

TEN STEPS TOWARDS JUSTICE FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

[To accompany the Social Justice Statement 2015–2016, *For Those Who've Come Across the Seas: Justice for refugees and asylum seekers.*]

The Australian Catholic Bishops' Social Justice Statement for 2015–2016 challenges us to face the reality of the terror and danger that people face around the world and to work to change Australia's response to people seeking asylum.

When we Australians support policies of cruelty and rejection, we close our ears to Christ's call and turn him away from our doors. We know that we are better than this. As Christians, we know that it is within us to hear the call of Jesus. As Australians we have shown ourselves willing to take the path of generosity and leadership. We can do so again. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

Following are ten steps – actions – we can take personally, locally and nationally.

1. Listen to the stories

Pope Francis, in his words and actions at Lampedusa, cuts through the global indifference by making the issue personal. He shows us that, when we look into the face of the asylum seeker and really hear their story – each stage of their journey – they are no longer a stranger to be feared and we can no longer be indifferent to their need. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

On your own or with others: read stories about asylum seekers and refugees. See a film, read a poem or a book. Go to:

Refugee Council of Australia *Fact Sheets and Resources*: www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Edmund Rice Centre, *Asylum Seekers and Refugees Education Resource*: www.erc.org.au

2. Allow yourself to be touched by the stories of asylum seekers and refugees

Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion – 'suffering with' others: the globalisation of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep! (Pope Francis at Lampedusa)

In your family, parish, community, gather a group to pray and mourn for those who have lost their lives seeking a safe place to live. Two examples of such prayers are available from:

- Catholic Religious Australia (www.catholicreligiousaustralia.org/index.php/events/item/1260-national-lament) and
- Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, Brisbane (CJPC) (<http://cjpbrisbane.wordpress.com>).

3. Get the facts

Australia's political debate has focused not on the millions of people displaced around the world, but almost entirely on a small segment of its immigration intake, the refugee and humanitarian program of 13,750 places annually. The policies of both major parties are aimed at deterring so-called 'illegal maritime arrivals' who, at their height in 2013, amounted to about 20,000 people. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

There is a great deal of misinformation in the community about refugees. Some reliable sources of information are:

- United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR): www.unhcr.org
- Refugee Council of Australia: www.refugeecouncil.org.au
- The Edmund Rice Centre: www.erc.org.au
- Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office: www.acmro.catholic.org.au
- Australian Catholic Social Justice Council: www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au
- Jesuit Refugee Service: www.jrs.org.au
- Australian Churches Refugee Task Force: www.acrt.com.au
- Amnesty International Australia: www.amnesty.org.au

4. Pray regularly for refugees and asylum seekers

Pope Francis showed us at Lampedusa how deeply he was touched by the plight of asylum seekers. We can follow his example by remembering those displaced around the world in our daily prayers, with family and friends, and by encouraging our parishes to include them in the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass. Use the prayer card published with this Statement.

5. Envision a new way of responding

There is another way; a way to make a real difference ... No longer need we fear the alien approaching our shores as a burden. Instead, we would realise that we are blessed because we do have the means to welcome our brothers and sisters. This other way is characterised by acceptance, leadership and generosity. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

Following the Vietnam War, Australia helped forge a humane regional response to boat people and accepted thousands of refugees. Now, 'Australia is the only country in the world with a policy that imposes mandatory and indefinite immigration detention on asylum seekers as a first action.' (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014)

Find out how other countries respond humanely to far greater numbers of asylum seekers than Australia faces. Some examples:

- People fleeing from the violence in Syria have increased the population of Lebanon by 25%. To see how Lebanon's schools have responded, go to the Jesuit Refugee Service website: www.jrs.net/multimedia.
- How have Italy and the European Union responded to thousands of asylum seekers in the Mediterranean?
- How do Scandinavian countries respond to people who seek asylum within their borders?

6. Work to raise awareness in your parish, schools and communities

We can work within our parishes to ensure that they are welcoming places. Creating social events, organising or joining support networks, introducing refugees and hearing their stories: all these are ways in which we can recognise the humanity of those who have come in need of protection. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

Where asylum seekers are rejected and excluded from our communities, they may be viewed with fear and suspicion. As Christians, we can work to break down that fear. See the resources in Steps 1 and 3; encourage your parish to make these resources available to people in your area; arrange for speakers from organisations supporting refugees in the community.

7. Join or set up a support group for asylum seekers and refugees in your parish

The treatment of asylum seekers in detention is cruel. So are the conditions for those permitted to live in the community while their claims are assessed ... they experience severe hardship and the indignity of having to search for charity wherever they can. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

Find out what support is already available in your diocese. Find out where there are asylum seekers or refugees in your local area and set up or join a parish group to support them.

Look up the 2015 Refugee Week Resource Kit for ideas and practical advice for organising events: www.refugeeweek.org.au/refugee-week-resources

8. Support agencies assisting asylum seekers and refugees

We acknowledge the untiring efforts of women and men of Church and community organisations who offer material and financial assistance, as well as emotional and social support to asylum seekers in poverty ... They have stood in true solidarity with the vulnerable in the face of inflammatory public debate. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

Many organisations are working to support asylum seekers. Volunteer your skills, or make a donation, to groups such as:

- Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA): <http://capsa.org.au>
- House of Welcome (Sydney): www.houseofwelcome.com.au
- Asylum Seekers Resource Centre (Melbourne): www.asrc.org.au
- Jesuit Refugee Service Australia: www.irs.org.au
- Sisters of Mercy www.mercy.org.au
- Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education: www.erc.org.au
- St Vincent de Paul Society: www.vinnies.org.au

9. Challenge your political representatives to take a stand

Politicians need to know that we feel passionately about this issue, and not just at the ballot box, when we cast our vote. Writing to local members and ministers does have an effect, and can give encouragement to those in Parliament who also seek a better way. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

Write to the Prime Minister, the relevant Minister, your MP and Senators, and officials of political parties. The Refugee Council has suggestions on how to do this, including addresses of politicians: www.refugeecouncil.org.au/campaigns/take-action/write-to-be-heard.

10. Join in 2016 events: Refugee Week and Refugee and Migrant Sunday

The essential issue for Australia is whether we will live up to our reputation as the land of the 'fair go' that lends a hand to those in desperate circumstances. (Social Justice Statement 2015–16)

The Social Justice Statement is current for a full 12 months until Social Justice Sunday 2016. So work on all these ten steps and **plan to participate in events in 2016**.

Refugee Week begins on the second Sunday in June. Resources are provided by the *Refugee Council of Australia* www.refugeecouncil.org.au.

Refugee and Migrant Sunday is celebrated on the last Sunday in August. Resources are provided by the *Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office* www.acmro.catholic.org.au.