

2006

Message

On Refugee and Migrant Sunday 2006

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Bishops' Commission for Pastoral Life*

27 June 2006

Dear Friends,

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On Refugee and Migrant Sunday - 27th August 2006 - we are reminded to thank God for the diversity of peoples in our nation and celebrate this diversity. The Church, like the nation, is made up of peoples from many different countries, with different languages and customs. In 2006/2007, Australia's Immigration (non-humanitarian) program will include between 140,000 and 150,000 people from many countries (an increase of more than 10,000 from the previous year). This includes 46,000 close family members (an increase of 4000) and around 100,000 skilled people. In the same period, the Refugee/Humanitarian program will provide 6000 places for the resettlement of refugees referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and 7000 places for the Special Humanitarian Program and protection visas in Australia. The Government will also continue to increase humanitarian settlement in suitable regional areas of Australia. Our priority will continue to be Africa, the Middle East, and South West Asia to assist people in the greatest need of resettlement as recommended by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

This year, I wish to bring three points to your attention:

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1) Pope Benedict XVI's message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2006. The theme is **Migrations: a sign of the times.** The Holy Father speaks of the trafficking in human beings, especially women. For women who are struggling to live in their own country, *it becomes easy for the trafficker to offer his own "services" to the victims, who often do not even vaguely suspect what awaits them. There are women and girls who are destined to be exploited almost like slaves in their work, and not infrequently in the sex industry.*

Trafficking in human beings from other countries, especially in women and children, is a reality in Australia. The Australian Catholic Bishops wrote to the Prime Minister in May this year and welcomed the significant advances already made by the Australian Government towards the elimination of trafficking in women and children. We asked the Government to ensure that policy and legislation are always focused on the individual human rights of the trafficked people rather than on what they might contribute to our legal and administrative processes in bringing traffickers to justice. We also recommended that the Government establish a national task force to investigate, review and coordinate responses to human trafficking in Australia, and requested that the Catholic Church

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be represented on such a task force.

2) National Conference (November 2005):

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From 16-18 November last year we held a Gathering of Migrant Chaplains and a National Conference on Pastoral Care in a Culturally-diverse Australia. Many recommendations were made by the Conference delegates, but two stood out: 1) Formation of a National Pastoral Plan for provision of pastoral care to migrants and refugees; and 2) Formation of Guidelines for seminary rectors who are preparing priests to minister in a Church that is multicultural. Committees have been formed to address these two issues and are progressing well with their work.

We hope to have a second gathering of Migrant chaplains in 2007 and a second National Conference in 2009.

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3) Proposed changes asylum seeker processing laws

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On Holy Thursday this year, the Federal Government announced a proposal to introduce legislation to process asylum claims offshore from all unauthorized boat arrivals, even if they reached mainland Australia.

During the plenary meeting in May, Australia's Catholic Bishops wrote to the Prime Minister on this issue. We acknowledged the need to safeguard national security, but urged the government not to sacrifice compassion for those who are in genuine need of help and asylum. We expressed our concern about the decision to process refugee claims of boat people at detention centres beyond Australia's shores, where they will have no access to proper legal advice or the human support they need. We expressed special concern that women and children may again be held in detention for an unspecified period of time. Finally, we urged the Prime Minister to reconsider the proposed legislation. As I write this message, the passage of the legislation has been delayed because of the concerns of some Government members of Parliament.

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In his message this year, the Holy Father warns us against disregarding the reasons why asylum seekers and refugees leave their native land. *The Church sees this entire world of suffering and violence through the eyes of Jesus, who was moved with pity at the sight of the crowds wandering as sheep without a shepherd (cf. Matt 9.36). Hope, courage, love and "creativity in charity" must inspire the necessary human and Christian efforts made to help these brothers and sisters in their suffering.*

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The three readings for this year's Refugee and Migrant Sunday (21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B) invite us to respond to the word of God by changing our way of thinking and even our way of life. (Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18; Ephesians 5: 21-32; John 6: 60-69). While society and the political climate may encourage us to look after ourselves as a first and only goal, as Catholics we are asked always to choose what is for the common good. Otherwise we will be self-centred, over-protective of our way of life, and wishing to exclude others from our country. Today's readings challenge us to have faith and trust in God and in one another. Jesus and Joshua both call on their listeners to make a profession of faith.

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I hope and pray that the spirit of Refugee and Migrant Sunday will remain with us always.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Joseph Grech, D.D.

Bishop Responsible for Migrant and Refugee Matters

Bishops' Commission for Pastoral Life

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