

## **PASTORAL CARE OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA: AN ON-GOING CHALLENGE.**

**Address by Archbishop Philip Wilson at the Conference for the Pastoral  
Care of Migrants and Refugees.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are few other nations in the world whose demographic composition has been as deeply affected by international migrations as Australia. As *Graced by Migration* states quite deliberately:

*Migration has made Australia a greater and richer country, demographically, economically, culturally, socially, linguistically and religiously. It has evolved, especially since World War II, into one of the world's most diverse nations...a language laboratory for the world's many languages and a showcase to other nations of multicultural and interfaith harmony.<sup>[1]</sup>*

In particular, the mass migrations from Europe after the Second World War have been unprecedented in their impact and significance. Allan Patience, along with several other academics, is convinced that

*1947 saw the commencement of what was to become the most revolutionary transformation of the Australian social structure...perhaps one of the most revolutionary experiences of any modern state.<sup>[2]</sup>*

The rapid acceleration of peoples and worlds in motion<sup>[3]</sup>, that has been experienced in Australia with the addition of migrants from practically every country in the world, has had profound influences on the life of the Catholic Church in Australia.

I wish to offer an initial number of reflections on how we have fared as a Catholic Community in Australia particularly since the end of the Second World War. These reflections will be followed by a brief outline of some pastoral challenges and unavoidable questions that have arisen as a result of these migrations.

### **BALANCE SHEET**

As the world is in perpetual motion, so too are the local Churches throughout the Catholic world. In their own way and at their own pace, they have experienced a multiplicity of responses to the inflow of Catholic migrants.<sup>[4]</sup> The fundamental issue for many local churches is that, in their attempt to act in response to the many changing needs of migrants in their midst, they have gone through a slow and at times imperceptible inner metamorphosis. The process is very similar to the handling and management of permanent guests, be they initially known or unknown, in anyone's home.

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Vatican documents<sup>[5]</sup> remind us all that, when discussing or planning the pastoral care of migrants and refugees, we should allow adequate time for reflection and concerted action on the words: *widen the space of your tent* (Is.54,2), which have been chosen as the motto for this Conference. There is a fertile imagery for these reflections in both the Old and the New Testaments,<sup>[6]</sup> where there are many examples of hospitality and welcome to the stranger and of unfaithfulness to God.<sup>[7]</sup>

The case of the Australian Catholic community could be summed up, I believe, in re-phrasing a popular statement: “Yes, we can, but...” As with many other local churches, Catholic communities throughout Australia have taken a rather pragmatic stance, which appeared to them as quite justifiable conduct<sup>[8]</sup>, e.g.:

- You are welcome to Australia, but we will avoid implementing the Holy See’s clear directives, contained in the document *Exsul Familia* (1952), followed later by *Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*.<sup>[9]</sup>
- We will also welcome and at times actively recruit migrant chaplains, as we began to do in the 1950s and onwards<sup>[10]</sup>, but we will rather reluctantly, and with long delays, concede to the granting of the necessary canonical faculties, as mandated by the Holy See.
- We will accept migrant children in Catholic institutions (schools, orphanages, kindergartens..) and we will treat sick and frail migrants in Catholic hospitals and institutions for the elderly, but in relation to their specific cultural and religious needs, the prevailing attitude should be: the quicker they adjust to existing patterns, the better for everybody.<sup>[11]</sup>

These are some, not all, of the lights and shadows that have occurred in the landscape of our Catholic communities in Australia in relation to our many migrant brothers and sisters. This circumspect way of providing accommodation<sup>[12]</sup>, while perhaps not embracing the new guests in their cultural and religious identity, is not infrequent. When discussing the experience of the many migrant workers in Switzerland, a famous Swiss sociologist remarked: *We wanted strong hands and we got brains and hearts!*

Back in 1971, among the advocates of a greater and more open acceptance of migrant spiritualities, a Canon Lawyer, H. M. O’Leary stated:

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*We are not free from the merely-save-the-faith or merely give-spiritual-aid-approaches or from looking at migration matters merely through the eyes of the inhabitants of a receiving country<sup>[13]</sup>.*

The same author invited the local Church to highlight more forcibly the salient points of the migrants' cultural background (internal factors) and the degree of necessary interaction with the dominant local cultural group (external factors). According to the same author, a greater flexibility would have aligned the position of the Catholic Church in Australia with the re-evaluative processes observed in some of the major Vatican documents issued during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And, we may add, would have kept the Church's thinking and policies in line with the prevailing mood existing in the country since the introduction of multicultural policies by the Whitlam government in the early 1970s.

Undoubtedly, this mixed balance sheet can be subjected to greater scrutiny and analysis. In the meantime, some remarkable developments have occurred in Catholic communities throughout Australia in recent times.

## **PRESENT PASTORAL REALITIES**

### **1. Multiculturalism in Church pews.**

On the basis of statistical evidence<sup>[14]</sup>, the crowds attending Church in the 1950s and in the 1960s have almost altogether disappeared. At that time, the poor performance of migrants, notably of the Italians<sup>[15]</sup>, had been causing some concern in Church circles. In a remarkable turn-around, recent Mass counts show that diverse groupings are now emerging that reflect factors such as ethnic background, and different patterns of upbringing and experience that were accumulated in countries other than Australia. This astonishing shift was commented on by Bishop Joseph Grech at the last Conference in 2007 and the Bishop's statement was well summarized by Fr Frank Devoy as follows:

- *The majority of Australian-born Mass attendees were over 60, while for overseas-born Mass attendees the majority were aged between 40 and 59;*
- *By a factor of 21% Catholics born overseas were better Mass attendees than Australian-born attendees, with women excelling.<sup>[16]</sup>*

A headcount of Mass attendance is useful, but it does not scan thoughts within the head! The very notion and experience of God in the pews will somehow reflect differences. It is the challenge of what one sees and experiences in common worship that is of the utmost importance, in this context, for both people and their priests. I am alluding to the different spiritualities that migrant people carry within them, some born out of religious persecution (Vietnamese, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Polish, Croats,

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some countries in Latin America, Sudan...), other spiritualities from evading wars, genocide and ethnic cleansing (Lebanese, Rwandan, Sudanese, El Salvadorians...). All of these stories of struggles and hard-earned experiences would form a great story, if recounted in catechetical books for use in Catholic schools.<sup>[17]</sup> In the relatively short history of Catholicism in Australia, is not the opportunity for amalgamation of different religious and cultural heritages (including the very substantial Irish contribution) over the span of two centuries, been a clear sign from Above? Is the integration of migrants into a local church a purely humanitarian undertaking or is it also a sign that God is a pilgrim God and intends to walk with all pilgrims?<sup>[18]</sup>

## **2. Documenting a mostly unrecorded Catholic Heritage.**

Documentation of anyone's experience suggests some degree of esteem; it turns hospitality into something real and, without mentioning the positive fallout for the group concerned, puts into place a mutual learning process. The building up of a track record of salvation history, of the living God as He reveals Himself in pilgrim people, may translate itself into:

- a more welcoming attitude by the Catholic Media to reporting events and stories that are otherwise doomed to remain within the precincts of a particular community;
- a pastoral practice that is not swamped by the many things to be done, but that has enough time and resources to be regarded as important enough for the wider catholic community and for inclusion in diocesan archives, with easy access by tertiary institutions;
- intelligent and untiring leadership and supervision at the level of the national and diocesan offices to ensure the twin objectives of documentation and the possibility of retrieval of precious information.

## **UNAVOIDABLE QUESTIONS**

Which Theology of the local Church?

Theological experts come to grips with the constitutive principles of the Church, with what makes it a distinctive community in the world. The result is a formal ecclesiology of universal application, but one, necessary as it is, that needs to be accompanied by reflection on where and how it is that this one Church comes to be and acts as an historical subject.<sup>[19]</sup> It is when a local Church regains or betters its responsibility as an historical agent, and in the process becomes a concrete subject of the catholic ecumene, that the intrinsic dimension of the local Church is brought to the surface and discovered. And, we may add, it makes a rich contribution to the universal Church because the communion of the Catholic Church universal is precisely the communion

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created by the mutual inclusion of all the local Churches in union with Peter.<sup>[20]</sup>

*E Pluribus Unum?*

It is a vexed question, but one that needs to be addressed.

Catholicism in Australia, “graced by migration”, has a distinctly historical moral obligation to ensure that the mystery of the One and Triune God is not forgotten or laid aside in the day-to-day running of the affairs of the Church.

We ought to avoid the pitfall of thinking only in terms of the risks inherent in either stressing unity or in over-emphasizing diversity. In our view, we favor the approach that all members of a given faith community will fully respect and adhere to those basic values and institutions that are considered part of the basic framework of the Church (Bible and Tradition). At the same time, every group or local Church is free to maintain its distinct subculture – policies, traditions...that do not conflict with the shared core – and a strong measure of loyalty to the whole Church.

Let’s be clear about another thing: the history of Catholic immigrants cannot be told as exclusively derived from diocesan or religious congregational archives. One has to include the ways in which migrant parents passed on the faith, the vocabulary used by people to speak of God, Mary, Jesus, human life and that area that goes under the heading of popular religion.

## CONCLUSION

The colonization of the Australian continent began with boat-loads of convicts, a substantial number of them being Irish and Catholic. Many more Catholic Irish Migrants settled in Australia, supported and accompanied by their bishops and priests for almost a century. Their historical contribution is well known.<sup>[21]</sup>

Since the conclusion of the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of European Catholic Migrants were re-settled or settled in Australia. Their spiritual needs were catered for mostly by a number of religious congregations which were based in Europe. Members of these Congregations provided chaplaincies, both formal and informal, that were responsible, through a variety of undertakings, for the pastoral care of their co-nationals.

In the 1970s, migrants from the Middle East, Latin America, South-East Asia and Africa began to make their way to Australia. It is to be noted that in many of the countries of origin of these migrants, in Africa and in Latin America, the local churches are still dependent for their religious personnel on either Europe, North America and even Australia and are scarcely able to cater for their own needs.

There is a two-fold challenge for the Catholic Church in Australia: firstly, to look after the needs of the new arrivals. Their numerical consistency, geographical dispersion and, most of all, their socio-cultural cohesion or lack of it will test the ingenuity of pastoral workers. And secondly, the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of at least half of the Australian Catholic

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population calls for a re-thinking of the theoretical and practical assumptions about the identity of the Catholic Church that is in Australia.

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**THREE POINTS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. There should be an accurate assessment of the situations that people come from when they migrate to Australia because they will necessarily be affected by the circumstances from which they have come and that will affect the requirements that they have for pastoral care when they arrive in Australia.
2. Our pastoral response has to be affected by the reasons for the migrants' arrivals in Australia. Have they come because they have been driven out of their homeland with no prospect of returning, for example, or have they been the victims of extreme violence and hatred in their homelands before they came to Australia?
3. What decisions do we have to make in order to make our liturgical practice in our parishes more inclusive of different cultures and languages?