



Justice News

Newsletter of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee

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Lock'em up and throw away the key??

The shiploads of convicts who formed a significant proportion of this nation's early white population would see a certain irony in the voicing of this sentiment by many of their descendents. Neither the cry nor the sentiments it expresses would, however, have been unfamiliar to the ears of those early convicts. Being able to distinguish oneself and one's own from the kind of people who commit ghastly crimes has been a source of psychological comfort to people of all times. This comfort even blossoms into self-righteousness when we form our views on how to deal with crime and criminals.

Crime is wicked and thus should be condemned, we tell ourselves. The community is entitled to protect itself against criminals. The surest protection is putting them behind bars where they can no longer commit crimes against the general community. Criminals also deserve punishment for the wrong they have done to their victims. And punishments should not only exact retribution for each crime but also deter others from committing the same crime in the future. If the courts hand down the sentences criminals deserve, we like to tell ourselves, then we would have less reason to fear that we might fall victim to the kinds of crimes they commit.

As the Australian bishops remind us in their annual Social Justice Statement, Jesus has a disconcerting habit of disturbing our comfort in many sentiments, not least this one. Jesus always condemns the sin but never the sinner. Indeed, the bishops point to the example of the father in the parable of the prodigal son: instead of turning away the offending son, the father throws a party to welcome him home. Jesus himself was arrested, tortured, tried and executed as a criminal. If we want to identify with him, therefore, we cannot simply dismiss criminals as 'others', not like us, and therefore about whom we need not care.

This is not to say that crime should be tolerated and that criminals should not be punished. It is to say, however, that Christians cannot allow themselves to be driven in their assessment of crime and criminals in society by popular sentiment, especially sentiment manipulated by sections of the media.

The bishops ask us to look at certain myths about crime (with the exception of some violent crimes, crime rates are falling, not rising), and at the causes of crime (poor family backgrounds, lack of education). Sadly, simply being of Aboriginal descent makes you 17 times more likely to be imprisoned than if you are non-Aboriginal: having largely destroyed Aboriginal society, our nation has refused them welcome in our own.

The bishops also call upon us to consider alternatives to imprisonment. Like strapping children, long prison sentences may make the punishers feel better but they don't deter people from committing crimes. It is not to deny the priority of the right of the victim to reparation to recognise that the human dignity of the criminal entitles him/her to rehabilitation. Indeed, the self-interest of the community dictates that it should act to convert the criminal to a productive member of the community rather than leave him/her with little alternative but to slide back into their criminal way of life.

The Victorian government has moved to increase imposition of maximum sentences, allegedly in line with community sentiment. This sentiment is not confirmed by recent studies. However, the bishops give us as Christians much more fundamental reasons for resisting this move, and for condemning the efforts of some sections of the media to reduce judicial discretion and increase the power of popular prejudice in the administration of criminal justice.



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Justice for Asylum Seekers

**The following is an edited extract from the 2011 Rerum Novarum oration
'Asylum Seekers: Is There a Just Solution?'
given by Bishop Vincent Long van Nguyen at Central Hall, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne
on Tuesday 11 October 2011**

The asylum seeker and refugee issue is long term and complicated; and there is no easy solution in the context of our contemporary society and indeed our role in the world today. What I would like to appeal to you, though, is that we need to approach the issue from a positive narrative and not from a narrow and negative mentality which demeans all Australians. We all remember the Tampa incident and how it damaged our reputation internationally – even if it might have been politicised domestically. Sadly, in the post-September 11th world, when border protection and national security acquire prominence politically and socially, the rights of asylum seekers become secondary and even expendable. The Tampa and the subsequent “children overboard” incidents are instances, and indeed the epitome of the negative narrative and the base politics that have tainted the debate. Regardless of where we stand on the issue, it demeans us when fellow human beings are projected as less than human and dangerous. Surely, people who risk their lives for nothing more than a better future for themselves and their children deserve better treatment. Surely, a civilised migrant nation such as ours can conduct itself better even in respect of a very complicated issue.

To my mind, we cannot approach the issue of the asylum seekers without reference to the broader context of justice and solidarity. Australia is and will continue to be a magnet for asylum seekers as long as there is an extreme chasm between where we are and where they are on the political and socio-economic spectrum. A positive narrative consists in addressing the issue as primarily a humanitarian and justice issue, rather than merely a political one. In the last analysis, asylum seekers challenge us to consider their plight 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 our less fortunate brothers and sisters? Can we continue to secure our privilege as our “exclusive right” without confronting the 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 attitudes? It seems to me that we cannot avoid these and other vexing moral questions that lurk behind the issue of asylum seekers.

I would say this to all fellow Australians: we can do a whole lot better than allowing the politics of fear and negativity to hijack our discourse and dictate our response; we can stop the demeaning of our beautiful country by reclaiming its Christian principle of preferential option for the poor, its fair-go-for-all tradition and its legendary support for the underdog. Australia rose to the challenge in the past with its generous embrace of asylum seekers, migrants and refugees. It proved itself especially courageous during the Indo-Chinese exodus and accepted an unprecedented number of Asian refugees for the first time in its history. The world did not come to an end as some might have feared. On the contrary, Australia changed for the better as it always has 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. 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.

I conclude with the Australian Catholic Bishops' message on refugees and asylum seekers - May 2004 “Australia has the chance to restore its reputation as an exemplary humanitarian country where refugees can rebuild their shattered lives and where, as a nation, we can sing without shame that “for those who come across the sea, we have boundless plains to share”.



Bishop Vincent Long van Nguyen OFMConv was born in Vietnam in 1961 and was himself an asylum seeker and refugee. He escaped from Vietnam in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and arrived in Australia in 1981 after a perilous voyage by boat. In May 2011 he was appointed an Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, and is Bishop for its Western Region

The full text of Bishop Long's Rerum Novarum Oration, and a video of the Oration can be viewed on the website of the Archdiocese of Melbourne at <http://www.cam.org.au>

Every Australian Counts

The campaign for a National Disability Insurance Scheme

People with disabilities and their families remain amongst the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society. For too long people with disabilities have been SHUT IN (institutionalised) and SHUT OUT (marginalised from society); it is time for us to transform the disability system in Australia.

It is time for Australians with disabilities and their families to be given a FAIR GO.



Why does Australia need a National Disability Insurance Scheme?

- The support system for people with a disability, their families and carers is in crisis. If you, or someone you love, is born with a disability or acquires one later in life, you all run the risk of falling through a huge hole in Australia's safety net.
- People with a disability and their families and carers want to participate in the social, economic, and cultural life of the nation. But there are many barriers to their full inclusion.
- Lack of support and services means families are primarily responsible for meeting the needs of their family member with a disability. Many families are struggling with high rates of physical, emotional and financial stress.
- The current situation is inequitable – people receive different levels of support depending on how, when and where their disability was acquired.
- An economic crisis is looming. The number of people with a disability is increasing and the number of people willing and able to provide unpaid care is falling. This means the cost to government is expected to escalate dramatically in the future.
- A National Disability Insurance Scheme would provide people with a disability and their families and carers with the regular care, support, therapy and equipment they need. As a Medicare-type scheme, it would provide a secure and consistent pool of funds for these services and support.
- It would be fair, efficient and effective. It would focus on early intervention and delivering those supports which produce the best long-term outcomes. It would maximise opportunities for independence, participation and productivity.
- It would be individualised and person-centred. Support would be based on the choices of the person with a disability and their family.
- The scheme would reframe support as investment rather than charity. Timely interventions, appropriate aids and equipment, training and development would become investment in individual capacity rather than welfare. The scheme would therefore lead to more positive results for people with a disability, their families and carers as well as being fiscally responsible.
- All Australians would benefit from this scheme because disability can affect anyone, anytime. Everyone will benefit from building a more inclusive, more diverse community.

The current Federal Government “likes” the idea of a National Disability Insurance Scheme but we need to keep campaigning until this is actually legislated and operational.

Jacqui Pierce

Jacqui Pierce is the National Disability Insurance Scheme Coordinator at Karingal

For more information about how a National Disability Insurance Scheme would work visit the Productivity Commission website www.pc.gov.au and select find a report and then choose Disability Care and Support. To learn more about the campaign and to sign up as a supporter visit www.everyaustraliancounts.com.au. To arrange a guest speaker contact: **Jacqui Pierce** via email j_pierce@bigpond.net.au or phone 5258 4205

Local Catholic and Uniting Church groups work together for social justice

After some recent combined meetings between the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee and members of the Uniting Church communities in Geelong working for the same causes, it was agreed that we should work together more closely.

To this end a meeting decided to begin a 6-month period of experimentation – working as combined sub-committees, one on asylum seekers and the other on climate change. If the experiment worked, we would consider amalgamating. The same meeting also decided that the experiment should be open to other churches as well, and an invitation to join us will be extended to the Anglican Church.

There is a very good practical reason for working together. We all have limited resources to devote to the same causes. But there is also a very good religious reason for joining together. We share in the one Baptism and are called to preach the one gospel. Our one Lord calls us to unity in him. The motto of the ecumenical movement has long been 'do together all that is possible, and do separately only what is necessary'. We are proceeding in that spirit, and we invite other members of our churches to join with us in our work for social justice.

Michael Leahy

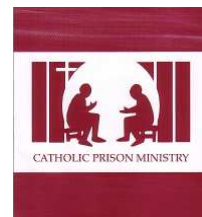
The Catholic Prison Ministry -

- **Listens** to people in prison who are worried about their situation, and to those who just want to talk to someone
- **Provides** spiritual and emotional support to people in prison and their families
- **Offers** religious services, including Reconciliation and Eucharist which is celebrated regularly in all prisons
- **Enables** people in prison to access bibles, religious books and other religious items
- **Advocates** for prisoners when necessary
- **Empowers** people to access services which address their needs
- **Supports** the initiatives of those who are promoting alternatives to incarceration of offenders
- **Promotes** the development and understanding of Restorative Justice

Catholic Prison Ministry

PO Box 1670
Preston South Victoria 3072
Ph 93214142
Email: cpmVIC@pacific.net.au

Catholic Chaplains visit each of the prisons in Victoria



Justice News is a publication of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee, and is authorised and published by the Committee's coordinator, Kevin Yelverton, c/- St Mary's Parish Office, 150 Yarra Street, Geelong 3220 (kbyelverton@bigpond.com).

The Committee welcomes letters and comments in response to items published in Justice News. All letters and comments are placed before the Committee and will be replied to wherever possible. The Committee can be contacted via its coordinator, Kevin Yelverton.

Earlier issues of **Justice News** and further information about the Social Justice Committee are available on the website of the Justice Unit of the Archdiocese of Melbourne at <http://www.cam.org.au/justice/geelongdeanery.htm>

