

Message from the Director

Christmas is supposed to evoke all kinds of warm and cosy associations: family gatherings, carol singing, midnight Mass, presents under a Christmas tree. But when I type 'Christmas' into Google, my computer automatically suggests 'Christmas Island IDC' as a search term. In Hanns Johst's 1933 play, *Schlageter*, there is a famous line: 'Whenever I hear of culture I release the safety catch of my Browning'; it is perhaps an unfortunate consequence of working in JRS Australia that whenever I hear of Christmas, I now think of detention centres.

The government's recent decision to release the bulk of boat arrivals into the community on bridging visas is a step in the right direction, moving Australia closer to fulfilling its human rights obligations. Further steps need to be taken: the Christmas Island immigration detention centre should be closed, and replaced by a processing centre where boat arrivals are housed for the briefest possible period of time while they go through health, identity and security checks and risk assessments, before they are allowed to live in the community while awaiting the outcome of their asylum claims. There is no room for the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in a country that sees itself as a nation of laws and a member of the international community.

There are fears of even more boat arrivals now that offshore processing is no longer an option for the government. The shadow immigration spokesman recently pointed out that there have been more boat arrivals in



the four years of Labor rule than in the eleven years of the Howard government. What was not mentioned was the huge harm suffered by asylum seekers who were placed in Nauru, the asylum seekers who were returned to places such as Afghanistan who were subsequently killed, and the barbaric and still current Coalition policy of towing boats back to sea. Crucially, what was also not mentioned was the main push factor for boat arrivals: that people are seeking asylum because of rising violence in their countries, and because of the lack of protection in the countries of first asylum in South East Asia.

I often say that I am a Jesuit priest because of pure dumb luck. If an ancestor on my father's side of the family had not decided that becoming an Anglican was a good career move when the territory of Sarawak was ruled by the Brooke family, the White Rajahs who held sway there from 1841 to 1946, my family would probably never have subsequently swum from

the Thames to the Tiber, as it were. We are never self-made: we are who we are because of decisions made by others, and much of our lives are shaped by forces beyond our reckoning. Donald Home's famous description of Australia as 'the Lucky Country' should remind Australians also that it is a matter of pure dumb luck that they happened to be born here, with all the wonderful resources and protections that this country has to offer its citizens, and not somewhere else. Australians do not 'deserve' the lifestyle they enjoy, and should not be scrambling to create a fortress and obsessing about border protection when faced with asylum seekers. The life that Australians enjoy is a gift, and those who come to these shores seeking protection from persecution and violence should be allowed to enjoy that gift in equal measure.

The Christmas story tells us that Mary, Joseph and their baby had to flee their country because Herod sought the life of Jesus, and that they sought asylum in Egypt. It is ironic therefore that an island named after the Feast of the Incarnation should be a place where asylum seekers find themselves detained and treated virtually as criminals. Let us hope that the peace and goodwill proclaimed by the angelic hosts outside Bethlehem so long ago will find a place in all our hearts, that the Christmas Island IDC and the other detention centres in Australia will soon be a distant memory, a shameful – and short – chapter in Australia's history.

Fr Aloysious Mowe SJ

Shelter Project

A year ago, JRS became the first agency in Australia to receive young asylum seekers into its care. This followed a decision by the Australian government to trial a policy of “residence determination”, whereby unaccompanied minors would be released from secure immigration detention into the community while still technically remaining in detention and under the guardianship of the Minister of Immigration.

Working under the direction of the Red Cross, which had been chosen to lead the program, JRS partnered with Marist Youth Care, setting up a household that can accommodate up to eight young people who have undertaken a momentous, frightening journey, and who are being encouraged to live as normal a life as possible while they wait on the outcome of their asylum applications.

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‘Because of our expertise with refugees and asylum seekers, JRS can link people into health services, psychological services, legal services and provide accompaniment and emotional support while people are going through that process,’ says Louise Stack, coordinator of JRS’ Shelter Project.

‘Marist Youth Care bring their expertise in working with youth. They provide live-in carers – youth workers – who do round-the-clock shifts, managing the day-to-day care of the young people, doing everything from providing food and clothing and basic needs, and making sure they get to school.’

JRS caseworker Samuel Fuller says that the young residents have developed family-like bonds with one another:

‘They may have come from a barbed wire detention facility - in a sense a prison - into what is almost a family unit. It is wonderful to see the change that they go through, and to suddenly see them integrate into the culture of the house,’ he says.

And while there’s no knowing whether these refugees will be granted permanent residency, JRS is ensuring that their time in Australia is not wasted.

‘A big part of our job is to give people life skills they can take with them anywhere in the world,’ says Ms Stack. ‘If they end up having to return to their country, hopefully their life will be better because of the experience they’ve had here.’

Christmas Island

When Fr Celso Romanin SJ arrived on Christmas Island in October this year, he encountered detainees living without hope, scenes that reminded him of his work years earlier with refugees in Asia and Africa. Here, he reflects on his experience.

In the mid-1980s a group of young men from Hei Ling Chow were involved in a violent riot and were removed to Victoria Prison on the island of Hong Kong in what can only be described as the bowels of the prison. The authorities said that although it was within the prison, this was not in fact prison but part of the detention system. No-one ever went there - no lawyer, no case-worker. I, as chaplain, went each week, and felt the utter powerlessness of the young men. I listened as best I could to their stories, and felt the hopelessness of their situation. Whilst others lived in some kind of hope that their case would be activated and they would be found eligible for re-settlement in a third country, these young men were deprived of all hope. I often wonder what happened to them, where they are and how they cope with life.

It was a similar story throughout the camps of Asia, Pulau Galang, Pulau Bidong and Site 2 on the Thai/Cambodian border; and to a much lesser extent the Hmong camps of northern Thailand; a story of young people who had been snatched from their traditional family and cultural environment and had taken to a life of gang adherence. Fortunately, many who came to Australia were able to re-discover some of this cultural tradition, especially through family re-integration programs, and they have made wonderful citizens.



And in Africa a similar story: the men largely were dead or displaced, women and children found themselves in camps, and the mothers, because of the hard life and constant work to provide for the family, were not able to discipline their children, who in turn became more and more difficult to control. They were left in a cultural and spiritual void by wars and lack of self-determination.

So too here at the detention centre on Christmas Island. I sit in the compound, surrounded by young men housed in a cage, in a situation where they wait for someone else to make some kind of decision for them. They need someone else to interpret

‘But the question persists: **what are we doing to young lives?**’

for them, and then their case is taken away, and they wait. I sit in the compound, surrounded by languages I don’t understand. I try to picture myself in their situation, living with others who represent different cultures and languages, carrying different stories of violence and war, desperately seeking somewhere to be able to live peacefully, and most importantly missing family. And this goes on day after day. I stay for a good while, and when I can no longer cope, I have a key and can go out.

But the question persists: what are we doing to young lives? The government’s answer is to tell us how evil the people smugglers are,

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Photo: DIAC

JRS Melbourne Cup Luncheon

The contrasting themes of carnival frivolity and saintly reflection were played out at the 2011 JRS Melbourne Cup Luncheon in Sydney, which fell on All Saints’ Day and resulted in a hopeful fellowship for the cause of refugees and asylum seekers.

‘It is a good time to celebrate being Australian, and therefore a good time to remember those who come to Australia seeking protection and appealing to the best instincts of this nation,’ said Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ, who was celebrating his first Melbourne Cup Luncheon since assuming the role of Director of JRS in February this year.

‘I hope everyone will take away not only their winnings and prizes that are part of the day’s fun, but also a renewed sense of what Australia could be: a nation that is generous with its abundant resources, compassionate to those in greatest need, and unwavering in its defence of the powerless and the poor. The mark of a great country is not how the richest in it live, but how the poorest who come to it are treated.’

Guest speaker, Dr Obi Fidelis Ayuk, a former refugee from Cameroon, encouraged guests to continue assisting refugees and asylum seekers.

‘Whatever you do,’ he said, ‘there is something added to your lives in one way or the other.’



Staff and volunteers enjoy themselves at the JRS Melbourne Cup Luncheon

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and we must do what we can to stop them. And so those punished are the desperate, and the fishermen who receive a small payment for sailing the boats. These people are bewildered and totally lost. Most have no language, no affinity with others in detention, and ultimately are not the ones responsible for people smuggling – they are simply trying to provide for their families. And so, who claims responsibility for young lives lost?

For a short time of my life I can feel something of the emptiness, even the despair of others with very little to hope or live for. I can theorise about the importance of border control, of how just we are as a society to protect our citizens. But to do this we must distance ourselves from the human face of suffering. Here, people wait in despair; when things become too much to cope with, they are given sleeping pills, and when their despair becomes too great they light a fire in their room, or break a window, then there is a court case, no end to suffering, just more of it.

JRS Youth Award

The third annual JRS Youth Award attracted a diversity of entries ranging from the clever and practical to the technically brilliant, with the Director of JRS, Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ, describing the winning entries variously as 'haunting' and 'brilliant'.

The winners of the Year 9-10 award were Kieran Dale, Henry Sinclair and Brandon Ryan from St Ignatius' College, Riverview, for 'The Road of a Refugee', which took the form of an interactive game.

'It was one of the few entries that explored the staggering complexity of the phenomenon of forcibly displaced persons, and did so by drawing the viewer into a game where we have to make the choices and experience the consequences ourselves,' said Fr Mowe.

Groups from St Aloysius College, Milsons Point, St Ignatius' College, Riverview, St Ignatius' College, Geelong, and Korowa Anglican Girls' School, VIC were highly commended in this division.

Only one entry was singled out in the Year 11-12 category, 'Somali Refugees' by David O'Keefe and Marc Privitelli of Xavier College, Kew. Fr Mowe described it as an outstanding entry that was well-deserving of first place.

'It did not look at refugees from a distance, or from the perspective of an outsider. Rather it gave the refugees a voice, and what a voice: eloquent, heart-felt, painting a world that spoke not just of the horrors that refugees flee, but also of the beauty of what they leave behind.' 'Somali Refugees' has already been shown at two major events - the JRS Melbourne Cup Luncheon and Jesuit Mission's cheque presentation evening, and received rave reviews at both events.

See the winning entries and the full list of winners at www.jrs.org.au

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