



## MESSAGE FROM BISHOP VINCENT LONG VAN NGUYEN OFM CONV.

Bishop Delegate to the ACMRO for Migrants and Refugees

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Pope Francis has chosen the theme, “Child Migrants, the Vulnerable and the Voiceless”, for the 103rd World Day of Migrants and Refugees, commemorated in Australia on the last Sunday of August 2017.

Pope Francis reminds us that, “Migration today is not a phenomenon limited to some areas of the planet. It affects all continents and is growing into a tragic situation of global proportions. Not only does this concern those looking for dignified work or better living conditions, but also men and women, the elderly and children, who are forced to leave their homes in the hope of finding safety,

peace and security.” (Pope Francis, Message 2017)

The statistics are alarming. UNICEF reported in December 2016 that, “An estimated 535 million children...live in countries affected by conflict or disaster, often without access to medical care, quality education, proper nutrition and protection...”. We are no longer able to sit in silence when confronted with these realities. We therefore need to become informed and also become engaged. There are many individuals and organisations who do amazing and inspirational work in this field, who quietly go about their work. We need to join in solidarity with them, and at a grassroots level begin to bring about concrete change.

Whenever we speak about children and child migration, we must always remind ourselves and declare that the best interests of the child must always come first. Where children can flourish the most is first and foremost within their own families. Therefore, when migrant and refugee children come to Australia attention needs to be paid to assisting their parents and helping them to settle and integrate into Australia. By helping families, children will have the best possible chance of succeeding in their new home.

By helping parents provide a safe, communal and positive home environment, this will greatly encourage their children and encourage every chance of success. A close relationship between parents and children is key to aid their settlement and growth as a family and individuals.

### Children of Migrant Families

It is important for local communities to help families, particularly the children to integrate into its communities. This is where schools can have a unique role to play. “Childhood, given its fragile nature, has unique and inalienable needs. Above all else, there is the right to a healthy and secure family environment where a child can grow under the guidance and example of a father and a mother; then there is the right and duty to receive adequate education primarily in the family but also in the school where children can grow as persons and agents of their own future and the future of their respective countries.” (Pope Francis, Message 2017)

Extra-curricular activities can be great avenues for helping migrant children feel at home, meet new people and settle in more easily into their new community environment. We also need to encourage members of the ethnic community who may have arrived earlier to become involved and assist in integrating new families

and children. These ‘older generations’ have a unique wisdom which can greatly benefit more recent arrivals. By encouraging these members of the community to participate and tapping into their unique wisdom and experience, it allows for greater chances of integrating and succeeding. Pope Francis reminds migrant communities that, “It is necessary, therefore, for immigrants to cooperate ever more closely with the communities that welcome them, for the good of their own children.” (Pope Francis, Message 2017)

Education is vital in assisting child migrants and their parents in settling into their new country. More often than not, when English is difficult for parents it’s the children who step in to assist in translating and manoeuvring day-to-day situations. Effective education must also look at strengthening young migrants’ potential and possibilities by helping them to nurture their talents, developing their personality and using their mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

#### Trafficked Children

Unaccompanied child migrants are an increasing phenomenon within parts of the world due to instability and conflict. These children are particularly vulnerable to extortion, kidnapping, threats, forced labour, and even sexual exploitation. The children, the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, need our urgent attention and protection. Pope Francis reminds us of the stark reality that, “the most powerful force driving the exploitation and abuse of children is demand. If more rigorous and effective action is not taken against those who profit from such abuse, we will not be able to stop the multiple forms of slavery where children are the victims.” (Pope Francis, Message 2017)

The key to begin with is to get informed and to get involved. As a church, in collaboration with the local communities, we can bring about concrete change to these situations. Solidarity with children in these situations is very important. We need to become aware of these situations and where possible make others aware as well. By uniting in solidarity with these vulnerable children, as Catholics and along with our Catholic institutions, we can bring about positive and concrete change. There are already many Catholic and community organisations that raise awareness of this issue and provide assistance to children in these situations and this needs to be greatly encouraged and promoted. We also need to work to bring about concrete change in the

countries where migrants leave for a better life. All have a right to live in their own home. Therefore, we must also work to bring about peace and prosperity in nations that are less fortunate than ours. Pope Francis reminds us that, “It is absolutely necessary, therefore, to deal with the causes which trigger migrations in the countries of origin. This requires, as a first step, the commitment of the whole international community to eliminate the conflicts and violence that force people to flee.” (Pope Francis, Message 2017)

### Conclusion

We need to raise awareness of those issues which face vulnerable, and particularly trafficked children. We cannot remain silent. Raising awareness and as a community bringing about concrete change will help child migrants in all situations grow and flourish. Children also need to be encouraged to grow and to actively participate in the creation of their own future. Whether this be in the school, or through extracurricular or community activities. Finally, fostering positive and nurturing family environments is key to assisting children to settle in their new homes and communities.

“In doing so I ask everyone to take care of the young, who in a threefold way are defenceless: they are children, they are foreigners, and they have no means to protect themselves. I ask everyone to help those who, for various reasons, are forced to live far from their homeland and are separated from their families.” (Pope Francis, Message 2017)

Yours in Christ,

Most Rev Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv.