

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE & CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

The starting point of Catholic Social Teaching concerning refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and 'environmental migrants', is not their legal status but rather their status as human persons made in the image and likeness of God.

The key question is not 'what are our legal obligations?' or 'how do we defend our sovereign territory?' but rather 'how would right relationships with self, God, others and creation, call us - as individuals, communities, nations and international bodies - to respond in the face of the massive displacement of people today?'

Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching help us to reflect on how we will respond to this challenge.

WELCOME THE STRANGER

God's special care for the poor – the widow, the orphan and the stranger – is a constant theme in Scripture.

Perhaps the strongest story of displacement in the Scriptures is the story of the Exodus. We see God call the people out of a situation of economic and political oppression as strangers in Egypt, through the Babylonian exile, into a new land where they are to establish a covenant community. In this new society widows, orphans and strangers are not to be oppressed. The causes of displacement and oppression are to be eradicated.

The memory of being strangers, exiles and aliens, and of God's loving intervention, permeates the Scriptures. God reveals God-self as the one who takes the side of the stranger. God calls us to new and more just relationships.

In the person of Jesus, God again identifies powerfully with the stranger. Jesus is born on the

edges of town in a shed because there was no place for them at the inn. Later the Holy Family are forced to flee into Egypt by Herod's politically motivated persecution – they become refugees.

Today we continue to encounter Jesus in the poor and needy, those with whom he chose to identify himself: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.' (Mt. 25:35)

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

People are on the move for many different reasons. Often 'push' and 'pull' factors are combined. We can think of a spectrum with 'voluntary' at one end and 'forced' at the other.

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol defines a refugee as:

"Any person who owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his / her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself / herself of the protection of that country."

This definition, which is used in Australian immigration law, is criticised by Catholic teaching because it leaves out many people in need who have similar experiences¹:

- Victims of armed conflicts
- People displaced by natural disasters
- Victims of poverty, hunger and failed economic policies
- People who cannot prove that they personally were specifically persecuted
- People displaced by climate change
- Internally displaced people

¹ Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* & Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People, *Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1992, n 4 – 6.

HUMAN DIGNITY

Anyone who is forced to move to preserve their lives or human dignity has a moral claim on our hospitality. The more vulnerable and needy the person, the greater the moral claim on our care.

In the first instance this involves responding to needs. It also involves the protection of rights and the transformation of the causes of displacement.

Every human person, regardless of their legal status or geographic location, has a transcendent dignity which must always be respected. The full range of human rights apply to refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, and 'economic migrants' - and we all have a duty to see that they are respected, protected and fulfilled².

Many of the causes of forced displacement are grounded in a lack of respect for human dignity. Working to promote human dignity is a way of addressing root causes of displacement.

THE COMMON GOOD

Catholic teaching holds that national and international institutional arrangements, such as nation states, exist to serve the human person by fostering, organising and promoting the common good.

The dignity of persons comes before the interests of nation states and people must never be treated as means. It is gravely wrong to treat people harshly in the attempt to deter others from seeking asylum³.

Addressing the global phenomena of displacement requires the nations and international organisations to work together to ensure that all people and groups are able to meet their needs and achieve their potential, that is, to share in the common good.

Sending countries, receiving countries, countries of first asylum, and the whole international community, all share in the responsibility to address displacement, each according to their capacity. At stake is the right to live in community.

SUBSIDIARITY

When a nation is unwilling or unable to protect the human dignity and rights of people within its borders, the international community must respond.

² Ibid., n 12 -13.

³ Ibid., n 9.

National sovereignty should be respected and supported as long as sovereign states are willing and able to fulfil their responsibilities to protect the dignity and rights of people within their jurisdiction and to promote the common good. The international community has a responsibility to support and assist where this condition is not met.

National sovereignty cannot legitimately be used as an excuse to neglect or abuse the human rights of people, no matter what their legal status, or to stand by while this happens.

SOLIDARITY

Solidarity enables us to imagine ourselves in the place of those fleeing persecution, generalized violence, or changes in the environment which jeopardise livelihoods.

We are called to work for the kind of responses which we would hope to encounter if we were in their place, and for the transformation of the causes of displacement.

Responding to the needs of displaced people cannot be left to countries of first asylum as though more distant or richer countries have no responsibility to their sisters and brothers in need.

Those communities, nations, and international institutions with the greatest capacity to assist displaced people have the greatest responsibility to do so.

FURTHER READING

- Visit the *Refugees and Asylum Seekers* pages of the *Faith Doing Justice* website and use the links at the right to find tools for action, background information, and more on Catholic Social Teaching and people on the move.
<http://www.faithdoingjustice.com.au/issues/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/introduction.html>
- Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* & Pontifical Council for the Pastoral care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, *Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*,
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/documents/rc_pc_corunum_doc_25061992_refugees_en.htm
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- David Holdcroft, "Refugees and Australia's Response", *Catholic Social Justice Series* No 65, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, 2009.
- Jesuit Refugee Service Australia www.jrs.org.au
- Jesuit Refugee Service International www.jrs.org