



Diocese of Port Pirie Chancery

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Pastoral Letter to the Christian Faithful of the Diocese of Port Pirie

Concerning: Refugee Crisis

“Touching the Wounds of Christ”

Dear Brothers & Sisters

What the new Pope chose as his first action outside Rome was obviously a significant choice for Pope Francis. He would understand that people would interpret such a move for its significance. So when we recall that the first time our new Pope Francis left the Vatican was to go in his first year to Lampedusa, a little island nearer the coast of Africa than Italy, but under Italian Government. It is a bit like our Christmas Island. It has become the venue for refugees and asylum seekers leaving Africa to avoid persecution or to attain a life not marked by abject poverty and deprivation.

Those who have drowned on the way to Lampedusa are well over one thousand people. The Pope said that the tragedies have “constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart...”

These brothers and sisters of ours were trying to escape difficult situations.... They are looking for a better place for themselves and their families, but instead they found death.... Their cry rises up to God.

Has anyone wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who are looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a Society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion....

After the Pope wrote that speech, little seems to have taken place on the world scene, and Italy and Greece were left to carry the burden, just as Jordan and Lebanon have been left to carry the burden for Syria and Iraq. Then a couple of weeks ago we had that most poignant picture of the body of a little boy washed up on a beach in Turkey.

Seeing the bundled and drowned body of that little toddler, which had his little black shoes still on, fitted by his mother who also drowned, seems to have moved the heart of the world, and we have noted Europe at least trying to do something about the waves of refugees entering its borders. Our response of 12,000 extra places for Syrian refugees pales into insignificance compared with Germany accepting 800,000, but at least it is a beginning.

In our diocese we have become familiar with men and women who have been asylum seekers and refugees. Indeed, the origins of our diocese in terms of the first priests to the northern areas which later became our diocese were themselves refugees. The priests from Sevenhill who came to open up our diocese were Jesuits expelled from Austria because they were Jesuits, and the men and women they accompanied from Germany to the new colony of South Australia were fleeing religious anti-Catholic persecution in Prussia.

We have known the work of so many of our people among the asylum seekers detained at Woomera and Baxter. We have seen what fine citizens so many of those detainees have become. As a nation we opened our arms in the 1980s to the Vietnamese boat people, and later to several tens of thousands of Chinese after the massacre in Tiananmen Square.

In Pirie before that we saw the effective immigration after the Second War, and earlier still, what a transformation the arrival of the Italian people from Molfetta brought with them when they came in the 1890s. Quite movingly, the Italian community chose this Scripture passage for its memorial to the pioneers -

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a brother among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 19:33-34)

So when we see on our televisions the misery of these people, and their great numbers, people who would return home if it was not a place of death, our hearts should be moved to do what we can. Pope Francis somewhere has a beautiful saying, that when we touch the wounds of the poor we are touching the wounds of Christ. And being followers of Christ, we have no option but to respond as well as we can to work to reduce the suffering of the poor. That is why I wrote to John Rohde, Mayor of Port Pirie, on the 10th September, and to clergy and Religious, supporting the Mayor and offering our cooperation as a diocese in his efforts to house some of the Syrian refugees.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me...” (Matt. 25:35)

Yours in Christ



+ Gregory O'Kelly SJ
Bishop of the Diocese of Port Pirie

30th September 2015