

JUSTICE FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

The Australian Catholic Bishops' recently released Social Justice Statement "For those who've come across the seas – Justice for Refugees and Asylum Seekers", was welcomed in Ballarat on September 24. Councillor Belinda Coates, on behalf of the Ballarat City Council, opened proceedings by saying that the current refugee tragedy engulfing Europe, and until recently playing out in the waters off the Australian Coast is a crisis of great magnitude. She said in part, "Around the world hundreds of thousands of people are on the move, or wasting away in camps or detention centres. Tragically, it seems no one wants them. I applaud the authors of the Social Justice Statement 2015-2016. I acknowledge that it is a document of the Catholic Church – but the truths it contains and the sentiments it expresses go beyond religion." The document cuts to the core of the issue and is an unequivocal statement of how a civilized society should treat refugees and asylum seekers.



The Forum speakers: Bishop Paul Bird, Cr Belinda Coates, Ann Foley ASSG, and Fr Constantine Osuchukwu St Paul's Anglican Church Bakery Hill

Father Constantine Osuchukwu of St Paul's Anglican Church, Bakery Hill, said he came to Australia as a twenty-four-year-old in 2003 from Nigeria. "I wasn't a refugee or an asylum seeker fleeing persecution or violence," he said. "I came here as a migrant of my own volition. In my twelve years in Australia I have had nothing but positive experiences. My own personal experience is that Australia is a country of a thousand welcomes. While my experience has been mostly positive I know that not all migrants or refugees have been as blessed as I have been." Father Constantine added that he was not naïve to think there are easy answers or a magic bullet to end the global refugee crisis and welcomed the Social Justice Statement because it calls people to reflect on the impact of our policies.

Bishop Paul Bird responded by saying he commended the document and underlined one of the themes that runs through the text – the good examples of Australians welcoming those who have come to this country. "I was pleased to hear that Australia will resettle 12,000 refugees from the current war torn regions of the Middle East," he said. "I have also been pleased that many church and other community groups are already looking at how they can help these refugees when they arrive from December onwards." Bishop Paul's presentation can be read below.

The Social Justice Statement "For those who've come across the seas – Justice for Refugees and Asylum Seekers", comes in three sections. The first draws on scripture and the social teaching of the Church, emphasizing the principles of human dignity, the option for the poor, and solidarity as foundations for how we should respond to the call of the asylum seeker. The second section aims to lift the gaze from a myopic focus on the interception of boats and detention of asylum seekers. The final section calls for a new global response of compassion.

On news radio this morning there was a report of a meeting between the President of the United States and the Pope. They met on the White House lawn in Washington. Among the topics they raised was the need to care for people who have been driven from their homes by war and are now seeking refuge in various countries. The words of the President and the Pope on this issue highlight the fact that this is an international challenge. Our gathering here in Ballarat this morning is part of an international response to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers because we realise that as Australians we have a responsibility to play our part in the international efforts. In this context I am very pleased to commend this social justice statement prepared by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference: “For those who’ve come across the seas: Justice for Refugees and Asylum Seekers”.

In commending this document I would simply like to underline one of the themes that runs through the text and that is the appeal to the good examples we have of Australians welcoming those who have come to this country.

We have examples from the years after the Second World War. I recall one simple case. There was a refugee who had come to Australia from Europe after the war. As part of the process of settling in to his new country he had to go to the local police station to complete some forms. He was wary of police because he had suffered at the hands of police in earlier years. When he came to the police station he was shown into an office. A sergeant sat behind a desk and asked him a few questions and wrote down some notes on a form. The refugee was nervous. He became even more nervous when the sergeant stood up and started to walk around to his side of the desk but then he was very relieved when the sergeant simply put out his hand and shook hands with the refugee and said: “Welcome to Australia!”

Australians also gave a generous welcome to refugees at the time of the Vietnam War. Many refugees came to Australia in those years. Among them was Vincent Long who is now a bishop and chair of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. Bishop Long has expressed great appreciation for the help that he and many others received at that time. When he was launching this social justice statement he said: “Australia rose to the challenge in the past with its generous embrace of migrants and refugees.” He invites us to show the same generosity towards migrants and refugees today.

I was pleased to hear that Australia will resettle 12,000 refugees from the current war torn regions of the Middle East. I have also been pleased that many church and other community groups are already looking at how they can help these refugees when they arrive from December onwards. They will need help with accommodation and with learning English and finding work. The children will need places in schools. I hope that we will do all we can to help them feel at home among us. I hope we can follow the best of our Australian tradition and show genuine care for refugees and asylum seekers. I hope the main message will be that very positive message: “Welcome to Australia!”

Bishop Paul Bird