

messenger

“If you want peace, work for justice.”
POPE PAUL VI

of hope

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Sr Mary Annell, Director of the HIV and AIDS Prevention Program in El Salvador, recently visited Australia to promote Caritas Australia Project Compassion appeal, “The Challenge is Poverty, The Time is Now”.

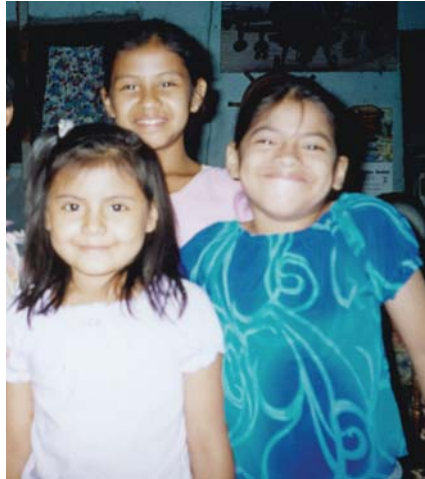
Sr Mary says that to make change, we must face the reality of our situation, and then ask the tough questions. This is how we become empowered to take control of our own lives.

Eleven-year-old Iris had no control over contracting HIV/AIDS. When she was only a tiny baby, her mother, Flor, recently widowed by her alcoholic husband, realised her baby was sick. At six months, baby Iris was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Inevitably, Flor discovered she too, had the deadly disease.

Stoically, Flor went about devoting her life to her daughter. A strong and compassionate catholic Flor had been an active member of her parish community, regularly visiting the sick. “She listened to them, talked about God and gave them hope”, said Sr Mary.

Now, she and her baby daughter were sick. Flor took her baby Iris to Sr Mary. “She was very sick and underweight,” said Sr Mary. At three and a half years old, Iris began taking anti-viral medication, which has improved her health dramatically.

Sadly, the social stigma in El Salvador means that HIV/AIDS sufferers can't easily disclose their condition. Known HIV/AIDS sufferers are ostracised from communities, deemed unemployable, their children expelled from school.



Iris (right) and friends at the HIV and AIDS Prevention Program in San Salvador

Three years ago, Flor developed AIDS. Iris was with her mother as she died. “Her funeral was the biggest I've seen – everybody knew Flor”, said Sr Mary.

Eleven-year-old Iris is doing well, says Sr Mary. A feisty young girl, she has faced the reality of her situation and knows what she wants in life.

As access to a balanced diet is as important as medication to HIV patients, the clinic provides food and nutrition information and supplies. To combat the isolation that accompanies the disease, the clinic trains volunteers to visit patients home once or twice a week. The clinic also supports children to attend school, and helps children with their studies.

compassion

The clinic plays an important role in educating the community. Teenagers perform in the clinic's theatre, doing role-plays in schools and parishes. HIV/AIDS victims share their personal testimonies.

In 2000, Sr Mary asked Flor to share her story. “Given that Flor was such a strong and involved Catholic, as well as a mother, she had a big impact in the parishes. People with HIV/AIDS are often seen as sinners, but Flor was able to break down that stereotype”.

Sr Mary's conviction is that “we are all brothers and sisters who need to be together in one community. We are all children of God, so we must respect the dignity of all human beings”.

It's a simple message, but it's a challenge to us all. “You might feel powerless to help,” said Sr Mary, but “the people of El Salvador can feel powerless too. What we need to do is to empower people to work together for change”.

editorial

“Do we help the poor, if we do not ask why they are poor?” Dom Helder Camara

Such is the challenge laid out by Caritas Australia in their Lenten Project Compassion appeal – “The Challenge is Poverty, the Time is Now.” It is under this theme that contributions have been made to the March edition of *Messenger of Hope*.

Indeed, Australians are good at helping the poor, responding generously in times of crisis. The recent tsunami crisis exemplified this.

Yet, throughout this newsletter it becomes clear that lying behind the poverty that provokes our generosity, are often structural injustices waiting to be challenged. Helder Camara's words were never needed more.

It is worth questioning why in the face of such generosity government

funded foreign aid has declined in the past two decades, as outlined in the article “Compassion: Rhetoric or Reality”.

“Poverty in the Lucky Country”, asks us to consider why is it that Indigenous people suffer some of the worst rates of curable disease in the world, in our wealthy country.

So too, “Barely Surviving”, invites us to question why, based on their visa status, some people live in Australia in absolute poverty without income or medical care.

As Sr Annell says above, we must face the reality of the situation if we are to bring about change. This is the greatest challenge of all. It is in seeking the truth that we might begin to make a difference for the world's poor.

Regina Lane | Editor



PHOTO: DARREN JAMES/THE MELBOURNE TIMES

barely surviving

BY **BRENDA HUBBER, MELBOURNE CATHOLIC MIGRANT AND REFUGEE OFFICE**

Considering Australia was one of the first countries to institute a welfare system, it is incredible to believe that, in the 21st century, there are people who exist solely on the charity of the community for their survival.

The poorest of our citizens are eligible for some kind of Centrelink payments. Though these are less than half the minimum wage and hardly cover the basic costs of food, clothing and shelter, they are at least entitled to something.

In the early 1990s, when the East Timorese asylum seekers had not received a first decision within six months, they were given ASAS payments – 89% of less than half the minimum wage.

And then there are Type E bridging visas (BVEs) that generally deny the recipient the right to work or income support, and subsequently Medicare entitlements.

In 2003, the Asylum Seeker Project (ASP) in North Melbourne released a report on welfare issues for asylum seekers on BVEs. It found that asylum seekers not eligible to work or receive income support lived in abject poverty with virtually no mainstream supports available to them.

Ninety-five percent of the people they worked with had no work rights and subsequently no Medicare

entitlements, no income support and no permission to study or gain vocational training. Sixty percent had been caught on the '45-day' rule, which means that when they did not approach the Immigration Department within 45 days of arriving in Australia, asylum seekers are denied the right to work or income support. Twenty-three percent had never had an income while in Australia and 44% were in debt with little chance of repayment.

Behind the statistics was a litany of suffering. For example:

- The 13-year-old boy who kept getting detention because he was late for school or not attending sport. The reality was his family could not afford sports shoes or daily travel tickets.
- Sick people fearing they were unable to seek medical treatment or worse having treatment denied to them when they finally did seek it.
- People continuing to go untreated because they could not afford the medicines to make them well.
- Mothers-to-be going nearly full term without seeing a doctor.
- The woman, who discharged herself from hospital, when she received a large bill on the second day.
- The young woman who, as her welcome wore thin, moved from friends' and acquaintances' homes. Her days were spent looking for food and housing. She ended up in hospital malnourished.

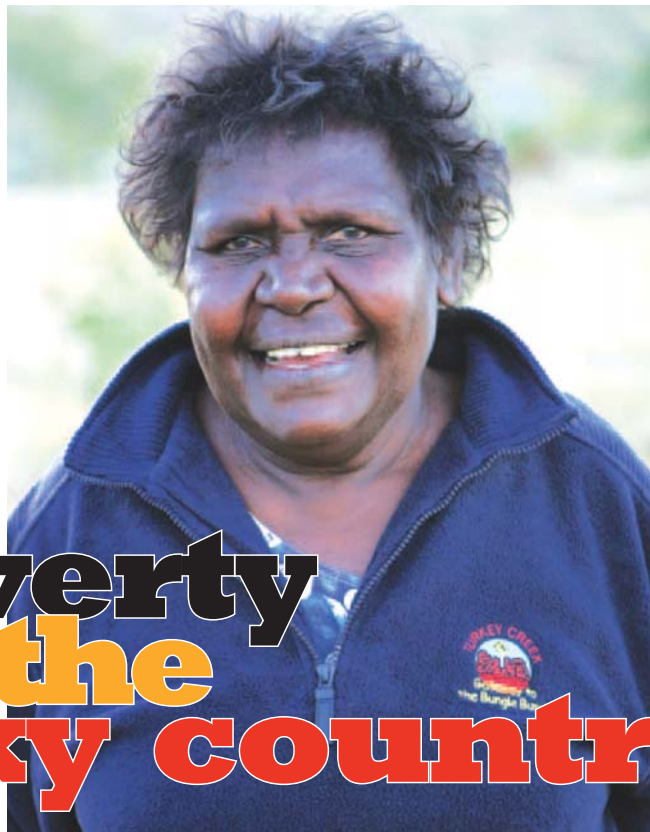
A woman stands in front of bare shelves at an Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in Melbourne. Each week these centre's try to feed about 180 families. As Dom Helder Camara once asked, 'Do we help the poor, if we do not ask why they are poor?' Do we continue to stock the shelves of material aid agencies without asking how their lot could be improved?

The sad part is this suffering is so unnecessary.

Under international treaties, such as the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Australia recognises the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing and housing, and to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The government needs to realise it has a 'duty of care' to asylum seekers while their claims are being assessed – not to punish them for seeking asylum.

Another sad aspect is that people often find themselves on BVEs through no fault of their own. They, or their migration agent, may not have known all the intricacies of migration law. The Immigration Department may not have realised the full implications of some of the introduced rules. Or the government has used the withdrawal of work rights as a deterrent to people exercising their right to the full appeal process.

The ASP is about to launch a campaign – *Dignity not Charity* – to argue for the right to work and health care entitlements for people seeking Australia's protection. If you or your group would like to know more, contact Stancea at on (03) 9326 8343.



poverty in the lucky country

BY BETTY PIKE, ELDER, ABORIGINAL CATHOLIC MINISTRY, MELBOURNE

Poverty in Australia today is a deadly disease. Its effect on Aboriginal people in Australia is destroying body, soul and spirit.

Through the structural injustice of white oppression, a "culture of poverty" has been created, resulting in the breakdown of Aboriginal law, culture and traditions. This in turn, further entrenches the deprivation since the period of colonisation.

The structural injustice has been perpetuated through inequitable funding processes, which denies Aboriginal people the right to self determination, the ability to make decisions concerning their own affairs, therefore marginalising and handicapping Aboriginal people even further.

Aboriginal poverty is much broader than material poverty. The tragedy of Aboriginal poverty is that it is not simply having little money or material possessions, but is one of deprivation and the consequences of a loss of cultural continuity and identity through dislocation from the land – Aboriginal peoples' spiritual and economic base.

The loss of culture, language and identity has engendered the material poverty that causes the living standard of some Aboriginal communities in Australia to lag behind conditions in third world countries. Diseases such as rheumatic fever, unheard of for the most part in Australia, are plaguing Aboriginal communities in Western Australia and Northern Territory.

Whilst the focus of Aboriginal poverty is often placed on Aboriginal communities in remote areas, it must not be forgotten that the other 76 per cent of the Aboriginal community, who live in urban or rural areas, also suffer from lower

education, higher unemployment, poorer housing and poorer health than non-Aboriginal Australia.

Hiding behind this sickening type of human degradation and poverty is an Australia unable or unwilling to own up to its past. Still, the lucky majority fail to address the true history of its own First People and the way in which the 'lucky country' became lucky and how the indigenous people became the 'have nots', and are still enduring this abject poverty in one of the richest countries of the world.

However, there is still hope for this situation to change – for those who are willing to seek the truth, and act.

In his address in 1986, Pope John Paul II brought hope to Aboriginal people. The Pope said to the Aboriginal people "You are part of Australia and Australia is a part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others".

The Pope recognised the past hurts "Certainly,

Shirley, a Gija woman from the Warmun community in remote East Kimberly, is participating in the Diabetes Management and Care Program launched last April, by the Unity of First People of Australia (UFGA), supported by Caritas Australia.

UFGAs' Diabetes Management and Care Program aims to stop the rising incidence of Type II diabetes in remote Indigenous communities, by helping Aboriginal people take control over their health. Type II diabetes can result in blindness, nerve disease, chronic kidney failure, heart disease and early death. As a diabetic herself and leader within her community, Shirley has agreed to not only participate in the diabetes program but also to act as a community carer.

PHOTO: RUSSELL SHAKESPEARE/CARITAS AUSTRALIA

what has been undone cannot be undone. But what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off until tomorrow".

The Pope's statement was a challenge to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. As we near the twenty-year anniversary of the Pope's address, we must ask ourselves, what has been achieved?

Aboriginal poverty continues to shame us all, conversations of treaty are long off the national agenda, Reconciliation – the 'people's movement' struggles to capture our hearts and minds. What of the Church, how has it received the contribution of Aboriginal people?

Indeed, the challenges are many. However, the Pope's vision of 1986 is not lost. Its not been lost on people from local parishes and schools who in their own communities are working towards Reconciliation. Now, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Pope's statement, we are calling on all parishes and school to join in the "Pass It On" initiative, to recommit to the Pope's call to joyfully receive the contribution of Aboriginal people in the life of the Church.

"Pass It On" Message Stick Relay

The "Pass It On" initiative is a direct response to a call from Indigenous people to respond to the message of hope and reconciliation that Pope John Paul proclaimed. The Message Stick Relay uses ancient cultural symbolism and practice, to invite all of us to celebrate the Pope's message and raise awareness of the need to redress historical and present day injustice, and to recommit people to actively work towards Reconciliation in our local communities.

The Message Stick Relay will be launched in Sydney on May 1st and will arrive in Melbourne on May 29th. The Message Sticks will be relayed around parishes and schools and brought together in Alice Springs in September 2006, in a celebration to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Pope's message.

If you'd like to get involved or volunteer in the organisation of the Relay, please contact Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, Melbourne on (03) 9480 3849.

Compassion: rhetoric and reality

Given the devastating impact of the Boxing Day tsunami, it is most appropriate that the present edition of the Messenger of Hope has been organised around the Project Compassion theme, "the challenge is poverty, the time is now".

The Australian government's response to the Asian crisis was swift and decisive, pledging \$1 billion in direct aid to Indonesia alone.

part of the Prime Minister's statement that is most telling for the present discussion.

By international standards Australia is, as the Prime Minister rightly suggests, fortunate, wealthy and in a position to help. To what extent, however, does Australia's recent political rhetoric on international aid and assistance coincide with reality? Consider this: Australia's Official Development Assistance

a product of television cameras drawn to the magnet of disaster.

There has of late been a concerted push by nation states to do more for developing nations. The UN Millennium Goals being one such example of transnational collaboration organised around the task of poverty reduction. The world's seven richest countries also agreed recently that up to

"My responsibility is to make sure that Australia's generosity matches the need of those who are in distress" John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, 5 January 2005

The Australian public also gave generously to both secular and faith-based Tsunami appeals. Prime Minister Howard was proud of Australia's response. Delivering a pre-prepared statement at a press conference in Jakarta in the week following the tsunami, the Prime Minister stated, "the world has come together in a remarkably compassionate and effective way. We should all be very proud of the contribution that different people and different countries have made, not least of course the contribution that's been made by Australia which has been widely applauded and respected as it should be because it does represent an extremely generous contribution from a country that has been blessed by providence and good fortune over the years and we're in a position to help. But it's one thing to be in a position to help, its another thing to actually provide the assistance." It is the final

program, an initiative aimed at advancing Australia's national interest by assisting developing countries to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development, has an allocated budget of \$2.133 billion for 2004-05. This figure is estimated at 0.26% of Australia's Gross National Income, well below the 0.7% target agreed to by United Nations member states. In contrast, the Defence budget for 2004-05 exceeds \$18 billion, a figure representing more than 2% of GNI. If, as the Prime Minister has suggested, that the Government does have a responsibility to match generosity with the needs of those most in distress, impoverished Africans who will receive just 3% of Australia's ODA may justifiably ask, "what about us?" One would expect that Australia's commitment to aid and development would not be dependent upon a 'when-it-suits' mentality. Furthermore, it is also hoped that global charity is not, as Simon Jenkins recently suggested,

\$A100 billion in debts from 37 of the world's poorest countries be written off. Debt relief is not on its own though a poverty reducing panacea. A combination of greater trade access, increased aid, debt cancellation and policy reform is required for demonstrable improvement. The task at hand is to ensure that "the challenge is poverty, the time is now" mantra resonates loudly within the consciousness of the Australian government. After all, to borrow an expression from the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, poverty is not a force of nature, but the failure of humanity. Africa suffers the equivalent of a man-made, preventable tsunami every week.

It is often said in that in politics talk is cheap. If such a sentiment is true, then it would seem that Australia's \$1 billion commitment to our South Pacific neighbours is an absolute bargain.

noteices

Would you like to volunteer?

Melbourne Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace seeks people with an interest in social justice to provide volunteer support in the areas of:

- research
- policy analysis
- media communications
- editing
- data entry
- administration support

If you would like to help, please contact: justice@melbourne.catholic.org.au or phone: 9926 5727

Social Justice News and Events

In 2005, the Melbourne Catholic Commission for Justice Development and Peace aims to engage closely with social justice activists within the Archdiocese. We hope this newsletter, *Messenger of Hope*, and our soon to be redeveloped website can provide a source of information and ideas for action so that social justice groups can be kept informed and up to date. The Commission encourages you to make contributions, or publicise your news and events in our newsletter, *Messenger of Hope* or on our website www.ccjdp.org.

Please contact the editor Regina Lane at: justice@melbourne.catholic.edu.au or on 9926 5727

Melbourne Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace

Doing Justice In Catholic Schools

A FREE information and resource day for Years 10, 11, and 12 students involved in Justice Activities in Catholic Secondary Schools. A great day for students from social justice groups.

Date: Thursday 31st March
Time: 9.30am-2.30pm
Venue: Australian Catholic University
Victoria Pde, East Melbourne
BYO Lunch

To register, please contact Regina Lane, Melbourne Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace (03) 9926 5727



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