

NURTURING A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER AND HOSPITALITY

Colloquium on Ethics and Migration

Brisbane, August 5th 2019.

INTRODUCTION:

I am grateful to Fr Fabio Baggio for his intervention, which gives us an insight into the work of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in the care for and the advocacy of migrants and refugees around the world. The creation of this Dicastery and its active role in the public sphere give us an indication of the outward direction of Pope Francis' pontificate. In fact, he said that he wanted this particular section to express the Church's concern for migrants, displaced people, refugees and victims of human trafficking. With the long awaited reform through the new constitution of the Roman Curia "Praedicate Evangelium" (Preach the Gospel) the Church's missionary mandate as opposed to its internal law and discipline will take precedence. The sharing of the Good News and the care of the needy and the vulnerable are again at the heart of the Church. Amen to that!

Pope Francis has been quite provocative in his many statements. Let me give you a sample: "Priests can turn out to be little monsters; there is no such a thing as a Catholic God; who am I to judge; heads of the Church have often been narcissists, flattered by the courtiers; those who build walls will end up being prisoners of the walls they build." This statement was made in relation to the policy of President Trump who wants to literally wall off the United States from the Global South. There has been a war of words between those who support and those who oppose Pope Francis for this statement, which I will not get into. It is more important for us to understand his vision of a world built on communion, solidarity and shared humanity as opposed to fear, suspicion and hatred.

WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE:

I wish to show you a few images that expose the absurdity not so much of border walls as of the simplistic attitude of isolationism. We are all living in an interconnected world and what we do has an impact beyond our own environment. Here is the image of children playing on the colourful see-saws

that were inserted through the steel slats of a section of the border wall between Mexico and USA. It was a brilliant albeit short-lived display of the mutual relationship between the two countries. Its designer said, "If you do something on one side, it will have an impact on the other side. And that's what happens politically between United States and Mexico. What they do there impacts here; what they do here, it will impact there — it's the same with the seesaw." I would say that the impact goes even beyond the two immediate neighbours. In fact, many would argue that global poverty, environmental degradation, and migration are linked inextricably to the culture and the supporting structures of our unfettered pursuit of wealth and power, which are strongly embedded in the dominant Western World.

Here are a couple of more confronting images. One shows the bodies of a Salvadoran father and his daughter who drowned while attempting to cross the river Rio Grande into the USA. The other is about 50 year old photo of a group of Vietnamese children fleeing the napalm bomb explosion. This one has a particular relevance to Australia because we were part of the coalition that determined and directed the conduct of the war in Vietnam. These images remind us not simply of the victims of war, violence and conflict but the intricate circumstances, which gave rise to their tragedy and for which they were not the only ones responsible.

Pope Francis spoke powerfully of the situation as the cumulative result of multiple injustices to which we all at some level contribute, the solution to which, it follows, we all become at some level responsible. In so doing he exposed the moral vacuity of isolationism, and simplistic reductionism, at the same time as enriching John Paul II's concept of solidarity, bringing it to the level of obligation and thus tying it to universal human dignity.

Pope Francis is not afraid to call out systems that drive oppression. Unless these systems are recognized, exposed, confronted, and dismantled, fundamental social change will not occur. In Bolivia, for example, he spoke of a common thread that caused the destructive realities of social exclusion and environmental destruction. The change we need therefore goes beyond national interests and Francis pointed to the systemic/structural change in terms of the globalization of hope: "We want change in our lives, in our neighbourhoods, in our everyday reality. We want a change, which can affect the entire world, since

global interdependence calls for global answers to local problems. The globalization of hope, a hope which springs up from peoples and takes root among the poor, must replace the globalization of exclusion and indifference!”

ISOLATIONISM VERSUS MORAL RESPONSIBILITY:

In the last analysis, Pope Francis’ vision of a world not separated by excessive nationalism but built on the culture of encounter and solidarity evokes a moral response. He challenges us to consider the plight of displaced people and the global inequality on the one hand, and on the other, our privilege of enjoying some of the best living conditions on the planet. Can we go on protecting our way of life with little interest in or regard for them? Can we continue to secure our privilege as our exclusive right without confronting injustice that impinges itself upon us? Can we adopt measures that amount to unjust and inhumane practices against our fellow human beings in order to justify our attitude? It seems to me that we cannot avoid these and other vexing moral questions.

Australia rose to the challenge in the past with its generous embrace of migrants and refugees. It proved itself especially courageous during the Vietnamese exodus and accepted an unprecedented number of Asian refugees for the first time in its history. We have not done too badly since. A few of us live off the fat of the land. But most of us are well-settled and doing our bit for the country. We’ve practically cornered the bakery, hair salon, pedicure, manicure and waxing businesses. We are making our presence felt in the Australian Church, too. I quipped at my episcopal ordination that we are the new Irish and that still holds true in many dioceses across Australia and America. Despite the “final solution” that former Senator Fraser Anning proposed in parliament last year, we are here to stay. Multicultural Australia is here to stay.

All things being equal, I believe that Australia has changed for the better with each successive wave of new arrivals. Australia is what it is today because of their love of freedom and fundamental human values. Australia is what it is today because of their determination and drive for a better future. Migrants and refugees bring energy, drive and dynamism to this country. They also contribute hugely to the renewal and revitalisation of the Catholic Church. So much so that Western Sydney boasts the highest participation rate in Australia. Where would we be without the vibrant faith and strong community spirit of migrants and

refugees? We honour the legacy of this great nation not by excessive protectionism, isolation and defence of our privilege at all costs. Rather, we make it greater by our concern and care for asylum seekers in the spirit of compassion and solidarity that has marked the history of our country from its beginning.

CONCLUSION:

It is fortuitous that today I am a spokesperson for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on social justice and particularly refugee issue. In recent times, I have found myself a critic of the Australian government's policy of indefinitely detaining asylum seekers, including proven refugees, on Manus Island and Nauru. It is my hope that the church, both local and universal, especially with the leadership of Pope Francis can be the voice for the voiceless and advocate for their rights and human dignity.

All of us the baptised are called be agents of the Gospel, leaven and yeast for the world. The boundary breaking spirit of Jesus spurs us on to go against the prevalent culture, not for the sake of civil dissent but for justice, dignity and the common good.

As Christians, we cannot remain content with status quo, especially when that status quo is less than what God wants for us as individuals and as a community. Australia is a wonderful country but where it is in terms of its treatment of asylum seekers should galvanise us into action. We cannot be his disciples if we ignore the plight of the marginalised and the vulnerable. We cannot be salt and leaven if we allow our Christian conscience to be desensitized by the inequality, injustice and inhumanity in our society and in the world.

With the men and women of goodwill, let us build a better Australia and a better world. May our endeavour to replace the culture of fear and indifference with that of encounter and acceptance be brought to fulfillment in accordance with God's vision of the fullness of life for all humanity.