

2003

Message

On Refugee and Migrant Sunday 2003

*Bishop Joseph Grech, D.D., Chairperson
Bishops' Committee for Migrants and Refugees*

19 June 2003

Dear Friends,

[3096]

On Refugee and Migrant Sunday we thank God for the diversity of peoples in our nation. We celebrate this diversity. The Church, like the nation, is made up of peoples from many different countries, with different languages and customs. In 2003/2004, Australia's Immigration (non-humanitarian) program allows for more than 100,000 people from many countries. This includes 40,600 close family members and 63,300 skilled people.

There are many passages in Scripture which tell us that we are all God's children, no matter what our origin. In today's second reading (22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time), St. James reminds us "By his own choice, God has made us his children", and in the Responsorial Psalm we hear: "Lord, who shall dwell on your holy mountain?.....He who does no wrong to his brother, who casts no slur on his neighbour."

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A particular challenge in Australia today is presented by refugees and asylum seekers. For 2003/2004, Australia's humanitarian program allows for 12,000 refugees from four regions of the world: Europe (12%), Africa (43%), Middle East and South-West Asia (41%), and Asia and Americas (4%). We will also give Temporary Protection Visas to those who land on our shores seeking our protection and who are able to satisfy our immigration authorities that they meet the requirements for Australia's protection. 1,000 of the above 12,000 places have been reserved for this. Already there are in Australia over 8,000 people who have been given Temporary Protection Visas, mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan.

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These refugees and asylum seekers present a great challenge to us as a church as we try to assist them in the most appropriate manner, always conscious of their human dignity. A lot has already been achieved, nevertheless much more still needs to be done. We acknowledge with deep gratitude the sterling pastoral ministry exercised by so many priests, religious and lay people who regularly visit immigration detention centres and work with refugees and migrants in our community. They need our prayers and practical support.

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On the occasion of Refugee and Migrant Sunday last year, many parishes and individuals made a generous response to a pledge to enable asylum seekers to live in the community, outside detention centres. The "pledge" proposal was placed before the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, but he declined to accept it. He was not satisfied with our commitment to ensure that asylum seekers receiving our assistance would be available for processing, and if

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ultimately necessary, removal from Australia. He also stated: “While I appreciate the generosity of offers of financial and other assistance pledged, I am not satisfied that the range of specialty services required by many detainees could be provided for significant ongoing support costs”.

Despite this set-back, we as a Catholic community pledge to continue to do what is possible to help our refugees and asylum seekers. Several Catholic and community groups in all States and territories are providing great support, particularly financial support. I strongly encourage parishes, schools and organizations to seek ways and means to assist financially his important ministry of the Catholic Church. Please use the attached form for your donations. [3101]

Referring to being open to true acceptance of immigrants. Pope John Paul II remarks in his message for World Day for Migrants and Refugees 2003: “When tensions arise, the credibility of the Church in her doctrine on the fundamental respect due to each person rests on the moral courage of pastors and faithful to ‘stake everything on love’ (cf. *Novo Millennio Inuente*, 49). The Holy Father uses the words of Jesus: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me”. (Matthew 25: 35-37) [3102]

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

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Joseph Grech, D.D.

Chairperson

Bishops' Committee for Migrants and Refugees

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