

A NEW STAGE ON THE ECUMENICAL JOURNEY
Bendigo Ecumenical Forum 25th August 2002

Bruce Duncan*

This day has been highlighted as Refugee Sunday by various Christian communities, and allows us to see our ecumenical journey in quite a fresh light. In view of our treatment of the asylum seekers, it comes at a deeply troubling time in our nation's history. I would not want my comments to be seen in a partisan political way, but wish to address some of the moral issues involved, where we are seriously obliged to defend human rights and natural justice of the most vulnerable people.

May I begin with a comment on where we have come on our ecumenical journey. We are all aware of how close has been collaboration between Christian communities on urgent social issues, especially in recent years. We can recall, just in recent years,

- campaigns for Aboriginal reconciliation, which unfortunately seems to have faded from public awareness,
- support for East Timorese independence, and now
- support for asylum seekers.

This collaboration, I believe, has changed us, and transformed our attitudes as we have discovered how much we have in common, and thus identify more precisely the core elements of faith from different cultural and historical expressions in our own traditions.

Jubilee

At stake here is our image of God, our fundamental understanding of who God is. During the Year of the Great Jubilee in 2000, we focused very closely on the Jubilee theme in the Old Testament and St Luke's Gospel especially. The Jubilee theme forcefully reminded us that that our God is one of liberation from oppression, a God of human liberation in all its dimensions. Moreover, he invites us to share his commitment and solidarity, demonstrated so poignantly in Christ's own death, with those who suffer and are afflicted. You will recall that, in the light of this Jubilee call, Pope John Paul called us Catholics to an examination of conscience as a Church. He went on to make a formal apology for the errors of Catholics in the past, and the injustices committed by church leaders, and called us to a new humility. As we move into the third millennium of the Christian story, he insisted that we must continue to evaluate everything we do according to the Jubilee message. Happily, this is a commitment Christians of every hue can make together, as well as Jews and indeed, by an astonishing paradox, people of any or no formal religious adherence at all.

Muslims and asylum seekers

However the arrival of numbers of Muslims in our community calls us to make a new step, to broaden our ecumenical commitment to an inter-religious one. Perhaps this is one of the unexpected blessings of our involvement with the asylum seekers. As you

* Dr Bruce Duncan belongs to the Redemptorist order. he lectures in social justice studies at Yarra Theological Union at Box Hill in Melbourne and works as a consultant at Catholic Social Services Victoria.

know, many of them are at least nominally Muslim, and our church people working with them have become committed to learning about their customs and religious beliefs. Though we have about 250,000 Muslims living in Australia, few of us have had such a close and intense relationships with Muslims before, and have been privileged to share their vulnerability and their suffering. Deep friendships have been formed, indicating the way we must begin to form bridges among the major religious traditions, not just with the Muslims but with Hindus, Buddhists and others.

I do not mean to underestimate the challenge lying before us in this inter-religious journey. Our geographical isolation has spared us from this until now, but with the processes of globalisation it is inevitable that people from the great religious traditions should mingle also in our country.

Relations between western cultures and the various worlds of Islam are experiencing great difficulty as we know. It is vital that we take the initiative in Australia to help educate our own religious traditions and the wider community into a deeper understanding of Islam. It is not a new encounter. For 1400 years Islam and the worlds of western Christianity have existed like two parallel universes, sometimes in conflict but more often in cultural isolation and ignorant of each other's cultures and beliefs. We need to recall that for nearly a thousand years Islamic civilisations were very advanced and eclipsed anything in the West. We also need to understand the richness of Muslim beliefs, and learn to collaborate in areas of social justice and human rights. Especially we need to recognise that we all worship the same God.

Respect for conscience

Any progress in inter-religious dialogue and cooperation must rest on a profound belief in the dignity of personal conscience, and respect for the duty of all people to worship God in the way they see fit. As Pope John Paul said in his message for World Refugee Sunday, each country can become a "'laboratory" of respectful living together and constructive dialogue'. I believe Australia is ideally suited to become such a laboratory.

The Asylum Seekers

For a number of years Australia has been trying to deal with numbers of asylum seekers coming by boat via Indonesia from the Middle East, particularly Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. It is almost a year since the Tampa incident, when the Australian government determined that no more asylum seekers would be allowed to land in Australia. The events of the Tampa episode have been carefully examined by Patrick Weller in his recent book, *No one tell the Prime Minister* (Scribe Publications). Many of us have been deeply shocked that high government officials misrepresented these events during an election campaign, claiming falsely that these boat people had thrown their children overboard, and stirring up fear that they were terrorists and criminals.

The government persists in misleadingly calling these people 'illegals' when they should be called 'asylum seekers'. Under international law and treaties that Australia has signed, people fleeing in fear of persecution have a right to ask asylum from Australia. They are not 'illegal' unless they are determined not to be genuine refugees, in which case they can be returned to their country of origin.

Certainly Australia has a right to screen these people for security or health reasons, but Australia is the only country in the world to incarcerate people in harsh and remote climates sometimes for years under conditions of intense security. Only Australia has adopted the pretence that parts of its territory can be excised as if international law no longer applied. Then the asylum seekers are shifted overseas to poverty-stricken Pacific Islands for processing.

It is clear that our government has intended to make an example of these people by making life so difficult that no one else in their right mind would attempt to seek asylum by boat. The policy has, of course, succeeded in deterring others, at great cost to Australia's reputation for humanitarianism.

I think I can say quite unambiguously that all the church and human rights people I hear of working with the asylum seekers or with those on temporary protection or bridging visas have been deeply distressed about how these people have been treated.

The situation of children in detention has long been of greatest concern. More recently, we have heard urgent calls by church agencies, medical personnel, doctors and psychiatrists, even some people working in the detention centres, calling attention to the cruel effects on children in detention. Among the hundreds of cases of people committing self-harm out of desperation, some are children, even to the extent of attempting suicide. We don't know how many people have attempted suicide, however I have been involved with the case of one girl of eleven who attempted suicide, and there have been others. The government claims that it has adopted programs of human decency; why then are such significant numbers of people feeling driven to self-harm or suicide? At what point does this reach the level of systemic child abuse?

Church and human rights groups have been lobbying vigorously that all children and mothers be released from detention, and preferably with their fathers so that the families can remain intact. Many children still remain in detention, though the numbers have been reduced. Currently, many parishes and Church groups are offering the government to act as 'community guardians' and provide accommodation for these people, so they can be released into their care in the community. This is something your parishes and community groups might like to consider undertaking even in Bendigo.

In this way, we can be like those midwives and the daughter of Pharaoh protecting the male children and the baby Moses.