

Statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on Asylum Seekers

Media Release

8 May 2014

The Australian Catholic Bishops have been involved in many ways with asylum seekers. Some of us have detention centres close to home, and we have worked hard to ensure that asylum seekers receive proper pastoral care and human assistance. We renew that commitment here.

The Bishops have also intervened with Government in an attempt to make policy more respectful of human dignity and basic human rights, which today are being seriously violated.

We now make this urgent plea for a respect for the rights of asylum seekers, not only in Government circles but in the Australian community more broadly. Federal decision-makers in both major parties have made their decisions and implemented their policies because they think they have the support of the majority of Australians. Therefore, we want to speak to the entire Australian community.

The current policy has about it a cruelty that does no honour to our nation. How can this be when Australians are so generous in so many situations where human beings are in strife? Think of the way the Vietnamese boat people were welcomed in the 1970s and 80s. The question becomes more pointed when we think of the politicians who are making and implementing the decisions. They are not cruel people. Yet they have made decisions and are implementing policies which are cruel. How can this be so?

Island dwellers like Australians often have an acute sense of the “other” or the “outsider” – and that is how asylum seekers are being portrayed. They are the dangerous “other” or “outsider” to be feared and resisted because they are supposedly violating our borders.

Do racist attitudes underlie the current policy? Would the policy be the same if the asylum seekers were fair-skinned Westerners rather than dark-skinned people, most of whom are of “other” religious and cultural backgrounds? Is the current policy perhaps bringing to the surface not only a xenophobia in us but also a latent racism? The White Australia policy was thought to be dead and buried, but perhaps it has mutated and is still alive.

There may also be the selfishness of the rich. Not everyone in Australia is rich, but we are a rich nation by any reckoning. The asylum seekers are often portrayed as economic refugees coming to plunder our wealth. But the fact is that most of them are not being “pulled” to Australia by a desire for wealth but are being “pushed” from their homeland and other lands where there is no life worth living. No-one wants them.

The policy can win acceptance only if the asylum seekers are kept faceless and nameless. It depends upon a process of de-humanisation. Such a policy would be widely rejected if the faces and names were known. Bishops have seen the faces; we know the names; we have heard the stories. That is why we say now, Enough of this institutionalised cruelty.

We join with the Catholic Bishops of Papua New Guinea who have voiced their strong opposition to the use of Manus Island for detention. They have urged Australia “to find a more humane solution to people seeking asylum”. We do not accept the need for off-shore processing. But even if it continues, it surely does not require such harshness.

The Government and Opposition want to stop the boats and thwart the people-smugglers. But does this require such cruelty? Could not the same goals be achieved by policies, which were less harsh, even humane – policies which respected not only our international obligations but also basic human rights? Can we not achieve a balance between the needs of people in desperate trouble and the electoral pressures faced by politicians? We believe we can; indeed we must.

The Australian Catholic Bishops call on parliamentarians of all parties to turn away from these policies, which shame Australia and to take the path of a realistic compassion that deals with both human need and electoral pressure. We call on the nation as a whole to say no to the dark forces, which make these policies possible. The time has come to examine our conscience and then to act differently.