

You're Welcome and Amen

Catholic Charities' recent observance of International Refugee Day was held at St. James Parish in Rockford. No stranger to the refugee communities, St. James offered its long tradition of extending the welcome mat to the survivors of war and oppression. The interactions, the conversations, the aroma of ethnic foods made obvious that communication was not going to be a problem within the Father David Beauvais Hall at the parish.

What we did not have at our event was a failure to communicate.

It didn't matter that English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, French, Russian, Polish, Burmese and Swahili were among the languages being spoken simultaneously at various parts of the packed hall.

Rather than a Tower of Babel throwing confusion and discord among the crowd, this cacophony of languages was more reminiscent of Pentecost. Everyone understood the common language of kindness.

What mattered were the laughs, smiles, music and foods being shared across national, ethnic and religious traditions, all on the campus of a Catholic Church that displays the flag of the United States in its sanctuary.

As comedian Yakof Smirnoff might say, "What a country!"

For nearly 30 years, our Catholic Charities has operated under the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the United Nations and the State Department to resettle individuals and families from more than the countries that persecuted religious, political and social rivals. If there's been a war, we've probably helped re-settle refugees from the belligerent countries. Now that they

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call America home, they go to school, raise families, start businesses, buy homes and become citizens.

Recent arrivals joined with graying veterans of the refugee pipeline, who in turn joined with American-

born friends and families. English-as-a-second-language teachers mixed with their students and families. Representatives of employers mingled with their employees, law enforcement officers with office holders. Landlords joined with their tenants; Baptists and Evangelicals mixed with Catholics, Muslims, Baha'i and Buddhists.

Race, gender, national origin and cultural divisions were ignored in the interest of celebration and respect. There was a beautiful noise from the sounds of children playing, laughing and crying, and their parents attending to them or greeting their neighbors.

Unfortunately, there was also a mild sense of foreboding born of recent memories and uncertain futures. The participants, whether native born or refugees, each remembered the people who were left behind. They remembered those who died in oppressive regimes, or during desperate

escapes through deserts or urban jungles, from civil wars and ethnic cleansing to register with the United Nations. We need the energy and conversation from that assembly to be seen and appreciated by those who remain vaguely fearful of refugees or apprehensive of those who appear or sound "different."

Those who were or remain uncomfortable and suspicious would be well advised to accept the two most commonly voiced statements from the gathering's guests: "Thank you," and "God Bless America." Catholic Charities responses were: "You're welcome," and "Amen."

'What we've got
here, is failure
to communicate.'

— Strother Martin, in "Cool Hand
Luke"

Read "Charitably Speaking" in *The Observer* on the last week of every month.