

## Conversation Starter for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2020

Pope Francis in his message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2020 [1] says:

*“God did not want the resources of our planet to benefit only a few. This was not the Lord’s will! We have to learn to share in order to grow together, leaving no one behind. The pandemic has reminded us how we are all in the same boat.”*

Madeleine Gleeson in her book “Offshore” [2] recounts the arrival in Australia of the first asylum seeker by boat in 1976. When Australian government officials boarded his boat, he said: “Welcome on my boat. My name is Lam Binh and these are my friends from South Vietnam and we would like permission to stay in Australia.” From 1975 to 1981 the Fraser Government accepted more than 2000 arrivals by boat and about 50,000 through resettlement, and eventually 177,000 Vietnamese came to Australia. Father Frank Brennan’s book “Tampering with Asylum” [3] quotes Malcolm Fraser: *“The political parties were united in the policy and Australians accepted the policy as right for the nation.”* In response to the repression in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Hawke Government gave residency status to 42,000 Chinese students [4]. Again there was political unity on this.

However, the situation changed dramatically in the first decade of this century, so that by 2010, when the then member for Kooyong, Petro Georgiou, was giving his valedictory speech in Parliament, he felt compelled to state [5]:

*“Also rolled back has been a more decent treatment of asylum seekers. Until a few months ago I believed that the reforms made by the Howard and the Rudd governments meant that we had irreversibly turned the corner. I wrote that we were closing a dark chapter in our history. This chapter had seen men and women who were seeking refuge in our country incarcerated. It had seen innocent people imprisoned for longer than convicted rapists, robbers and kidnapers. Escapees from persecution were demonised and detention centres traumatised—not just the detainees, but their guards.*

*This chapter, I am afraid, has been reopened. Regression has become the order of the day. With an increase in boat arrivals, asylum seekers are being subjected to increasingly virulent attacks. The Labor government has frozen the processing of Afghani and Sri Lankan asylum seekers and is reopening the Curtin detention centre. Historically, Curtin is the most notorious of the detention centres, which have all been places of despair and self-harm. Opposition policies would turn back boats, process asylum seekers in undisclosed third countries and restore the destructive temporary protection visas. These policies are cruel. They do not have my support.*

*This regression does not reflect credit on either side of federal politics. Vulnerable people are again being made into a football to be kicked around in the interests of partisan politics. This is despite the facts and the best values of our society.”*

In 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has shown us that parties of all persuasion and from all levels of government – State, Federal, Local - can work together constructively in the national interest.

Professor Jane McAdam and Fiona Chong report in their 2019 book “Refugee Rights and Policy Wrongs” [6]:

*“Offshore processing costs Australian taxpayers more than 50 times as much as it does to let asylum seekers live in the community while their refugee claims are processed. It costs*

- A\$573,100 a year to hold people offshore,
- A\$346,660 to hold them in detention in Australia,
- and A\$103,343 for them to live in community detention.

*By contrast it costs A\$10,221 a year for an asylum seeker to live in the community on a bridging visa while their claim is processed, including the cost of financial assistance for basic living expenses and essential health care.*

*In 2019 it was reported that a security company was being paid more than A\$20 million a month to oversee just 422 refugees and asylum seekers on Manus Island, costing the Australian taxpayer more than \$1600 per person per day – more than twice the price of a suite in a luxury hotel in Sydney.”*

A full 18 months ago, in December 2018, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a statement, that was reprinted in Vatican News [7], asking both major political parties to bring the asylum seekers still on Manus Island and Nauru after 5 years, to Australia or New Zealand, concluding: *Enough is enough. Let's find them a home.*

If this was done it would also make economic sense. The amount of money saved by repatriating migrants on Manus and Nauru would very easily fund the support needed by asylum seekers currently in Australia, but unable to access any government support.

On World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2020 we ask if it is possible for parties across political lines and government levels to work during the continuing COVID-19 crisis to enable the concept of sharing that is the centre piece of Pope Francis' message, the call of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the appeal by Petro Georgiou to the best values in our society, and the exhortation in our national anthem:

**For those who've come across the seas  
We've boundless plains to share  
With courage let us all combine  
To Advance Australia Fair**

## REFERENCES

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- [2] Offshore: Behind the wire on Manus and Nauru. Madeline Gleeson. Winner of the 2017 Stella Prize and the 2017 Victorian Premier's Literary Prize. New South Books. ISBN:978-1742234717
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- [7]Vatican News: report on ACBC statement: *Enough is enough. Let's find them a home.*  
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