



*(East London is a melting-pot of individuals from the four corners of the world. At the center of the Bethnal Green neighborhood is located the Assumptionist parish of Our Lady of the Assumption, which has been at the forefront of an effort to create a welcoming climate for all, no matter one's religion, race, ethnic origin, economic status, or level of education. It has been and continues to be a long-term project.)*

As he arrives at St. Elizabeth Elementary School, Fr. Tom O'Brien sets his umbrella down and begins to shake hands with the parents of some of the students, with teachers, and with members of the staff. Then he's off at a brisk pace to the school's gymnasium. On this gray Thursday afternoon, the Assumptionist pastor of Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Bethnal Green will spend two hours with the school's 300 students..... some blonds, some brunettes, a few redheads; some Caucasian, some African, some Asian. Even a few veils can be seen. They are all waiting for Fr. Tom to celebrate Mass at the end of one hundred days of prayer for peace.

### **Peace: A Major Challenge**

In this East London neighborhood known for welcoming waves of immigrants throughout history, peace is a major challenge. "First there were the Huguenots of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries; then the Poles and the Jews; afterward, the Irish in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and most recently Muslims," explains Fr. Andrew O'Dell, an Assumptionist who is now an associate in the parish but who had been pastor for many years. "Most of these did not stay around long; but today some, like the Bangladeshi, are settling in with the clear intention of being here for the long haul."

## A Multiethnic Federation

“Multiculturalism can be seen everywhere,” Fr. Andrew adds. This reality led to what can only be described as a real civic success story: in 1996, churches in East London together with social service agencies targeting the neediest formed The East London Communities Organization (TELCO). It is a model that has inspired others: any number of London neighborhoods have copied this initiative and even the city of London itself has created an organization called London Citizens based on the TELCO model. What is even more amazing is that the model has spread to other cities in Great Britain and a national group, UK Citizens, has now seen the light of day.



The principal objective: to work hand in hand on specific projects of common interest and, once a goal is obtained, to move on to another one. Fr. Tom explains, “One of the most successful recent projects had to do with the 2012 Olympics and job creation. We worked with the city of London to get the Games, which many areas didn’t want because of all the hassles, here in East London with a promise on the organizers’ part that workers would be hired from the neighborhood and that they would receive a living wage, and not simply a minimum salary.” Once the city agreed, TELCO set out to identify potential employees and train them for their positions. Muslims and Christians work side by side in this effort. As a result, some 1800 residents found work for three to six months and, at the end of this time, received a ‘diploma’ indicating their Olympics experience which, in turn, helped them secure future employment.

“TELCO’s goal is to get people involved at the local level and give them an opportunity to contribute directly to society,” Fr. Tom says. “We say that we live in a democracy but citizens have generally abdicated their responsibility and handed it over to politicians; when the latter make bad decisions, then all the former can do is resort to complaining. TELCO, and now the

larger organization called London Citizens, invite citizens to have their say, but especially to get involved in projects that will improve the society in which they live.”

### **Assumptionist Parish of Our Lady of the Assumption**

Fr. Tom is quick to point out that the Assumptionist parish itself is a multiethnic melting-pot. We have some 300 active families from 23 different countries: Japan, China, India, Vietnam, Malaysia, the West Indies, many African countries, Poland, Ireland, etc. One of the greatest challenges I face is my preaching: trying to keep in mind the vast variety of cultures and the sensitivities of each.”

Our Lady of the Assumption, Bethnal Green, East London

As the Assumptionists throughout Europe prepare to become one province later this year, Fr. Tom hopes that the multiethnic experience of his parish and of East London in general may contribute to its success.

By Sophie Lebrun (this article first appeared in *L'Assomption et Ses Oeuvres*, Winter 2014)