

*What is this precious love and laughter  
Budding in our hearts?*

*It is the glorious sound  
Of a soul waking up*  
[Hafiz]

Some things in life cannot be accounted for by mere human reasoning. We can get caught up in events that are not of our choosing and which come upon us unexpectedly. If we truly believe that nothing happens by chance, all one can do is say yes when the invitation comes. And it is in such fashion that I have been recently blessed.

Out of the blue I received an invitation from Br. Liam O'Meara to visit Belarus and attend the opening of the Mary Rice Home in Cherven. I had vaguely heard of Cherven because of the work being done by Liam and the Burren Chernobyl Trust, but had no further knowledge of it. I looked at my calendar and discovered that I did have some time when no one would miss me. So I told him that I would be glad to go. God uses simple decisions like this to stretch one's horizons and reveal a little more how God views the world.

With the help of Greg Wall in Rome I managed to get a visa for Belarus and left on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July. Liam picked me up at the airport and then began four very full days where he generously took me around and showed me what he was doing. I felt so humble and so proud all at the same time. Humble that I should be so blessed. Proud that a Christian Brother would reveal to me what 'daring to be disciple' should look like.

It is not my intention to describe all that the Burren Chernobyl Trust is doing, nor to repeat how impressed I was with the generosity and goodness of lay women and men who give of their time and resources to be with these children. I would request you to visit the website [www.burrenchernobyl.ie](http://www.burrenchernobyl.ie) and see for yourselves.



Belarus is a country that is emerging out of the shadow of the former Soviet Union. They still speak Russian and use the Rouble. But when things fell apart with the fall of the Iron Curtain, many of the institutions also struggled. In the forefront of these are the State run welfare institutions. The orphanages and Asylums barely manage to stay afloat and are under-funded and understaffed.

Things were really grim when Liam O'Meara first visited Belarus and it was a chance phone call from a woman, Maria Mitskevich, that saw him visit the orphanage in Cherven and discover the plight of these children.

My visit to Cherven and the children was memorable. Both the staff and the children were so happy to see Liam. It was obvious that he felt so at home with them and they with him. I saw again what relationship was all about and how being brother is a call in itself. When this happens with vulnerable people and those who have been marginalized by society, it takes on a whole new meaning. To 'dare' in such a situation is simply to follow one's heart.

Liam also told me that when he began he had no idea where all this would lead. All he was doing was responding to a situation that he could not walk away from. It was the simple everyday things that he and the Trust tried to provide: creams, shampoos, soaps, detergents, pampers, clothes, slippers, shoes, socks, warm clothes, blankets. Then they moved to more expensive items such as laundry and kitchen equipment, fridges, water heaters, boilers. At the same time volunteers came and repaired the thirteen units of the old building, painting, providing piping for heating and replacing linoleum. What I saw was a whole new building that had been refurbished and was now spotless.



They did the same with the orphanage in Goradishche. I was able to see the difference in some instances with what was and what had been. The new building in Goradishche stands in strong contrast with the old grey stone institutional building that preceded it.



The interior was worthy of the finest institutions anywhere in the world.



But always what made it all worthwhile was to see children being opened to life in a way they would not have been able to live without the intervention of the generous people who come from Ireland to share love and concern. And the people who volunteer also realize that it is the children who give them hope and meaning. Without them we would not have been gathered in that country. The children are the Eucharist, the sign of unity

that brings people from different walks of life to sit at the one table. They are the broken bodies that bring life and hope.

The main reason for my coming to Belarus was to attend the opening of the Mary Rice Home in Cherven. It is a day care centre for children with disabilities. Seeing these children sing for us with such joy and gusto I could see nothing “wrong” with them. Somewhere I felt that God sees them like that. They were beautiful, vibrant, loving. I was the disabled one: fearful, closed, cold.



It was a privilege to be here and to realize that the Founder’s influence extended to a country where the Brothers are not officially present. Here is made alive his love for his daughter. The person who probably “opened his heart to Christ, present and appealing in the poor” has done the same thing here. The children show us a face of God we would not normally see.

Hafiz again asks the question:

What happens when your soul  
Begins to awaken  
Your eyes  
And your heart  
And the cells of your body  
To the great Journey of Love?

The people of the Burren Chernobyl Trust have experienced this and have responded the only way that love responds: in reaching out.

Will I?

Will we?

Philip Pinto  
Rome  
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