

Good Morning and **thank you to Fr. Arnie** for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today

On behalf of all our friends in Gorodishche and across Belarus – we say **Spaceba Bolshoi** (that's Thank You Very Much in Russian). Thank you for your **support over the last 19 years**, support that has seen volunteers from Shannon, and many other places, visit Belarus to serve in so many capacities; as **builders, decorators, carers, massage therapists, virtual parents (more about that later)**, and many other roles that has brought such joy to the children and young people in Gorodishche orphanage. One such volunteer that we remember especially today is Mike McKee.

But it's not simply about those that have had the opportunity to visit – **Spaceba Bolshoi extends to all those that have helped** in so many ways in the past years. Those that support us financially, those that donate clothes, those that load trucks of humanitarian aid, those that support, pray for, and encourage all the volunteers and efforts of Burren Chernobyl Project

Fate or coincidence, **Shannon Parish is blessed** that Canon Brendan O'Donoghue read a small piece in the Parish newsletter while visiting his (now late) sister in Derbyshire in January 1999. The Canon and Parish Council were thinking about an appropriate project that Shannon might support for the celebration of the new Millennium. As the Canon described it - **A charity that represented "real people that we might come to know"** was what he and the team started to search for on his return from Derbyshire. At that same time, Br. Liam O'Meara (of Burren Chernobyl Project) was looking for support for his new undertaking - **an orphanage for special needs children in the village of Gorodishche, Belarus.** Both men met and so the Parish and Community of Shannon started on a journey that is now 19 years young. Volunteers and supporters, in so many capacities, have ultimately **brought comfort and joy (and more than a few treats!)** to **Gorodishche on behalf of the people of Shannon** and beyond. Everyone is grateful for the fateful day and the meeting and vision of such great men. Long may we celebrate what has become such an important part of our wonderful parish and town.

Gorodishche is a small village with a population of just over 2,000 people, situated in the region of Brest in south west of Belarus. It has a long history, dating back to first records as a settlement in the 13th century. A two-hour trip, by road, from the countries' capital Minsk, the village has a look and feel of a small Irish town from the 50's or 60's.

The village has a local hospital, a park, a school, a library, two churches, and, importantly, a few small shops (where funds raised here are gladly spent to ensure a **boost to the local economy** when the Irish are in town).

But most importantly, from our perspective, is has an **Orphanage that caters for up to 220 children and young adults with special needs**. The new Orphanage was built in the last 20 years, and is run by the Belarusian state. It is a bright and relatively modern facility that changes from being perfectly functional to becoming a home full of hugs, laughter, and music when the Irish are in town. On a recent trip a member of staff at the Orphanage declared - **“we give them all that they need in the way of shelter, food, and medical aid but you – The Irish – you bring them love”**.

“Bright and relatively modern” is how it appears now, but this was not always the case. Early visitors to Gorodishche were shocked at what they witnessed – conditions and levels of care being provided were poor by any standards and the children were living in unacceptable conditions. This is where BCP plays such an **important role in the telling of the Gorodishche story**.

Burren Chernobyl Project (BCP) is a Clare based Charity that sets out to help the children and communities of Belarus that fell victim to the effects of the **Chernobyl Nuclear disaster in 1986**. Since it began operating, BCP has carried out many projects to assist in the **medical, social, and economic problems faced by those living in Belarus**. From bringing children to Ireland for respite (and a chance to live in a loving family home) to sending trucks of humanitarian aid annually. It also works to send teams of volunteers to Belarus to work in orphanages, adult asylums and local communities.

At present the biggest programme is the **volunteer programme**. Here, people travel from all over Ireland to spend time with the children and young adults with disabilities in Cherven and Gorodishche Orphanages. These groups provide the children with love and attention that they so desperately crave. They provide stimulation and bring boundless energy and love with them to **break up the mundane daily routine of life in an institution**. Volunteers work with bedbound children doing massages, taking them outside and using simple sensory play activities. They also conduct activities for the older, more mobile children and young adults. These activities encourage their creative, musical and sporting abilities; developing more confidence and a stronger self-belief.

So, who are these “real people that we might come to know” that the Canon was looking to help? Allow me to introduce you to Kyriel.

Kyriel and I have had a **close bond** since I first visited Gorodishche over 2 years ago. Kyriel is 18 years old and is one of the brightest minds in the Orphanage (if he were in Ireland, he would be a straight A student without doubt). But Kyriel has many challenges to overcome. He has extremely limited use of his arms and legs, and by limited – I mean almost no use whatsoever. He uses a wheelchair to get about and uses his mouth and nose to write and type (by the way – he types faster with his nose than I can with 10 fingers!). **2019 has been a generally positive year for Kyriel:** -

1. He turned 18
2. He has moved to a new group in the Orphanage, giving him more independence and a group that he is much happier to be with (he’s with a bunch of “lads”)
3. Through BCP he got a motorised wheelchair, guided and directed by his chin and his two thumbs – offering him independence and freedom like he has only dreamt of previously (and I mean he dreamt of this!)

But 18 also brings a **big challenge** to Kyriel, he is now finished in formal education (he had regular schooling and teachers for many years). There are concerns that not having this outlet for such a mind may become an issue. But not a problem for such a clever young man!

“I have a business proposal for you” he says to Joanne and I when we met just 1 month ago. “I want to be an IT guy and work for you”, this had obviously been thought out and he saw his opportunity to have his first formal business meeting when we met him in his new surroundings. Kyriel has some basic (mostly second-hand) equipment that is given to him by volunteers to encourage him to develop his technical skills.

But how (I thought) - “let me think about what we could do” was my answer. We met the following day and I proposed that he might look at some of the **manual documents and processes** that they have today in the Orphanage. Start by looking at the Birthday List (probably THE most important document in the Orphanage!) and produce reports by month/group for Iryana (she works for BCP in the Orphanage). “Using what” he asked - “you will have to learn Excel” - “no problem”.

Later that evening I got a WhatsApp message from Kyriel that shook me somewhat. A short and simple message - **“Thank you dad”**. And you wonder what are the things that bring us volunteers back for more!!!

1 month later and Kyriel has **delivered his first project**, more to follow. This is a “real person that I have come to know”; and now someone that you have come to know - the Orphanage is full of such people.

As we now **look forward to a new decade** – we are looking to celebrate 20 years of connecting Shannon and Gorodishche. Appropriate that we should be looking at our 20th year as the calendar shows 2020 – a time to celebrate what has become **A Perfect Vision**. We look forward to hosting events throughout the town, a chance for all of us to connect and **celebrate something that we should be so proud of** – a parish and town that has reached the hearts and minds of so many children and young people in **a place I call home** – Gorodishche.

Spaceba Bolshoi