

SM Solidarity Commission.
Visit to Schiphol and Uithoorn (NL), 29-30 January 2019.

On behalf of the SM province Solidarity Commission, Catherine JONES (NDF London) and Jean-Claude BOIDIN (Brussels) visited Fr Wim VAN BROEKHOVEN in Schiphol and Uithoorn (NL) on 29-30 January 2019.

Our visit to Fr Wim focussed on the Schiphol Judicial Detention Centre, a very modern complex in the vicinity of the international airport, which hosts and caters separately for two kinds of residents: judicial convicts serving short sentences (2 months maximum) on the one hand, and asylum seekers arrested on their arrival at Schiphol airport, awaiting a first decision on whether they will be sent back or redirected to longer term screening centres. Both groups are held in Schiphol for short periods of time (between 10 days and 2 months) and the turnover is high. With the population of residents changing every day, establishing personal relations and building trust is not an easy task.



Fr Wim's engagement in Schiphol builds on a very long experience of caring for Spanish-speaking detainees and refugees in different detention centers in the NL. Since 1974, when he was appointed pastor for a Spanish-speaking parish in Amsterdam, through to 1990, when he became lead pastor for Schiphol international airport, until his retirement in 2006. Since then, he has been working for 12 years at the chaplaincy of the Schiphol detention center, where we met him. Fr Wim visits also regularly the two prisons of Zuyder Bos and Amerswiel in the Amsterdam region.

At the Schiphol detention centre, the building, its equipment and the services offered to the inmates are impressive and clearly ahead of all European standards: from accommodation to leisure and gym space, through medical, psychological or legal assistance, pensioners seem to enjoy an extremely secure and clean environment. As a result of a recent reduction in the number of pensioners, staffing levels also look impressive, with probably more staff of all kinds than detainees. After the insecurity and violence they have often met on their way to here, detainees and refugees openly recognize that their living conditions in Schiphol are excellent.



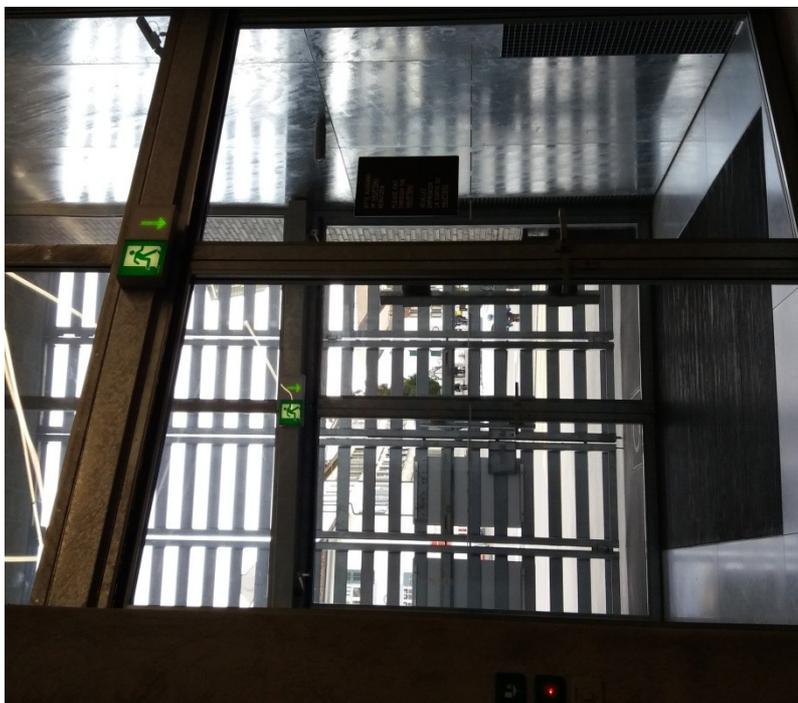
In contrast with this modern physical environment, the moral condition of detainees/asylum seekers remains fragile. Most are awaiting a first legal decision or the outcome of an appeal within days, which can radically change their immediate future. Separated from their families with whom it is difficult and costly to maintain phone contacts, many suffer from isolation and uncertainty. In that situation, being able to share one's life-story and express one's anxieties becomes essential. As each one wants to be heard, psychological support and spiritual care are in high demand. In the asylum seekers block, we also noted a high degree of solidarity between inmates, which helps maintain a positive mood.

"Ramon" was arrested in Schiphol on 23 January with drugs in his luggage. He claims to be innocent, and the victim of drug traffickers. A dual Spanish/Venezuelan national, he fears a tough sentence that would keep him for many months in a Dutch jail, away from his family. He asks Fr Wim to help with legal advice and to seek assistance from the Venezuela embassy in The Hague.

"Michel", from Cameroon, has fled political repression in his country and landed accidentally in Amsterdam instead of Paris, where he has close family and friends, because of a flight connection missed in Nairobi. He has appealed after his first asylum request was rejected. He is grateful for the material conditions offered in dutch detention centres, but complains that isolation from family and the linguistic barrier prevent him from presenting his case properly.

Spiritual care is part and parcel of Schiphol Centre, with a shared chaplaincy office and specific rooms for meeting and celebrations. Catholic chaplains share the main office with a protestant pastor, two imams and a humanist pastor (a jewish rabbi and orthodox priest can also be called in). Separate masses are given every Sunday for detainees and asylum seekers. Over the years, a close collaboration and joint service have been established in Schiphol between the different chaplains under the guidance of the denominations to which each separately belongs. In the case of Fr Wim, that is the bishop of Haarlem. The joint cooperation of the participating denominations added an element of "inter-faith solidarity". In NL, the protestant churches are very actively engaged in welcoming refugees and mobilize many volunteers; the Catholic church is also active and it has a special appeal to refugees coming from Latin America.

The nature of care: in the words of Fr Wim, who deliberately focusses his attention on those detainees most -in-need, "pastoral care alone is not meaningful". It must be accompanied by legal advice and social counselling, and should always start with a listening attitude, trying to find out what the inmate wants. Spiritual care cannot therefore be disentangled from human attention and solidarity. When exchanging with refugees, Fr Wim will often direct them towards their case manager, so as to obtain legal assistance; should this prove insufficient or ineffective, he will intervene to try and change the lawyer. He will often offer his help to contact the family, or obtain telephone cards.



After many years of work in Schiphol, Fr Wim, who has formally retired from the chaplaincy, has expressed a wish to withdraw from the detention centre and to devote more attention to open refugee centres in the Amsterdam area. However, given his knowledge and experience of the Schiphol complex and his link to Spanish-speakers, he has been asked to remain available on a stand-by basis.

While not living within a community, Fr Wim maintains close personal links with the marist community of Enschede, quite distant from Uithoorn/Amsterdam. His successive assignments to Schiphol airport and to the detention centre were made “ad personam”, but they were also recognized as a marist engagement by the province. Solidarity with refugees has now become a concern for many communities in the Netherlands and beyond. Fr Wim’s work and his experience connect quite closely to the engagement of other marist communities such as NDF-London or Marconia in southern Italy.

Our visit to Fr Wim acted as an eye-opener on the condition of people in a detention centre, and their need for moral support and spiritual care. While unable in itself to change the course of government policies or that of legal proceedings, human solidarity remains essential to uphold the dignity of detainees and asylum seekers, and safeguard their confidence in a better future. As Fr Wim said, refugees want “their stories to be heard, and their word to be trusted”.

Our warm thanks go to Fr Wim for his warm and friendly hospitality in Schiphol and Uithoorn, his skilled guidance through the detention centre and his acceptance of our visit as simple “newcomers”. We are most grateful for the depth and the frankness of the exchanges we had with him and with some of the refugees and detainees at the Schiphol centre.

Jean-Claude Boidin & Catherine Jones

2 Feb 2019