

Moral teaching that falls on deaf ears

16 Comments **Neil Ormerod** | 20 May 2014

At a time when we are preoccupied with the shock of the budget, and Scott Morrison has been seeking to justify his proposed Australian Border Force, a recent **media release** from the Catholic Bishops seems to have passed with little or no notice from the mainstream media. It is hard to recall such a strong and direct call by the Catholic Bishops on our politicians on a matter of major public policy.

On 8 May, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference released a statement on asylum seekers which pulled no punches in terms of its evaluation of the policies of the present Coalition and former Labor governments. The language was to the point, tough and desperate in tone. It spoke of human rights being 'seriously violated', and of making an 'urgent plea for a respect for the rights of asylum seekers.'

The word which is often repeated is 'cruel/cruelty'. The current policy displays 'a cruelty that does no honour to our country'. It notes that our politicians 'are not cruel people', but 'they have made decisions and are implementing policies which are cruel'. In desperation they call out, 'Enough of this institutionalised cruelty'. While acknowledging the desire to 'stop the boats' (to use the Coalition slogan) they ask, 'Does this require such cruelty?'

In their analysis of the underlying causes for the current policy settings, the bishops again pull no punches. Referring to our past policy of 'White Australia' they acknowledge not only 'a xenophobia in us but also a latent racism' in our society. In this regard they could easily have pointed to recent efforts by the Attorney General Senator George Brandis to repeal sections of the anti-discrimination legislation, a move that has raised concerns with a number of ethnic groups in Australia. There is a real fear that the ugliness of racism will once again raise its voice.

Noting also the relative wealth of Australia as a nation, they also claim, 'There may also be the selfishness of the rich' in our refusal to recognise the claims of refugees and asylum seekers. Here again we find the present government seeking to send asylum seekers to Cambodia, one of the

world's poorest nations rather than accept our international responsibilities to asylum seekers.

They conclude their statement with a 'call on parliamentarians of all parties to turn away from these policies, which shame Australia and to take the path of a realistic compassion that deals with both human need and electoral pressure. We call on the nation as a whole to say no to the dark forces, which make these policies possible. The time has come to examine our conscience and *then to act differently*' (emphasis added).

Of course the argument is made that the policy is saving lives by discouraging boats from undertaking a perilous journey that puts lives at risk. But such a justification amounts to ends justifying means. Undoubtedly it is laudable to seek to save lives, but if the means to do so requires a serious violation of human rights and the imposition of a harsh and cruel system of indeterminate detention in remote settings, then the moral calculus shifts. We are not responsible for the moral decisions of others, but we are for the ones we make and the cruelty we impose.

The bishops are saying directly and forcefully that the current policy implemented by these politicians is immoral. 'The time has come to examine our conscience and then to act differently.' But it seems no-one is listening!

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