

# THE REFUGEE CRISIS

**A**NOTHER MAJOR crisis of our time—another, that is, besides the sex-abuse crisis—is the refugee crisis. 51.3 million people are currently displaced globally. Three million refugees have been produced by the Syrian war. Six and a half million, or one-third, of Syrian people are displaced. Half of these refugees are children.

Europe at this time is experiencing historical migrations and refugee waves. It is the worst refugee crisis since World War II. More than 250,000 people have landed in Europe this year and thousands more have died in desperate attempts to cross the Mediterranean.

We in Australia cannot remain unaffected by all this. The announcement that Australia will be taking an extra 12,000 refugees from Syria and Iraq on a temporary basis is a welcome response to the crisis. But one wonders how generous our nation will be, given our relatively recent poor track record.

In our newspapers, on the radio, on television, we hear a language of deterrence and fear: talk of ‘illegal immigrants’, ‘queue jumpers’, ‘undocumented boat people’, ‘boarder protection’. Such language de-personalises the people, men, women and children, who are in desperate need of our welcome and support. It suggests that boat people are not really people at all. A suggestion that became a plain assertion in the false ‘children overboard’ claim—asylum seekers were depicted as something less than human.

Further, we have developed intricate policies to deter asylum seekers arriving by boat. For several decades, successive Australian governments have continued to implement increasingly harsh measures which punish asylum seekers in the hope that this will stop them arriving.

For over twenty years both political parties have maintained a policy of indefinite mandatory immigration detention. Most detention facilities are in very remote areas and harsh environments. And many reports show that such detention causes significant psychological harm, especially to children.

All this is justified by claiming that such policies will stop drownings at sea—that it will undermine the people smugglers’ business and so stop people taking risky journeys on unseaworthy boats. But, as Waleed Aly pointed out in his article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 16th October, p. 24, this is to sacrifice some people for the sake of others: ‘some people will be brutalised and occasionally destroyed, so that other lives may be saved.’ This is to use people as a means to an end—it is to punish one group of human beings in order to deter other people from attempting to come to Australia.

All this is unchristian. It is against Jesus’ teaching. It is ill-treatment of our brothers and sisters, an affront to their human dignity.

Today the biblical commandment to welcome with respect and solidarity the stranger in need—‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’—takes on particular significance in an age of such vast movements of people, such migration.

Our national response in recent decades has been in contrast with what we read of the responses in Europe at this time. They are confronted with historical migrations and waves of refugees. They are experiencing the worst refugee crisis since World War II. More than 250,000 people have landed in Europe this year and thousands more have died in desperate attempts to cross the Mediterranean.

The European countries are coming

together to try to find ways of welcoming these refugees. This is such a contrast to our Australian attitude.

As has been frequently pointed out, our present policies are a stark contrast to our own Australian policies during the 1970s and 1980s. We have a reputation of being a compassionate nation, based on our tradition of welcoming and providing assistance for Vietnamese, East Timorese and South American refugees. And migrants have made Australia what it is today.

We Catholics find ourselves at odds with our nation's practice. The Church speaks a different voice to that of our nation, Australia. The Church derives her voice from that of Christ: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me', 'Whenever you did this for one of the least of my followers you did to me'. (Mt 25:35-40).

The Catholic Church in her teaching and her practice is guided by Jesus' teaching.

The Catholic Church teaches that all

people have the right to live a dignified life in their homeland. Tragically, over 45 million people around the world are displaced. War, natural calamities, persecution and discrimination of every kind have deprived millions of a home, employment, education, family and homeland.

The Catholic Church teaches that anyone whose life is threatened has the right to protection.

The social teaching of the church echoes the teaching of Jesus. But the Church's teaching simply reflects what we must feel as human beings for all these suffering people.

And are our political leaders underestimating the generosity of our Australian people? For many years religious groups have been supporting refugees and asylum seekers with housing, employment, food and clothing, education and counselling (cf. Catholic Religious Australia media release of October 15, 2015). And they are able to do this because people give them financial assistance.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor

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*Immigrants dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death. That is how the headlines put it. When I first heard of this tragedy a few weeks ago, and realised that it happens all too frequently, it has constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart. These brothers and sisters of ours were trying to escape difficult situations to find some serenity and peace; they were looking for a better place for themselves and their families, but instead they found death. How often do such people fail to find understanding, fail to find acceptance, fail to find solidarity. And their cry rises up to God! ...*

*Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion—'suffering with' others: the globalisation of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!*

—Pope Francis at Lampedusa