

Social Justice Statement 2015–16

FOR THOSE WHO'VE COME ACROSS THE SEAS

JUSTICE FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS



Chairman's Message

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, I present the 2015–2016 Social Justice Statement, *For Those Who've Come Across the Seas: Justice for refugees and asylum seekers*.

This Statement was developed in response to the longstanding divisions in Australian society over asylum seekers, particularly those who have arrived by sea. We Australians have rightly felt appalled at the dangers that refugees experience on their journeys, but we seem to have come to believe that harshness and rejection will be enough to deter desperate people from their flight to safety.

Yet the presence of boat people proves that Australia cannot insulate itself from the worldwide movement of people. Every boat we intercept, every child we detain, is a reminder that we can be part of the problem or part of the solution. While we try to bar our doors, millions are fleeing and dying – Rohingyas, Syrians, Hazaras and Somalis, to name only a few.

For me, the desperate plight of refugees is particularly poignant because I came to Australia as a boat person, fleeing as a teenager from Vietnam. I experienced communist oppression and I saw how tyranny and cruelty can leave people with no choice but to seek refuge elsewhere, in any way possible.

That personal history was one reason why I chose for my motto as a bishop the evocative words of Jesus to his disciples, *Duc in Altum* – 'Put out into the deep' (Luke 5:4). His words

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to his companions were a challenge to encounter new horizons, to go where they might not have dared, to seek grace where they had not found it before. That is the journey and the hope of all asylum seekers.

I believe that those words of Jesus also challenge Australians to make a similar journey – to dare to accept the gifts that we have come to fear or reject. And there are many gifts that refugees have brought to Australia, not only as scientists, doctors, teachers and artists but as ordinary people whose talents and energy have enriched our society.

Australia rose to the challenge in the past with its generous embrace of migrants and refugees. It proved itself especially courageous during the Indochinese exodus and accepted an unprecedented number of Asian refugees. 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 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.

With the increasing global movement of peoples and our nation's fearful response, it is timely for us to reflect on this important issue of the day. I highly commend this Statement to you and I pray that it will lead us to work for acceptance, justice and dignity for refugees and asylum seekers.

With every blessing,

Vincent Long Van Nguyen DD
Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne
Chairman, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council