that there are no problems with the showers and toilets. Incoming mail for members has to be recorded and distributed when required.*

*There is always a variety of things happening and a relatively quiet period during the day could instantly change into a frenzied period of activity, so it was important to be able to keep calm and alert and show plenty of initiative.* Many of the members using the DCC have to cope with desperately hard lives and yet they are still able keep going. The helpful and friendly attitudes of the staff and volunteers at the DCC play a vital role in these peoples' lives and without their support a vital source of humanity will be lost to them. Christ's teaching of loving our neighbour is greatly in evidence at the DCC and I am extremely privileged to have had the opportunity to be part of a team that gives so much. Working with everyone at the DCC was a great deal of fun and the very warm appreciation of my time spent there will remain very dear to me.

My second two weeks were spent at Christ the King, Sixth Form College. This was another very interesting and rewarding experience; one in which I had a real insight into how a college chaplaincy operates. It was interesting to note how much of a presence a college chaplain needs to be within the college and how important it is that students are aware of this. With such a range of different faiths within the college, the chaplaincy is quite a challenging role. I am very grateful to the chaplaincy team for their hospitality and also members of the RE teaching staff and pupils who allowed me to sit in on some of their classes. I was very lucky to have been given the opportunity to finish my placement with a day at St. Matthews Academy. Again, many thanks to all who made this hugely enjoyable experience possible.

Mgr. Nicholas, very thoughtfully, provided me with a number of extracurricular activities, all of which were very interesting and enlightening and which give a very broad insight into what happens in the life of a busy parish and its priest. It was lovely to have been able to sit in on the liturgy committee and first communion meetings which gave the opportunity to meet and get to know some members of the parish who I had not previously met. I was greatly impressed by the children of the confirmation group who showed such an appreciation of what they were doing and raised some very interesting questions! It has not been all work, however, and I am very thankful for all the hospitality over the last four weeks!

To everyone I have met and who have helped to make my stay in Blackheath such an enjoyable one I offer you all my prayers and thanks. Special thanks to Mgr. Nicholas for his generous hospitality and to the Sisters of the Convent of the Sacred Heart for their help and support. May God bless you all and I hope we will meet again, some day.