

Calais: Between Two Shores, Lives in Limbo

The first ten days of August took me to Calais for a period of service among migrants. I feel as though I have come back from another world — a world that is forgotten, misunderstood or despised, a world of drama, dreams and fraternity.



I divided my time between Care4Calais, a British NGO that distributes clothing, hot drinks and essential supplies, and the Secours Catholique day centre, where people can take a shower, wash their clothes, have a cup of tea or coffee, charge their phones, be listened to, and simply regain a little dignity. Beyond these simple but precious gestures, especially when one is living outside in a situation of waiting and uncertainty, great importance is given to building relationships with people who have been forced into exile.

During these ten days, I met a few women from Somalia and Eritrea with their children and, above all, several hundred young Sudanese men fleeing the civil war that has been devastating their country since April 2023. A war fuelled and prolonged by external support and by the geopolitical and economic interests of several regional and international powers. France itself is not outside these dynamics: it continues, in particular, to maintain military relations and sell arms to certain states involved in the region. Many of these young men are barely more than teenagers; some are unaccompanied minors. They have travelled thousands of kilometres and endured experiences whose violence we can hardly begin to imagine.



Calais has become a dead end for migrants (see the *La Croix* article of 31 July 2026). The United Kingdom is seeking to limit arrivals, while France offers them no real possibility of settling there permanently. Between the two shores, these young people are simply looking for a future. Some want to join family members, friends or networks already established in Britain.

The contrast between the beauty of the place and the harshness of what is happening there is striking. The long sandy beaches, the dunes and the ever-changing light of the Côte d'Opale create a landscape of exceptional beauty. On a clear day, the English cliffs seem almost within reach. Only a few dozen kilometres separate the two shores... and yet, for so many women, men and children, this short distance

becomes an almost insurmountable obstacle, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

Four people died at sea shortly before I arrived. During my stay, an inflatable boat caught fire offshore but, fortunately, all 170 people on board were rescued. I myself witnessed an attempt to cross the Channel that ended in failure on Sangatte beach. Seeing the CRS officers run towards the boat, then watching the departure being stopped, and sensing, even from a distance, the mixture of fear, tension, disappointment and resignation that takes hold of everyone, is an experience that is difficult to put into words. Behind the images that occasionally reach our screens, there are faces, eyes, stories and dreams that refuse to die.





Under the policy known as “zero point of fixation”, strengthened since the dismantling of the “Jungle” camp in 2016, makeshift camps on the outskirts of the city are regularly dismantled by the police and personal belongings confiscated. People are therefore forced to move constantly, to lose the few possessions they have and to start again somewhere else, living in permanent insecurity while waiting for an opportunity to cross the Channel. Sometimes they wait for days, weeks or months, never knowing when or how they might cross. They then become dependent on clandestine networks and often pay very high prices for an extremely dangerous crossing whose outcome remains uncertain. In this context, everything becomes temporary: sleeping, eating, washing, keeping one’s belongings safe, making a phone call, meeting someone, or simply knowing where one will be the following day.



This violence is compounded by that of certain French and British far-right groups who conduct campaigns of intimidation against migrants and against the organisations that support them. These organisations are accused of “playing into the hands of migrants”, while people in exile are too often portrayed as a gang of thugs, criminals or profiteers.

It is difficult not to be struck by the gap between such rhetoric and the reality encountered on the ground: young men, often barely out of adolescence, who have fled a war, crossed several countries and risked their lives simply in the hope of reaching a place where they can begin to imagine a future.



The situation in Calais is not simply a matter of individual hardship. It is connected to wars, European migration policies, international power struggles and political choices. There is something almost overwhelming about encountering, in Calais, the human consequences of conflicts in which we are, directly or indirectly, involved. We sometimes look at migration as a problem that reaches our borders. And it is easy to understand the weariness of the people of Calais, who have been confronted with this situation for almost thirty years. The police presence is constant and has become part of everyday life for those who live there, adding to the uncertainty and tension of each day.

While these people are too often treated as a threat or as unwanted human beings, around ten organisations continue to work in Calais. Through modest gestures, they restore some of the dignity that exile, waiting and rejection so often erode.

The film *Le Passage*, directed by Brandt Andersen and released in French cinemas in July 2026, opens with words attributed to William Shakespeare: “Imagine you see these wretched strangers, their babies at their backs and their scanty luggage [...] such is the miserable condition of strangers, and such is your inhumanity.”

It is this inhumanity that many people of goodwill cannot accept. I was struck by the small number of paid staff and the large number of volunteers who take turns throughout the year.

People of all ages and convictions, from several different countries, work side by side with simplicity and great kindness. Their beliefs are diverse and their ages vary greatly, but they are united by one fundamental conviction: no one should be deprived of their dignity. Most of them have no religious faith, and yet they live the Gospel, without knowing it, in an admirable way: the Gospel that takes flesh whenever we choose closeness rather than fear, fraternity rather than indifference, and hope rather than discouragement.



Each volunteer has chosen not to remain a mere observer of a reality that is so often portrayed in the media. Each contributes whatever they can: a smile, a listening ear, a skill, a presence. Powerless to resolve the tragedies of exile, they are nevertheless determined not to allow people to be reduced to anonymity or indifference, to numbers or to a threat. It is not about doing great things, but about being present, attentive and available. And through these simple gestures of fraternity, each person also discovers something about the meaning of their own life: a life that finds its deepest joy when it opens itself to others and places itself at the service of something greater than itself.

The recent words of the popes accompanied what I experienced on the ground. Pope Francis never ceased to invite the Church to “welcome, protect, promote and integrate” migrants, reminding us that they are not primarily a problem to be solved, but brothers and sisters to be loved. More recently, Pope Leo XIV has continued this call, inviting the Church to recognise Christ in those who live on the peripheries and to build a culture of encounter rather than indifference.



I returned from Calais deeply moved. What touched me was not only the precariousness of the migrants’ lives, but their extraordinary resilience. Behind every face there was a story, a family left behind, dreams, wounds and a stubborn hope. I feel privileged to have been a witness to this. This experience of service also reminded me that the peripheries are not only places of suffering; they are places where God goes before us. In the eyes of a migrant welcomed with

respect, in the quiet generosity of the volunteers, in the simplest gestures of solidarity, I caught a glimpse of something of the Kingdom quietly growing among us.

Facing this sea that separates and connects at the same time, facing England so close and yet so inaccessible to so many, my life is now somehow connected to the many faces I encountered. They remind me that hope is the strength that continues to believe in fraternity, even when everything seems to invite us to discouragement. I loved being able to pray in the oratory of the Sisters of the Helpers of the Souls in Purgatory, who welcomed me for the week. Before this portrait of Jesus painted by Arcabas, I found the strength to place before the Father, sometimes through tears, the faces, smiles, stories, tragedies and daily gestures of solidarity, as we wait for the day when the words of Psalm 84 will find their full fulfilment: “Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will embrace.”



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