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📷 A painting by a young asylum seeker depicting his journey to Australia.

Time to convert our conscience

“Christ hangs in agony until the end of time; and how are we to sleep?”
Blaise Pascal

Australia seems to be sleeping through one of the most shameful and disgraceful periods in its history. Thousands of people seeking asylum here are being treated as criminals, either locked up on Christmas Island while awaiting transportation to Australia’s new penal colonies in Papua New Guinea and Nauru, or sent back to the countries which they’ve fled without their asylum claims being even considered. Worse, the government has admitted that unaccompanied children have been sent back to Sri Lanka without any opportunity to put in a claim for protection in Australia.

As far as the government is concerned, these boat arrivals should have stayed in their own countries and found some way to get one of the 11,000 visas that Australia doles out each year to refugees who meekly stay in a refugee camp somewhere until they are lucky enough to be chosen for resettlement by Australia. I say “lucky” rather than “vulnerable”, even though vulnerability is assumed by most people to be the main criterion for granting a refugee in a camp

somewhere a visa to Australia. Even granting all the merits of the resettlement program, the reality is that, with very few exceptions, the most vulnerable refugees in the camps – unaccompanied minors – have not been included by Australia in its resettlement intake.

In his Lenten message, Pope Francis asks us to reflect on what it means to be like Christ who became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). He calls on us to “confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own, and to take practical steps to alleviate it.” His words are most apt for Australians when he says that our consciences need to be “converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing”.

On Christmas Island, on Manus and Nauru, in the persons of the asylum seekers ignored and turned away by Australia, Christ hangs in agony. Are we walking the path of conversion this Lent, opening our consciences and our hearts to the cries of our sisters and brothers?

Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ

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A show of solidarity

The visit gave JRS Australia firsthand experience of the needs of the projects there, such as a nutrition program for the refugee children.

JRS Australia has visited projects run by the international arm of the organisation in the Middle East in an effort to show solidarity with refugees who have fled their war-ravaged homeland of Syria, and to give concrete support to the JRS staff working in four countries there.

JRS Director Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ, and Associate Director Sr Maryanne Loughry RSM, together with Dr Colin McMullin, a psychologist and JRS volunteer, visited Beirut in February to conduct workshops on staff self-care, best practice in management, and JRS principles and procedures. Sr Loughry and Dr McMullin were also able to visit JRS projects in Turkey which support families and provide education for refugee children.

“The Syrian crisis has created the worst humanitarian disaster in decades, with 2.5 million Syrians now living as refugees outside their country. Within Syria, people are dying from the violence, but also from hunger and disease. JRS in the

region is engaged in the largest project in our organisation’s history,” said Fr Mowe.

One of the most difficult aspects of the work for JRS staff in the region is that many of the Syrian JRS workers are themselves refugees, and are working with traumatised people who are in fact their families, their neighbours, their friends.

“It’s almost impossible for the staff there to set up the kind of boundaries that social workers in Australia, for example, are expected to put in place when working with clients,” said Fr Mowe.

The visit gave JRS Australia firsthand experience of the needs of the projects there, such as a nutrition program for the refugee children.

“We are now planning to provide funding for the projects there that will help give the children fresh fruit and vegetables as part of their daily diet, something that at present the project cannot afford,” explained Fr Mowe.

Read more about JRS International’s work in the Middle East at www.jrs.net



 Migrant workers play cricket in the Jesuit compound in Beirut.

Just add love

Sr Pauline Fogarty wipes away tears as she contemplates the future of asylum seekers and refugees who are denied the respect and acceptance they so deeply crave from their adopted countrymen.

This Brown Nurse (a nickname for nuns who are members of the order of Our Lady's Nurses for the Poor) has spent her life working with people shoved out to the margins of our society: the homeless, the alcoholic, the drug-addled and the mentally ill. For the past six years she has spent one day a week volunteering with

JRS, and she knows better than anyone that the struggle is far from over once asylum seekers have reached Australian soil. Even those who have been granted refugee status still face almost insurmountable challenges in their quest to settle themselves into the Australian community: unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and ongoing resentment from refugee-wary members of the community.

Sr Fogarty's chief responsibility is to help refugees gain independence by transitioning from JRS' Shelter Project into self-funded accommodation. But Sydney's excessive rental costs are an obstacle for many refugees who are often simultaneously studying and working in low-paid jobs while trying to find their feet.

There have been success stories, though: one such example is that of a Pakistani Christian who was persecuted for his religion and left his wife and baby behind while seeking out a new life in Australia. He was exploited by a landlord in western Sydney, but was finally able to smile again when he was reunited with his family in Australia. He has worked at JRS as a volunteer, has completed a nursing course, and has a car.

But Sr Fogarty fears that refugees' resilience and mental health is at risk in a country as overtly anti-refugee as Australia.

"If you're going to treat [refugees] meanly, and destroy their spirit, then they'll end up like the [homeless] people I was working with in the city. There should be room and there should be a more generous spirit towards them. If you love people they're going to grow and respond and be nurtured."

Sr Fogarty fears that refugees' resilience and mental health is at risk in a country as overtly anti-refugee as Australia.



 Sr Pauline Fogarty has served asylum seekers for the past six years.



 Asylum seekers living in community detention play football in a local park.

Ministering in a state of uncertainty

JRS' threefold mission is to accompany, serve and advocate for refugees and asylum seekers. In my short time working with the community detention project, my main focus has been the first of these.

Accompaniment – walking with a person – may seem a fairly fuzzy thing. It does not, after all, produce anything measurable on a balance sheet or in a newspaper article. But it still seems to me a ministry in which the close-knit community detention team (of all faiths and none) see and show the face of Christ.

Our clients cannot work or study and have limited volunteering options. Frustrated, at constant risk of being re-detained or, worse, returned to the dangers they fled, they exist in a marginal state of uncertainty.

Each time I meet my clients, the sense of

Frustrated, at constant risk of being re-detained or, worse, returned to the dangers they fled, they exist in a marginal state of uncertainty.

impotent fear and frustration hangs in the air between us. I keep reliving the third week of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* (the retreat in which Jesuits journey in prayer with Christ), in which the retreatant prays to accompany Christ in his Passion. This may not be Calvary, but it can't be too far from Gethsemane – an agony re-enacted day after day, year after year.

Will the cup of this half-life pass and a visa (if only a transitional bridging one) be granted or will detention centre doors close again behind them? We sit and

watch with them, sharing their fear: the horror of the empty bed that bespeaks an (unannounced) revocation of community detainee status and a return to the cells, or the joy of a visa granted and the uncomprehending anger or frustration of those whom either decision – inscrutable and unfathomable – leaves behind. Why me? Why not me?

There are, however, other times too. The excitement of a football match or the warmth of a barbecue with volunteers and others in which the cloud lifts briefly and it is possible for clients and we who walk with them to share simple joys – conversation, cooperation, companionship. While we cannot create these moments, one of our most important missions in accompaniment is to make them possible.

Jesuit scholastic Justin Glyn SJ works with asylum seekers in Sydney.

JRS considers expanding service

“There are several major barriers to successful settlement, such as limited access to housing, employment, physical and mental health services, education, legal advice and meaningful community engagement.”

The growing number of asylum seekers and refugees living in Sydney’s south western fringe has prompted a JRS-led investigation to assess the needs of this group and determine whether or not the organisation’s services should be expanded to encompass this region.

A needs assessment undertaken by JRS’ Head of Policy and Advocacy, Oliver White, found that asylum seekers tended to congregate in the city’s southwest due to the greater affordability of housing in this area and the concentration of cultural groups with which many asylum seekers identify.

“The assessment confirmed that there is a great need for a service hub for asylum seekers in southwestern Sydney, and that JRS would be well-suited to providing such a service,” said Mr White.

“Some of these people’s needs are currently being met by other agencies working in the area, but the size of their caseloads and the niche areas they are specialising in – health and material assistance, for example – means that they simply cannot adequately address all the asylum seekers’ needs.”

Mr White said that agencies had expressed a willingness to collaborate with JRS should it decide to open an office in Sydney’s southwest, and that the proposed facility would help to improve the level of access that asylum seekers currently have to support services while awaiting the outcome of their visa applications.

“There are several major barriers to successful settlement, such as limited access to housing, employment, physical and mental health services, education, legal advice and meaningful community engagement. JRS would be able to fill a large gap which asylum seekers are currently falling through thanks to the uneven way in which government policy is applied to different categories of asylum seeker.”

The needs assessment report also recommended that a service hub be culturally-sensitive, that it offer a no-interest loan scheme and the provision of childcare so that mothers can more readily access services, and that it employ specialised youth workers to help young asylum seekers transition into the community.



 The needs assessment was conducted over a three-week period and involved face-to face consultations with service providers and asylum seekers.



 Unaccompanied minors prepare food and play pool in the JRS house on Sydney's Northern Beaches.

Young asylum seekers grateful for community support

The young men have lived in the house for the past three years as part of the government's Unaccompanied Minors Residential Determination Program (UAM RDP).

A group of unaccompanied minors has hosted a special dinner to thank volunteers, neighbours and community members for their support for JRS' Unaccompanied Minors Project House on Sydney's Northern Beaches.

The young men have lived in the house for the past three years as part of the government's Unaccompanied Minors Residential Determination Program (UAM RDP), which was introduced as an alternative to closed detention for children.

Under the program JRS, in partnership with Marist Youth Care, has provided housing for 19 unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. The communal nature of this detention model has necessitated the nurturing of strong relationships with local schools and service providers, and the development of a sense of goodwill among community groups. With the clients now ready to transition into the community as independent residents, it was time for them to thank those who had contributed towards their growth since

arriving in Australia.

Guests included the young men's teachers, swimming instructors, volunteer tutors, neighbours and staff from both JRS and Marist Youth Care. The clients at JRS House are particularly close with the young men from another part of the UAM program based at West Ryde, and they were invited as a special surprise for our boys.

The young people were perfect hosts, mixing and mingling with their guests. One of them gave a speech to the assembled crowd, thanking them for their ongoing support and commitment to their welfare.

The guests, staff and clients ate and chatted late into the evening, a sure sign of a successful dinner party. The event provided the opportunity for people to interact more informally than usual, and it was a pleasure to see that such warm and significant support exists in the local community for the young men in the UAM program.

Kim Mignacca and Shelley Goldsmith, JRS' UAM program

New website for JRS

JRS Australia has launched a new website which aims to use stories and images to publicise the work it does and to advocate on behalf of the refugees and asylum seekers with whom it works.

Although the website has been designed to reflect the brand of JRS International and the regional JRS websites, it has retained its own unique Australian sensibility, says JRS Australia's Head of Policy and Advocacy, Oliver White.

"We are working here with a set of issues and problems which are unique to Australia's refugee landscape, and which are in some cases unheard of in other regions and countries," he says.

"And so we've designed our website to reflect the causes and projects that are important and relevant to us and to the people we work with."

Australia is the only country in the world that mandatorily detains asylum seekers who arrive without authorisation, and

JRS plans to use the new website as a tool to advocate with and on behalf of refugees, and as a safe place where refugees can share their stories and have a voice.

JRS Australia is one of few agencies to provide short-term accommodation and other assistance to asylum seekers living in the community.

"One of our jobs is to research the mass movement of refugees through the Asia-Pacific region so that we can determine its consequences and develop advocacy strategies that best address it," says Mr White.

"We are also closely involved with developments in climate change displacement, which is occurring on our doorstep in the Pacific region."

JRS plans to use the new website as a tool to advocate with and on behalf of refugees, and as a safe place where refugees can share their stories and have a voice. It will also keep the public well-informed about current policy and practice, providing resources so that interested parties can raise awareness and advocate with and on behalf of refugees. And finally, the website will give people an opportunity to read about JRS' work and to get involved by either signing up to volunteer with the organisation or by supporting it financially.

Please visit the new website at www.jrs.org.au and sign up to JRS' new electronic quarterly publication of LINK.

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
PO Box 522, Kings Cross
NSW 1340
Ph: 02 9356 3888
Fax: 02 9356 3021
Email: info@jrs.org.au
Web: www.jrs.org.au

Director: Aloysious Mowe SJ

Associate Director:
Maryanne Loughry RSM

Head of Policy and Advocacy:
Oliver White

Project Coordinators:
Suma Pillai

Housing Officer: Mamour Seck

Volunteers Coordinator:
Anne Porter

Caseworkers:
Angela Gallard
Cecilia Silva

Kathy Moran
Kim Mignacca
Shelley Goldsmith
Patricia Lay
Teresa Sanchez

Office Manager: Kim Mandelik

If undeliverable return to:

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
PO Box 522
Kings Cross NSW 1340

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