

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Excerpts of a letter from Bishop Gerard Hanna

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

As a matter of urgency, I write in what may truly be a defining time in our national identity.

As our government begins enforcing a new offshore detention policy we are compelled, I believe, to reflect seriously on how these policies reflect on us – Catholic Australian people – and if in fact we wish our representatives to act in this way on our behalf.

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need, yet refuses help? (1 John 3:17)

The new resettlement arrangements with Papua New Guinea are based on a premise that it is wrong for people fleeing from persecution to seek asylum in Australia. This is fundamentally untrue. The policy also asks the people of Papua New Guinea to not only show a level of generosity far beyond their economic means, but also to welcome these refugees in a way that we ourselves are not willing to do. This action is demeaning to everyone.

We have the duty as members of one human family to help those who arrive on our shores seeking asylum and strive with all our resources to assist them no matter how inconvenient this may prove to be.

Pope Francis recently said, "the 'other' is no longer a brother or sister to be loved, but simply someone who disturbs my life and my comfort. In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business."

....

Hope is a major force of motivation driving refugees to endure and continue their journey. In faith they look to us as people who can fulfil their legitimate hopes. In this Year of Faith, we note that people who are migrants/refugees

place their faith and hope in us; pray that we will be inspired to fully live our Christian Commitment and open our hearts and allow the love of God to abide in us.

To assist us to examine the issues surrounding this major political question, what follows is a brief examination of Catholic Social Teaching and the Refugee/Asylum Seeker.

In 1992 Australia introduced the policy of mandatory detention for non-citizens who arrive in Australia by boat without a valid Australian visa.

This policy was pursued before hearing their stories and despite all the information available about the wars and conflict occurring in the countries that these asylum seekers were arriving from.

It is not against international law to seek asylum, however those who try to in Australia are stripped of their liberty. The length and isolation of many Australian immigration detention facilities compounds the suffering and frustration of not knowing what the future holds. This policy is primarily pursued in the belief (not the fact) that it will deter asylum seekers from arriving by boat.

The Refugee Convention in operation since 1951 has struggled to ensure the right to seek asylum is secure and available to those most vulnerable. Australia as signatory to the Refugee Convention has agreed to protect those who seek asylum at our shores. Sadly, the policy of mandatory detention has led many people to harm themselves and even take their own life. Twenty years later this policy remains in place.

The Catholic Church, as a universal family, pursues the mandate to protect and promote life both in Australia and internationally. Asylum flows are considered in this larger view, not just of what is happening in Australia but to see what the situation is globally and to reflect on what is the best approach in the pursuit of not only protecting people's lives but to empower the exiled to live life to the full.

For Catholics, our obligation to asylum seekers is not only to protect (as stipulated in the Refugee Convention) but to welcome and offer hospitality so that they may not feel isolated because of intolerance or disinterest. Since its inception mandatory detention has been a nightmarish situation for asylum seekers. Their journey begins with great suffering, often with the loss of loved ones, parents, siblings, and children. They often lose their beloved homeland forever and will never be able to return. They then risk their own lives all for the slight hope that their situation could be improved. They seek an opportunity to live a dignified life.

The call of the Catholic Church is to help all people *“live in a way consonant with that dignity.”* The first step is to extend hospitality to people *“caught in the trials and misfortunes of exile, and to strive with all our resources to help them.”*

In asking for asylum, our exiled brothers and sisters turn up unexpectedly as Jesus does to call on our kindness (cf. John 4:10). Our welcome, compassion, assistance and hospitality are a blessing not only for asylum seekers but more so for the host community, who is given a great privilege to serve God in this special way (cf. Mt 25: 38).

