

1998

Message

A Message for the National Day for Migrants and Refugees

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29 June 1998

The theme for 1998 is “We are all one in Christ Jesus” (cf. Galatians 3:28). In his message for this year (included here) Pope John Paul II reflects this theme: *“The fact that apostolic action for migrants is sometimes carried out in the midst of suspicion and even hostility can never become a reason for abandoning the commitment to solidarity and human advancement. Jesus’ demanding assertion: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Mt 25:35) retains its power in all circumstances and challenges the conscience of those who intend to follow in his footsteps. For the believer, accepting others is not only philanthropy or a natural concern for his fellow man. It is far more, because in every human being he knows he is meeting Christ, who expects to be loved and served in our brothers and sisters, especially in the poorest and neediest”.* [2944]

An unofficial ‘immigration debate’ in Australia is taking place at present. While it is important to have informed public debate on immigration levels, much of the discussion on the topic is confused and misleading. This occurs when the focus is more on perception of numbers of Asian migrants rather than the serious issues of population growth and Australia’s plans for the next half century. The result is a great amount of concern and hurt in our Asian communities and much ill-informed opinion in the general community. [2945]

The following is taken from *INFORM: Welcoming the Stranger -multicultural myths and opportunities*. Available from Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney. Used with permission. The author is Kerry Murphy, a Sydney solicitor who works with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Kerry is a member of the Sydney Advisory Group for the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office. He deals here with two myths about multicultural Australia which are commonly heard today: [2946]

1. Multiculturalism will result in Ethnic conflict [2947]

Our eyes and ears readily pick up evidence of multicultural Australia as we walk down some suburban streets or visit local shopping centres. Many school teachers experience a microcosm of multicultural Australia in the one classroom.

Multiculturalism does not mean that every cultural practice is acceptable. Practices, such as bigamy, for instance, are unlawful. Yet we will welcome other practices because they enrich our culture, bringing diversity in language, music [2948]

and cuisine. But let's not be too simplistic. Multiculturalism is more than being able to eat pasta one night and stir-fry the next. It means creating the circumstances where different cultures learn to live together. This has been achieved in many cities in Australia and we are fortunate not to have the ghettos that exist in some cities in the USA. Many Australians count themselves fortunate in having friends named Smith and Nguyen.

2. I'm not racist, but....

[2949]

Racism involves the presumption that some people are superior to others. History well documents the atrocities that such a belief leads to - consider the recent experiences in Rwanda, Zaire, and the former Yugoslavia. Racism and its companion, simplistic nationalism, can divide a community and country. The challenge for Australians is to counter the presumption that people from different lands cannot live together.

The Christian response

[2950]

For a Christian, there can be no 'buts' in regard to racism. A basic tenet of Christianity is that we are all created equal before God. The Old Testament tradition of 'welcoming the stranger' continues in the New Testament. In all four Gospels, and particularly in Matthew's scene of the last judgement, it is one of the criteria of being a follower of Jesus.

Jesus himself was a refugee. We read in Luke's Gospel how Joseph, Mary and their new-born child were forced to flee their homeland and settle in a foreign country. This is the common experience of millions of displaced people in the world today. Refugees travel in alien territory and are often deprived of their dignity, their family, their education, and their possessions.

The local church has a key role to play in welcoming the stranger and providing comfort for the new migrant. Some parishes have helped to sponsor families to Australia as refugees or special humanitarian migrants. Many Catholic ethnic communities in Australia have their own chaplain. This enables them to have Mass in their own language and not be alienated from the Australian Church. We have a unique opportunity to be truly catholic - that is, truly universal - Christians in multicultural Australia in the 1990s when we welcome to our parishes Catholics from all over the world.

And of course we encounter people from other faiths in our local communities - people who witness to Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. The continuing challenge is to learn from these people and come to understand them.

Yours sincerely in Christ

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Director

Source: Archives of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office
(ACMRO), Canberra, Australia.
