

REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF THE PASTORAL CARE OF GYPSIES AND ITINERANT PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Rev. Fr. Cherian THALAKULAM
National Counselor for Gypsies
USA

Gypsies in America may number as many as one million. They self-identify as "Rom" (singular) or "Roma" (plural), but they are known as Tzigane in Russia, Gitane, Gitano in French and Spanish, and may call themselves Romanichal, Kale, Sinti, Manush. One thing is certain; they are not from Egypt, as the terms Gypsy and Gitane imply. They are neither a lost tribe of Egyptians nor did they remove nails from Christ's cross or manufactured them. They came to Europe from the North Western part of India during the early part of the thirteenth century.

Roma came to US from Europe as early as 1498, when four of them travelled along with Columbus on his third voyage to the New World. Portugal expelled Roma to its American colony, as did the Spanish, French and Dutch. By 1850's English Roma, known as Romnichels, had begun to immigrate to the US. Roma came from Serbia and Russia to the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During this same period, Bosnian Roma, called Ludars, came to this country, followed by Slovak Roma.

Roma in the US are generally Protestants, and some joined with Fundamentalist or Pentecostal congregations. Some Roma maintain the religious tradition of their home country, Bosnian Roma, Ludars, tend to remain Orthodox, while only a few Roma remain Catholic.

As the Catholic Gypsies mostly got assimilated to the American Society the Church in US has not served them as separate communities as it deals with the other Itinerant groups. Some of them got married to Irish travelers and thus it is able to cater their spiritual needs along with the Irish travelers.

IRISH TRAVELERS

Irish Travelers also called Tinkers are a traditionally itinerant people of ethnic Irish origin, who maintain a set of traditions. Although predominantly English speaking, some also use Shelta and other similar cants. They live mostly in Ireland as well as having large numbers in the

United Kingdom and in the United States. Around 10,000 people in the United States are descendants of Travelers who had left Ireland mostly during the period between 1845 and 1860 during the Great Potato Famine. About 2,500 of them live in Murphy Village, a community outside North Augusta, in the state of South Carolina.

Irish Travelers in Ireland

The 2006 census in the Republic of Ireland reported the number of Irish Travelers as 22,369. A further 1,700 to 2,000 were estimated to live in Northern Ireland.

From the 2006 Irish census it was determined that 20,975 dwell in urban areas and 1,460 were living in rural areas. With an overall population of just 0.5% some areas were found to have a higher proportion, with Tuam, Galway Travelers constituting 7.71% of the population. There were found to be 9,301 Travelers in the 0–14 age range, comprising 41.5% of the Traveler population, and a further 3,406 of them were in the 15–24 age range, comprising 15.2%. Children of age range 0–17 comprised 48.7% of the Traveler population.

Great Britain

In 2011, for the first time, the census category “Irish Traveler” was introduced as part of the broader Gypsy/Traveler section. The self-reported figure for collective Gypsy/Traveler and Irish Traveler populations were 63,193. But recent estimates of Travelers living in Great Britain range between 15,000 as part of a total estimation of 300,000 Gypsy/Roma and other Traveler groups in the UK.

The London Boroughs of Harrow and Brent contain significant Irish Traveler populations. In addition to those on various official sites there are a number who are settled in Local Authority Housing. These are mostly women who wish their children to have a chance at a good education. They and the children may or may not travel in the summer but remain in close contact with the wider Traveler community. There are also significant numbers of Irish Travelers in the Home Counties.

THE IRISH TRAVELERS IN THE UNITED STATES

There are no official or legitimate population figures regarding Travelers in the United States. In fact, Irish Travelers are not recognized as a unique ethnic group by the US Census. While some sources estimate their population in the US to be 10,000, others suggest their population is 40,000. According to research by Mary E. Andereck, “the Georgia Travelers’ community is made up of about eight hundred families,

the Mississippi Travelers, about three hundred families, and the Texas Travelers, under fifty families."

Travelers in the US are said to speak English and Cant. The Cant spoken in the US differs from the Cant spoken in Ireland. They chiefly do three types of works, namely asphaltting the drive ways, spray painting and selling equipment, linoleums and tools.

Short History of Irish Travelers

Irish travelers are not Gypsies and yet they are often called so by the non-Gypsies. They are not of Asian Indian origin as the Gypsies. They are Celts, fair skinned often blond and blue eyed. The history of the Irish travelers goes back much farther than the Gypsies.

It is believed that the travelers originally were land owners or laborers. But after the military campaign of Oliver Cromwell over Ireland in 1649 – 1650, they were made homeless and landless. Since their lands and holdings were seized by Cromwell, they were forced to leave their farming and ranching ways of life. So the clans got banded together and formed itinerant groups of families and travelled across Ireland. They mended pots, pans and farm equipment. This earned them the name Tinkers in Ireland. Due to the great misery and financial distress created by the Potato Famine in Ireland (1845-1852) some of them seriously thought of migrating to the US. The first Irish Traveler who came to the United States is said to be one Tom Carroll. He came to New York after being processed through Ellis Island. At that time there was a large community of Irish settlers living in Boston. So Tom quickly went and settled down there. After arriving there, he quickly found work in a tannery because he could speak English as against many European immigrants who could not.

After working for several months, he was able to get his brother Patrick to US. Patrick again sent for his other brothers Jimmy and John. Very soon many of their kith and kin migrated to the US. Once established, just before the Civil War (1861-1865) the travelers slowly migrated to the South, living in Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. There, they began to travel throughout the South buying mules and horses to trade and sell them among the farming communities. As the town of North Augusta began to grow, many Catholics relocated there from the North East. Due to this large influx of Catholics to this area, the Catholic parish of Our Lady of Peace was established in North Augusta in 1948. Rev. Fr. Murphy an Irish immigrant himself was made its Pastor. Fr. Murphy greatly helped the travelers in their spiritual needs. He encouraged the travelers to buy a land few miles north of the town. As a result of this, the community of Murphy village was born, bearing

the name of this kind and enthusiastic priest who ministered them for over 20 years.

After a few years, the parish of St. Edward the Confessor began. This parish is established exclusively for Irish Travelers. Today St. Edward parish has grown rapidly to over 560 families. (As I understand) this is the only parish in the world ministering only for the needs of the Irish travelers.

Irish travelers are very much devoted Catholics. They respect and love their priest. Even before the establishment of this parish they used to travel a long way to find a Catholic Church to participate in the Mass and receive the Sacraments.

Pastoral Situations

The following are some of the pastoral services imparted to the Irish travelers:

1. Daily Mass is offered and many of them participate even on week day masses.
2. Celebrate various feasts mentioned in the Liturgical Calendar very solemnly. One or two families take care of the celebrations. Novenas and Triduums are recited as a spiritual preparation for the feast.
3. The Pastor visits their homes frequently and pray over and with them.
4. Blessing of the homes and the consecration and enthronement to the Sacred Heart of Jesus are done annually.
5. Annual Parish mission preaching and several healing masses and services are conducted every year.
6. Regular confessions are heard before and after every Mass and reconciliation services for the whole parish community are organized many times a year especially during Parish Retreat, Lenten and Christmas seasons.
7. Various Church organizations as, Legion of Mary, Society of Mary Immaculate, Youth Group, Young Girls Organization, Teen League, Young Men Association, Stewardship Groups are working faithfully in the parish.
8. Eucharistic Adoration except on Sundays and daily Rosary in the community are held. The people participate in them devotionally and faithfully.
9. As the people love the common gatherings, they have various programs as, parish picnics, pilgrimages, golf games, walk-a-

thon, carnivals, and various trips to places of spiritual, social and cultural interest.

10. Every year the Pastor goes and visits the parish families who have gone for vacation from June to August. He stays with them and celebrate Mass, hear confessions, and give them blessings individually and in groups.
11. The people use to come to their priest regularly for advise, counseling and blessings.
12. The Pastor has frequent visits to the poor, sick and home-bound.
13. The parish arranges GED course for the youth who like to go for further studies.
14. The priest tries to be always approachable and available to the people so that they can come and speak with him in their needs.

Irish traveler culture and customs have changed and evolved greatly to fit in to the twenty-first century America. Still many of the old customs exist as arranged marriages and dowry systems. My greatest hope for the future lies in education. In years past girls were given very little formal education. Most of the young men only went to the eighth grade to receive the basic education. After the eighth grade they were taken out of the school to learn the ways of the road.

Thanks to the progress made towards the higher education among the Irish Travelers in the Murphy Village, now, they have in their community a doctor, a lawyer, a few nurses and many young men pursuing high employment in outside business and corporations. Now they have built beautiful and spacious homes. This shows that the itinerant way of life they had in the past is slowly diminishing. As time progresses I hope this will be the norm of this community and I pray for the same.

COMPARISON BETWEEN IRISH TRAVELERS AND GYPSIES

Although the Gypsies (Roma) have been in the United State far longer than the Irish Travelers, both share many common customs and rituals together.

According to some reliable sources, Roma in the United States numbers as many as one million people while Irish Travelers are far less in number.

Both cultures shared a common history of being the victims of hatred and persecution. The Roma had it from the time of their exodus from India and Irish travelers from Oliver Cromwell's conquest of Ireland.

Both share common beliefs regarding marriage. Marriages are arranged between the respected families where dowries are exchanged. Marriages between outsiders are strongly discouraged. This maintains their ethnic purity. Boundaries between men and women are regulated in each society. Marriages between Irish Travels and Roma take place rarely. Surprisingly these marriages are lasted in spite of their cultural differences.

Both cultures share the extended family structure, supporting each other and providing for the needs of others.

In the past, both spoke among themselves their own languages, Cant for the Irish Travelers and Romani for the Roma.

In terms of the work ethic, both cultures shared similar occupations. English Roma had been basket and furniture makers and metal workers. European and Russian Roma worked as copper, silver and gold smiths as well as animal traders. Irish travelers also did horse and mule trading and metal working.

Certain religious traits are also to be noticed. Most of the Roma in the US today are Protestants and mainly in Fundamentalist or Pentecostal groups. Some Roma maintain the religious traditions of their home countries: Bosnian Roma and Ludars tend to be Orthodox and Slovak Roma Catholic. Irish Travelers have always been devoted Roman Catholics.