

# ASYLUM SEEKERS

## *Statement by the National Council of Priests of Australia on Asylum Seekers 14 May 2014*

The National Council of Priests of Australia would like to endorse the statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (issued 8 May) and express our concern also about the Australian government's treatment of asylum seekers.

Some of our members minister to these asylum seekers in detention centres and are very concerned for their welfare. The hard-line policies of the current Australian government towards asylum seekers and refugees is extinguishing the Christian virtue of hope for many of these people: some of whom have risked their lives for a new and better life after experiencing oppression and extraordinary deprivation both of rights and resources.

Like our Bishops, many of us have seen the faces and heard the stories of these people and cannot hide our shame at the way some are being treated.

We stand with our Bishops in entreating our nation to relook at the way we are cur-

rently treating asylum seekers and ask the Australian government to change its cruel and inhuman policy towards those seeking asylum in Australia.

We do not believe that concealing their stories or faces, or keeping secret what the Australian government has been doing to deter these asylum seekers is helpful. We ourselves as a church know the danger of secrecy in dealing with those who have been abused or mistreated in any way.

We call upon the Australian government and all politicians of goodwill to seriously review these policies in order to respect the human dignity of these asylum seekers both in Australia and those transported by the government to other lands.

*(The statement of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on Asylum Seekers can be accessed on the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference website.)*

## *Palm Sunday Rally Sydney April 13 2014*

(1) PHIL GLENDENNING

Let me begin by acknowledging the original owners and custodians of the land we gather on today, the Gadigal people of the great Eora nation. And let's be clear, if there ever were people who *really* had a problem with people coming to this country by boat, it was the Gadigal people of the great Eora nation!

Since 1788, when the first boat load of unauthorised arrivals landed on these shores,

we have all been boat people. All of us here in Hyde Park today, we are all boat people. So I ask the question: what are we afraid of? The answer is probably that we are afraid of ourselves. History happened here. Ask an Aboriginal person. Unless we learn the lessons of our history we are bound to repeat the sins of that history. Today, we are repeating the sins of that history.

When I see the fear and ignorance that

surrounds the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers today in this land of migrants and boat people, I wonder what it is that we are afraid of. We are all boat people in this country. Unless you are an Aboriginal person, you and your mob have come from somewhere else, most likely by boat, so what is it we are afraid of? Perhaps we are afraid of ourselves.

I would like to share with you a poem, written by an Iranian asylum seeker, who identified himself only by his ID number and not his name:

*I do not know  
what will happen after I die.  
I do not want to know.  
But I would like the Potter to make a  
whistle  
from the clay of my throat.  
May this whistle fall into the hands of a  
naughty child  
and the child to blow hard on the whistle  
continuously  
with the suppressed and silent air of his  
lungs  
and disrupt the sleep  
of those who seem dead  
to my cries'.*

Today as we gather here in Sydney, all of us are here to proclaim to that asylum seeker, and all asylum seekers in Australia, on Manus Island and in Nauru, we are *not* deaf to your cries.

We hear you. We are here to amplify your voice and declare peace to the refugees, peace to the refugees. Peace. Today we begin this struggle for justice all over again. And if our elected leaders are not up to it, we the people will have to be.

Two days ago in Balmain a young Sri Lankan man in his 20's decided he had had enough. Following the rejection of his case and facing being returned to Sri Lanka, he swallowed half a bucket of petrol and tipped the remainder over his body and set fire to himself. Today he lies in an induced coma and is

not expected to live. He left a note thanking the Australian people for their kindness but said he wanted to die in Australia rather than in Sri Lanka.

We have known for a long-time of the mental trauma and degradation that is meted out to asylum seekers in Australia. The Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatrists speak of a new form of mental disorder, 'asylum seeker syndrome'.

The impact of this falls hardest on children. Today as we stand here in Hyde Park some 1,000 children are being held in detention.

When a nation determines that it is appropriate behaviour to incarcerate children then that nation has an ethical and moral problem at the core of its soul.

At the same time our Government has returned people to Sri Lanka, a country where the Edmund Rice Centre discovered that nine people were killed in the Howard years. We know that many of those returned are kept in jail without charge or trial indefinitely.

Australia today stands with China and Iran in supporting the Sri Lankan regime and failing to support the United Nations Human Rights Council's investigation into human rights abuses that were not limited to the civil war. What on earth is this nation doing lining up with the mullahs of Iran?

Here today in front of this stage are representatives of the PMOI and National Council of Resistance of Iran. Since last October the Iranian regime has executed over 700 political opponents. Yet of all the nations on the planet Australia is the only nation on Earth—not the Americans, the British or the Europeans—to have the Democratic Opposition of Iran on its banned list of supposed terrorist organisations. Why is Australia supporting the regimes of Sri Lanka and Iran?

What has been missing in our country... the ethical rock on which our response to asylum seekers must be based is that cruelty is an unjustifiable abuse of the dignity of people we

are obliged to protect.

People are an end in themselves, not a means to a domestic political result.

Compare our situation with that of Lebanon, a country of 4.3 million people who just last month received their one millionth refugee, 50% of whom are children. Rather than call in the military as we have done, the Lebanese have called for more teachers. They suspended the start of the school year so that double shifts could be organised and every child could go to school.

Alternatives are available. The Government does not have to do this. Both major parties' positions are flawed because they both require people to get in a boat before there is any policy response.

We are spending in advance of \$4 billion on mandatory detention. Last year UNHCR spent \$3.3bn globally and only \$103 million in South-East Asia.

If we applied some of the billions we spend locking up a few thousand people to working with the nations of the region to assist asylum seekers with work, education and health rights whilst being processed in the region, we would be a long way towards a durable solution. Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke's Governments showed what was possible in the 70's and 80's.

The great Irish poet Seamus Heaney once wrote that it is often foolish to hope on this side of the grave. But every now and then the great tide of justice rises up and 'hope and history rhyme'. Today on this Palm Sunday we must re-commit ourselves to the dawning of that day, when our hope meets our history.

We cannot be silent on issues of justice and human rights. The neglect of the human dignity of refugees and asylum seekers is not being cruel to be kind. It's just cruel.

Thirty years from now a Prime Minister will rise in the Parliament and on behalf of the nation he or she will offer an apology to refugees and asylum seekers and their families for the damage that is being done to them today.

Reza Bahrati was a 24 year old Iranian Kurd seeking protection who was killed on Manus Island in a facility established by the Australian Government and funded by Australian taxpayers. He was dragged from his room and bashed to death. He was in our care. He had committed no crime. The tragic appalling deaths of people at sea do not justify his death nor can it justify the continuance of the harsh regime that led to it. It is not acceptable under any circumstances for any young person fleeing a brutal regime to be killed by the people supposed to protect them. It was a conscious choice to create the conditions that enabled this to happen. It's what happens when humans are treated as a means and not an end. They get killed.

Martin Luther King once famously said that silence is betrayal. We will not be silent. St Catherine of Siena said in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that we should speak the truth in a million voices for it is the silence that kills. It still does today.

So today I call upon our poets, our singers, our writers, our artists, our creative voices, to speak the truth of these days to the Australian people in as many languages, forms and voices that we can muster.

We have nothing to fear from refugees and asylum seekers. We will, however, have much to fear from ourselves if we as a nation continue to practice such cruelty and excuse it as necessary. It is not necessary. It is a choice.

There can be no peace without justice.

So we refuse to be silent. We refuse to be complicit. Today across this nation from Cooktown to Perth, from Brisbane to Broome, thousands of people are gathering at rallies and marches to say we will not allow these things to be done in our name. If Australia is to become a truly great nation—we will have to learn the lessons of history.

*Phil Glendenning is Director of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education and President of the Refugee Council of Australia.*

(2) SUSAN CONNELLY RSJ

*We are Victimising Asylum Seekers*

We all know what scapegoating is.<sup>1</sup> You blame someone else for your troubles, you victimise something or someone, hopefully get rid of it, and so get things your own way and come to some sort of peace for a while. Individuals do it, and so do groups, large and small. Even nations. Scapegoating a very old practice and can be found in all societies, ancient and modern. It's the stuff of literature.

Australia is conducting a major scapegoating episode. By locking asylum seekers up, refusing them entry, pushing them off onto other countries, we are making them victims, sacrificed on the altar of a narrow interpretation of 'National Security' and 'Sovereignty'.

But the trouble with scapegoating is that its cover has been blown. It just doesn't work any more because it is increasingly obvious that victims are innocent. Most people worldwide can recognise the self-serving trickery of setting up scapegoats. Since it has been realised that the quintessential victim, Jesus, was innocent, the world has been growing conscious of the inherent innocence of all victims.

The people now on Manus Island and Nauru are the victims of Australia. It's no use just talking about 'Government' when we know that the political parties we vote in to govern, have opted for the easier, voter-friendly approach. We keep voting for these people; in fact, the majority of Australians agree with the current hard-line stand.

There have to be other ways of dealing with the problems of people smugglers, deaths at sea, relationships in the region. It doesn't matter how hard the asylum seeker problem is. It doesn't matter how huge are the problems that have to be solved. That's life. Life is difficult.

What does matter is that innocent hu-

man beings are being locked up for indeterminate periods of time as a deterrent to others. And we put the onus on them to solve it all by returning to the danger from which they escaped. This cannot be allowed to continue.

It is simply morally wrong to victimise the innocent, to treat as criminals persons who claim to be in fear for their safety. It is morally wrong, no matter how successful it may be.

Australia's victimisation of asylum seekers is reducing us, as a people. We are rank hypocrites. We treat these people as criminals whereas they have broken no laws, while all the time *we* are the ones who thumb our collective nose at the Refugee Convention, and thumb our nose at basic human decency.

We in Australia should be acutely aware that it is possible for any person, group, church or nation to stray from its basic principles and moral foundations. Our nation's structures are built on the Judeo-Christian ethic of the fundamental dignity of human beings. It has often been breached, but remains basic to our structures. It is being attacked by the severity with which asylum seekers are treated. It is being eroded by the refusal of Australia to abide by international agreements.

So on the one hand we have the fact of the gradual awakening of humanity to the innocence of victims, and on the other we have Australia actually using people who have committed no crime as victims. The only way these two opposites can be held together is by a process of self-deception, simple deceit, by pretending that it is right to imprison the innocent, that locking up children is necessary for a greater good, to trumpet 'the saving of people from drowning' as the reason, when everyone knows that that is only a by-product.

Stupidly, we then imagine that by some miracle our character as a generally fairminded and generous people will not be affected by the cruel, underhanded violence we are inflicting on weak and vulnerable others. We need to be very concerned about what our behaviour is doing to our identity.

You and I are part of the conscience of Australia. We must continue to stand and speak for these people, who have done no wrong. We must think, and read, and teach. We must respond with ingenuity and courage to Australian Governments and their media drivers. We must not lose heart.

However, the worst thing we can do is to perpetuate the cycle of victimisation. That means, we can't afford to make the same errors politicians make by turning around and victimising *them*. Don't victimise the victimisers. Otherwise we reduce the situation to one of feeding an endless cycle of pathetic

point-scoring.

We must engage with decision-makers and opponents, in season and out of season, in civilised and respectful terms. There are good people in Government, on all political sides. What we must do is focus on facts, on humanity, on truth, transparency and goodness. That sort of strength is a match for the deepest moral darkness and can pierce the thickest of parliamentary hot air.

The asylum seeker question is not fundamentally about borders, security, media power, the next election or political trickery. It's about human beings, the rights of people everywhere to seek safety, and human dignity, including ours. It's about our human obligation and capacity to put ourselves in others' shoes, and as Pope Francis has said,<sup>2</sup> 'to be able to weep'. We weep for asylum seekers. And we weep for Australia and what it risks becoming.

## NOTES

1. There are numerous books by René Girard and James Alison where they develop insights into scapegoating and victimization.
2. "...let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty in the world, in ourselves, and even in those who

anonymously make socio-economic decisions that open the way to tragedies like this. Who has wept? Who in today's world has wept?' Pope Francis, 08.07.2013  [/en1-708541](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/07/08pope_on_lampedusa:_the_globalization_of_indifference)

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### Welcome The Stranger

Jesus identifies himself as a stranger to be welcomed (Matthew 25:35). The Catholic Church teaches that Christ has in some way united himself to every person, whether or not one is aware of this. Christ will consider done to himself the kind of treatment that is reserved to any human person, in particular, to the least among them, the stranger. [...]

Pope John Paul II invites us to an ever deeper awareness of the mission of the Catholic Church 'to see Christ in every brother and sister in need, to proclaim and defend the dignity of every migrant, every displaced person and every refugee. In this way, assistance given will not be considered an alms from the goodness of our heart, but an act of justice due to them'.

—Australian Catholic Migration Office (ACMRO), 'What the Catholic Church teaches on Asylum and Migration'.