

Jill Boggan – #Liverpool4Ukraine – April 2022

Everyone I know has been deeply moved by the suffering of the people in Ukraine because of months of war waged by Russia. I work for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Liverpool and the Archbishop of Liverpool launched an archdiocesan appeal to support the people of Ukraine, '#Liverpool4Ukraine'. The appeal seeks support from across the archdiocese for prayers and physical and financial donations.

The Archdiocese of Liverpool has strong links with the Ukraine diocese of Sambir-Drohobych in the Lviv region of western Ukraine. Archdiocesan priest Fr. Francis Marsden taught bishop Hryhoriy (Gregory) Komar while he was studying for the priesthood. Through these links we've been able to establish the essential items required by the people of Ukraine.

Some of our contractors based in Wigan came forward and volunteered to drive vans with the physical donations to Ukraine. The first journey at the end of March included two vans travelling through six countries to reach the Polish-Ukraine border and handover the goods to Bishop Gregory and seminarians from the Holy Spirit seminary, Lviv.

As I watched the progress of the first drivers and heard about the impact of their journey on Bishop Gregory and the student priests when handing over donations, I knew this was something I wanted to do if the opportunity arose. I volunteered alongside three of my colleagues and my colleague Nicky and myself soon became known as the 'Girl power' team.

I felt so honoured to be taking essential goods that people right across the archdiocese have donated to handover to Bishop Gregory. I knew that I could put to one side any small anxieties I had, and the good wishes and prayers before and during the trip helped us enormously.

Our journey began at 6.30am on Sunday 24th April, after a blessing and short service by Fr. Sean Riley. We reached Folkestone to catch the Eurotunnel and arrived in France at 2.30pm. Both vans were selected for random checks at customs in France, so this delayed us by a couple of hours. After travelling through Belgium, we reached Eindhoven, Netherlands for a rest overnight. We set off at 6am on Monday 25th April to drive through Germany and arrived in Krakow, Poland in the evening for our next overnight rest.

Another early start on Tuesday 26th saw us travel through Poland to the border, the final 30 miles being mainly single-track road, over what Nicky and myself call 'the rickety bridge' – this had been described to us by the other drivers as a dangerous wooden structure with missing planks and like something out of the 'Bridge on the River Kwai'.

This last section of the drive was the most challenging, the laden vans laboured more to drive uphill, with significant parts of the road having a sheer drop on one side. On the way back down this road we had to manoeuvre the van, with directions from emergency services traffic marshals past a head on collision on a hairpin bend. I drove an inch at a time whilst Nicky closed her eyes and we both held our breath until we were safely past.

Approaching the Poland-Ukraine border – Przejscie graniczne Kroszowice – Smolnica we optimistically gathered our documents, passports, customs declarations, packing lists and vehicle documents. We were in for a wait, partly due to the thorough checks of vehicles and individuals at the border, including opening the bonnet for a search around the engine, and perhaps partly due to stretched staff – it was after all Orthodox Easter observing the Julian Calendar rather than our Gregorian calendar.

As the hours ticked by (three-and-a-half) to us getting through border control and the barrier lifting, we had speculated how long we might have to wait and 'what if we have to wait a really long time and Bishop Gregory and the seminarians have to return to the seminary due to the curfew? It wasn't necessary, but we had resolved our Plan B, we would stay with the vans beyond the border until the curfew lifted and drive the goods to the seminary. Thankfully, this wasn't necessary, and when we drove 100 yards into Ukraine we were met by Bishop Gregory and the student priests, and the unloading and transfer of goods took place.

I had a short-list of questions for Bishop Gregory from our communications colleagues and was immediately aware that he is the most serene and peaceful person I have ever met. Bishop Gregory answered our questions quietly and it was particularly moving when he told us that they knew they were not alone when receiving our prayers and donations.

We said prayers together on the Ukrainian side of the border before leaving for our journey back and the same rigorous checks on us and the vehicles going from Ukraine through to Poland. We reached Katowice in Poland on Tuesday night for an overnight stop and takeaway pizza. We left at our, now usual time, of 6am on Wednesday for our drive to Cologne, our final overnight stop. This was the only time during the trip we managed to have a couple of hours to look around where we were staying. Cologne Cathedral, the largest Gothic church in northern Europe is truly spectacular with its twin towers, with the Shrine of The Three Kings housing the relics of Balthasar, Melchior, and Casper. I plan to return for a longer visit in the future.

After a later than usual start to the day, we set off at 8am for our journey through the Netherlands, Belgium and to Calais for the Eurotunnel. No customs check this time, but it was fascinating watching border control with detector dogs searching the HGVs. We couldn't help feeling for the people who in desperation, and risking their lives, attempt to cling onto the axles of lorries, or their wheel arches, to get to the UK.

We were using the Eurotunnel Freight Service and all drivers have to leave their vehicles during the journey and sit in the Drivers' Car. We couldn't help noticing that apart from one lady HGV driver, we were the only women on both Freight Service journeys. We overheard a discussion amongst the drivers about how the facilities in Europe are far better than the UK. The UK Government has recently announced £20m funding to improve facilities for these key workers. Hopefully, this will help to attract younger people and more women to the industry, and I hope standards improve for the well-being of drivers.

After a drive through the UK, and dropping Nicky off at her home, I parked up the now empty van at the office car park at around 11pm on Thursday night. I could finally relax, mission accomplished. My husband Phil had brought our dog, Oonagh, with him to welcome me back and for the final journey home.

Bishop Gregory asked me if I would return to visit Ukraine properly when peace is restored, and I promised that this was a journey I would be praying I could make very soon. It is a promise I intend to keep, and I hope with all my heart that peace returns to Ukraine soon.