

Integral Human Development for a just settlement of refugees

The Catholic Church in Australia has been consistent in advocating for the just treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in this country.

In continuity with Pope Francis our church has advocated for compassionate responses to those who seek asylum in a war-torn world where the human rights of too many are routinely violated.

The Australian bishops' conference has been highly critical, and rightly so, of the harsh and punitive treatment inflicted by our government on asylum seekers including children who in their desperation have landed on Australian shores without the required visas.

So while support for this threshold issue- that is the acceptance of migrants and refugees has been well made and consistent I think there is need for further advocacy and service - not just about acceptance of refugees but also for their integrated settlement.

Unless settlement is given the right level of priority there is a high chance that refugees will not be able to avail themselves of the opportunities that the host country has to offer.

We need to appreciate that refugees most often come to us out of very traumatic circumstances. They may have lived in war zones; survived in under resourced refugee camps; and in many cases have spent years on the run – their lives under constant threat. Loved ones will have died or been killed on the journey- families will have been separated.

It is one thing to accept people from such desperate circumstances into our country and our neighbourhoods and communities but along with that acceptance comes a serious responsibility to make it work- to help them to overcome their traumatic backgrounds to settle well in their new home.

How well do we help these people to integrate into our communities? With very disrupted backgrounds how do they find opportunities for English language development? Education? Employment? How can they get the attention they need for their health needs? How do they negotiate our complex legal and social welfare systems?

When these matters are not attended to adequately, then settlement will fail. In the event of that failure many young men and women will feel alienated and powerless; elders will disengage finding no way to take responsibility for their future and their family in the context of their new land; the human fall out will last for generations- so we must not fail these people.

Already we see young people of refugee backgrounds over represented in our criminal justice system and in our state child protection system.

Over the past few years we have seen a concerning change in emphasis in Australia from hospitality and settlement to hostility and security – this has been signalled by a change in name of what was the Government Department for Immigration and Citizenship to the Department of Immigration and Border Control.

The news reports this week announce a further move in the same direction with the creation of a new super ministry of Home Affairs which will bring together ASIO, the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Border Force and other agencies.

Successful integration and settlement however are equally if not more important than border security issues for sustained community safety and growth.

The quality of settlement poses an obvious risk for the refugees themselves but it also has implications for community safety which could in turn lead to a backlash against all refugees and amplify calls to reduce our intake.

Settlement then is vitally important- government provides programs with access to some initial housing and English speaking classes and other services but for many groups there is so much more that is required.

Let's consider the case of most of people who have grown up in a stable community- they know people who open doors for them, who give them chances for work, and social interaction; someone able to

introduce them to people that might help out in some way or another; who will even look after the children while mum goes shopping.

Consider on the other hand a new arrival- who knows nobody of real influence. We all appreciate the fact that it is often not “what” you know but “who” you know that really opens the doors and gives people their place in the community. For new arrivals we in the church can be the “who they know” that helps to create connections and identify opportunities for them.

At CatholicCare in the Archdiocese we run homework support for the children of refugees. We also run a community farm and provide mentoring and conversation programs.

You may walk into a room that looks like a sewing class or a cooking class but it is there that the women will mix with other locals – conversing in English – laughing and engaging in a truly remarkable cultural exchange to the advantage of all.

Parishes of course are very well placed to assist as well. In my own parish school recently, a mother from a refugee background was struggling to get the youngest of her children off to school in the mornings while she was dealing with some of her own health issues.

We found an older woman, a parishioner, who lived nearby who was able to go over to the family each morning at about 7.00 o’clock and get the children some breakfast and dressed for school. This was a great assistance to the family but it also provided a wonderful opportunity for the parishioner to engage in a really worthwhile activity- one that gave her a fresh lease of life.

I would also like to mention another imitative that CatholicCare has developed with the parishes which may serve as a model that others could take up..

A few years ago the agency was able to raise some funds to employ a person to provide parishes with information and resources and support; enabling the people of the parish to care directly for asylum seekers in their own community.

There has been a great deal of interest in parishes to support those seeking asylum but as you would expect some of the needs are quite complex and while people can be well meaning they don’t always have the knowledge and skills to address the issues and manage those complexities.

The new role that we developed is one that trains and provides resources to assists parish volunteers to provide appropriate care and accommodation support. This has been a good use of resources as rather than employing a person to assist a few asylum seekers directly we were able to have someone who would assist four or five parishes, each with twenty or so volunteers, to provide help to a far greater number of asylum seekers. This experience exposes a broader range of people to the needs the situation and the humanity, gifts and culture of the refugees on the one hand while increasing community connection for the refugee families on the other.

Asylum seekers and refugees and other migrants will continue to be accepted in Australia but it is critical that for both their successful integration and the ongoing support of the broader community for newly arrived communities we need to devote more resources and attention to settlement. Government policy and resources need to reflect this. The Church too, through its agencies and parishes has a great deal to offer in helping new arrivals to make a true home in their adopted country.

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