



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC
MIGRANT & REFUGEE OFFICE



Refugees and Asylum Seekers – A Catholic Perspective

“Our Church teaches that anyone who is forced to flee to protect their lives or human dignity has a moral claim on our assistance, whether they fit legal definitions of a refugee or not. We need a just, humane and timely system for assessing claims for asylum.”

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, [Towards a Better Kind of Politics](#), 2022, p 3.

“... history teaches us that the contribution of migrants and refugees has been fundamental to the social and economic growth of our societies. This continues to be true in our own day. Their work, their youth, their enthusiasm and their willingness to sacrifice enrich the communities that receive them.”

Pope Francis, [Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2022](#).

Sisters and Brothers to be Welcomed, Protected, and Included

The Church has a bigger view of the world than any one country. We do not view asylum seekers and refugees primarily through the lens of legal status. We see asylum seekers, refugees and migrants as our sisters and brothers, members of one human family. Our starting point is not defending borders, but rather defending the dignity of the human person from conception to natural death.

Official Church documents like [Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi](#) (on the Love of Christ Towards Migrants) offer a scriptural reading of the meaning of human mobility. They encourage us to see in people on the move the face of Jesus, who was born away from home, had to flee to Egypt, and spent his public life moving from town to town. Even after the resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, he was a foreigner and unknown (EMCC n 12, 15). We are reminded of the role of migration and deportation in the story of the chosen people. Reflecting on scripture we can see that human mobility is part of our journey towards “the birth of a people without discrimination or frontiers” (EMCC n 13). We are reminded that the church itself was born from the experience of Pentecost, signaling that there is no room for distinctions – the presence of people from many countries is a sign and a reminder of the universality of the church.

Pope Francis frequently reminds us that migrants and refugees are not a problem to be solved or a burden to be shared equitably among countries, but sisters and brothers to be welcomed, respected, and loved. Their presence is not an

imposition but presents us with the opportunity to contribute with them to building a better world.

In his [Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2022](#) Pope Francis links human mobility and the building of the Kingdom of God, saying that “the ultimate meaning of our ‘journey’ in this world is the search for our true homeland, the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus Christ, which will find its full realization when he comes in glory”. He goes on to explain that God’s plan “gives priority to those living on the existential peripheries” including “migrants and refugees, displaced persons, and victims of trafficking” and that “the Kingdom of God is to be built with them, for without them it would not be the Kingdom that God wants.” Migration is part of humanity’s journey, seeking to live ever more truly as one human family on our way to our true home.

Living as One Human Family

The Catholic Church teaches that anyone who is forced to move to preserve their lives or human dignity has a moral claim on the hospitality of others. The more vulnerable or needy the person, the greater is their moral claim on others. This means for example that people fleeing death-dealing poverty cannot simply be labelled ‘economic migrants’, that people fleeing generalized violence and human rights abuses should not be dismissed as ‘not real refugees’, and that asylum seekers and refugees should not be excluded from resettlement on the basis of illness or disability. We have a moral responsibility to preserve the lives and dignity of our sisters and brothers.

As well as calling us to respond to the immediate needs of people on the move, Catholic teaching calls us to act to protect their rights and to transform the causes of displacement. They should not have to flee in the first place. This is a duty of solidarity.

We believe that every human person, regardless of their legal status or geographic location, has a transcendent dignity that must always be respected. It follows that people on the move should enjoy the full range of human rights regardless of their legal status, and that others have a duty to see that these rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled.

Governments have an important role to play. They exist to serve the human person by fostering, organizing, and promoting the common good. That is why the dignity of persons comes before the interests of nation states. Governments have a right to control their borders insofar as this contributes to the common good. However, they should be more concerned with protecting people than with protecting borders; people must never be treated as means.

In a globalized world, the common good must also be understood globally. Responding to people on the move requires all nations and international organisations to work together to ensure that all people and groups can meet their needs and achieve their potential, in other words, to share in the common good. Effective expressions of solidarity are needed.

Prayer

Lord, make us bearers of hope,
so that where there is darkness,
your light may shine,
and where there is discouragement,
confidence in the future may be reborn.

Lord, make us instruments of your justice,
so that where there is exclusion, fraternity may flourish,
and where there is greed, a spirit of sharing may grow.

Lord, make us builders of your Kingdom,
together with migrants and refugees
and with all who dwell on the peripheries.

Lord, let us learn how beautiful it is
to live together as brothers and sisters.

Amen.

(Pope Francis, [Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2022](#).)

Who are Asylum Seekers and Refugees?

Australian migration law uses the definition of a refugee contained in the [UN Convention on the Status of Refugees](#). It sees people who are outside their country of origin or habitual residence and are “... unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” as refugees. Asylum seekers are people who have crossed a border wanting to be recognized as refugees and granted asylum.

This narrow Convention definition, developed in 1951, leaves out a lot of people who we might refer to in a commonsense way as refugees in everyday conversations. Isn't anyone fleeing war a refugee? What about people displaced by natural disasters or climate change?

In the first decade of this century the size and complexity of the movement of people reached unprecedented levels. ‘Mixed flows’ in which it is difficult to make distinctions between migrants and refugees became common. They include people displaced by conflicts, poverty, inequality, persecution, poor governance, and disasters – or combinations of these factors. Vulnerable people on the move might come from the same places, travel by the same means, and arrive at the same times and places, yet only some are afforded protections under international agreements.

Resources for Pastoral Action & Advocacy

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Recent actions (link to document)

Social Justice Statement 2015-2016, [For Those Who've Come Across the Seas](#).

Recent Papal Messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees

2022, [Building the Future with Migrants and Refugees](#)

2021, [Towards an Ever Wider We](#)

2020, [Like Jesus Christ, forced to flee: welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating internally displaced persons](#)

Migrant & Refugees Section of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development

[Pastoral Orientations on Intercultural Migrant Ministry](#), 2022.

[Pastoral Orientation on Climate Displaced People](#), 2021.

[Pastoral Orientations on Internally Displaced People](#), 2020.

[Pastoral Orientations on Human Trafficking](#), 2019.

[Pastoral Guideline, Welcoming Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons](#), 2013.

Vatican COVID-19 Commission

[Pandemic, Conflicts, and Forced Migration](#), 2022.

[Human Trafficking and Digital Media](#), 2021.

[Restoring Dignity to Migrant Workers](#), 2020.

[Alternatives to Immigration Detention](#), 2020.

[Ensuring Access to Territory for persons seeking International Protection](#), 2020.