Bishops ask tough questions about refugees and asylum seekers

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St Clare’s Taree students, Adam Mayers and Sarah Locker, offer an analysis of the 2015 Social Justice Statement, “For Those Who’ve Come Across the Seas: Justice for refugees and asylum seekers”.

Australian society’s understanding of refugees and asylum seekers is sadly tainted by dehumanising rhetoric promoting “the globalisation of indifference”. In a world experiencing the “worst refugee crisis since World War II”, this is of great concern. Hence the Australian Bishops’ 2015 Social Justice Statement on refugees and asylum seekers could not have come at a more appropriate time.

The recent announcement that Australia will increase its intake of Syrian refugees by 12,000 is positive. However, this inflation in numbers is ‘stand alone’. Further, whilst these individuals will be promptly and permanently resettled, the Statement makes the salient point that “constant shifts in policies and the current delay in status determination for boat arrivals living in Australia have affected around 30,000 people”. This, coupled with the fact that “Australia still remains the only nation that detains child asylum seekers as a matter of course”, is crucial in the Statement’s undermining of the belief held by some that Australia’s refugee policies are humane and effective.

The Statement also highlights the saddening statistic that, during 2014-15, “Australia devoted almost $3 billion to onshore and offshore detention and community placement services for several thousand asylum seekers….by comparison, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has a budget of around $5.5 billion to attend to the needs of almost 60 million people around the world.” How can it be that Australia spends over half the UNHCR’s humanitarian budget on detention processes that leave “the forgotten of the forgotten” in “legal limbo” and yet it’s deemed effective and humane? How can it be that “about 90 per cent of boat arrivals who have been processed in the past have been found… to be genuine refugees in need of protection” yet some 50 people “have languished in detention for years because ASIO has issued an adverse security assessment” even though they have been given full refugee
status? These are the tough questions the Bishops challenge Australians to answer; questions that should be at the heart of social and political discourse.

The content of the Statement – whilst holding all Australians to account for our “myopic focus on the interception of boats and deterrence of asylum seekers” – is particularly relevant for Catholics. The assertion by Pope Francis at Lampedusa that “we are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion” sets the tone for a document reminding Catholics that “we are blessed because we do have the means to welcome our brothers and sisters”. Members of the Church are reminded that, in the infancy narratives of Matthew’s gospel, “the first days of [Jesus’] life [were] characterised by the wise men’s adoration of his majesty and, immediately afterwards, the Holy Family’s escape from Herod’s slaughter”. Christ himself was persecuted throughout his life and it was only through seeking asylum – in escaping Herod’s oppression – that he was able to express the “special concern for the poor and solidarity” that characterised his life. Further, pertaining specifically to children in detention, the Statement highlights Jesus’ advocacy for children. “Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.’” (Mt 9:13-14). The document states, “Jesus’ disciples see the children as obstacles, someone to be kept out of the way….But Jesus sees the children as persons, each loved by God and each with something to teach us.” These are lessons that can be learned not only by Australian Catholics but by all Australians in our approach to the issue of children in detention. As a nation “we pretend that the pain and diminishment of one group of people, including children, is a justifiable price to pay for sending a message to others” and hence, we persistently dishonour “the human dignity of people who seek protection”.

The Statement is most striking in its revelation of the inherent humanity of refugees and asylum seekers. Going beyond the political rhetoric and xenophobic ideals that contradict the traditional Australian values of opportunity and “boundless plains to share”, the text highlights the negative effects of Australia’s immigration policies on those caught up in the system. With regard to mandatory detention, the stance is very clear; “the treatment of asylum seekers in detention is cruel”; they are “factories for producing mental illness and mental disorder”. Even those able to “live in the community while their claims are assessed” continue to be treated harshly. On temporary visas without workers’ rights, individuals are forced into situations that lead to destitution and hopelessness, as evidenced by an asylum seeker quoted in the Statement: “because we are not working we don’t pay taxes, we feel that we... don’t belong here because we can’t contribute to this country”. Compounding this, the Statement highlights the fact that many asylum seekers relying on government support during the processing period are not able to access adequate accommodation and, hence, “almost 40 per cent [have] experienced food insecurity largely due to housing costs and income below the poverty line”.

For young people, the personal stories of youth in detention strike a particularly relevant chord. Individuals, such as an anonymous 17-year-old on Nauru, eloquently portray the realities of life for those in “legal limbo”; a reality in which no one is willing to “hear [you] out and listen”. Hopefully the Bishops’ Statement
will change the minds of Australia’s youth. The Statement says, “a just and healthy society is one in which all people are able to live decently, and where all contribute to the needs of the weakest, including non-citizens”. This is the ideal that needs to become the norm. For far too long, Australia has accepted the maltreatment of those least fortunate. The assertion that “underneath the surface of the Australian debate there are often unresolved fears of newcomers, other ‘races’, pluralism, conflict and change”, needs to be challenged and individuals, both young and old, need to “think about how [they] are like Jesus in this situation”; we need to act with care and compassion, not consternation and contempt.

Article courtesy of Adam Mayers

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