

The Church and asylum seekers

BY BRUCE DUNCAN CSSR

Reflections

A number of guest columnists will be contributing to Reflections, to reflect a range of views. This week Fr Bruce Duncan reflects on the plight of refugees, an issue of great concern to many in the Church.

Many Australians have been shocked at the treatment of the asylum seekers and the exploitation of this issue for political advantage during the recent election. Even former leading Liberals such as Malcolm Fraser and Ian McPhee objected forcefully to what they perceived as cynical opportunism.

To restore integrity to the political scene, the Senate should examine the treatment of asylum seekers and, particularly, claims that they threw their children into the sea. MPs who have misrepresented matters should be held accountable.

Australia has a right to protect its borders, but we are bound by basic moral principles as well as international law to provide asylum to genuine refugees.

Clearly the Church has a duty to speak strongly if it thinks human rights have been abused, even if it means conflict with political parties.

In this case, the major parties claimed to hold similar positions, so the Church had greater freedom to speak without being accused of being politically partisan.

How did the Church perform? Various bishops and Church justice agencies, among others, did speak strongly.

Many clergy of various denominations also spoke firmly in their homilies. The new lobby group launched by the religious orders, PolMin, was very active in using the internet to communicate quickly its well-researched information.

Ecumenical and inter-religious groupings also spoke out against the rough treatment given the refugees.

But with what effect? Once such a wide coalition of religious denominations would have had a significant influence on such a debate.

But does the outcome indicate that the media, particularly the more populist wing, have a dominant influence over the formation of opinion?

The problem is not just the views of individual politicians, but that they tapped into fears and anxieties among many Australians who suddenly per-

ceived the refugees as a threat to social cohesion or even their jobs.

This is the deeper problem that must be addressed, partly by better political leadership, but also by Church people providing accurate information about the desperate circumstances of the refugees, standing firm on principles of human rights and demonstrating that the asylum seekers, far from being a threat, can be a great asset to Australia, as other refugees and immigrants have been over the past 50 years.

Perhaps most important is that more Australians should meet some of the refugees and hear their stories, so we can respond with fairness and compassion.

We Christians especially would not want to find ourselves at the Last Judgement asking God when we saw him hungry and sick and turned him away, to hear him say: when you treated the asylum seekers like criminals, that was me.

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Catholic Weekly 2/12/01