

Bridging troubled waters on Christmas Island.

The Catholic Church in Australia provides pastoral care on Christmas Island.

The Catholic Church has been providing pastoral care to asylum seekers since a policy of mandatory detention began. This is just one story of how the Church is currently responding to the situation on Christmas Island. Christmas Island is the site for one of Australia's seven operational Immigration Detention Centres, in which up to 3,000 Asylum seekers are held while their claims for refugee status are considered.

Advocates have been calling for an end to mandatory detention of asylum seekers for many years now. These advocates, including Church leaders, consider that unnecessary incarceration of asylum seekers is extremely damaging. The Church has been involved in the delivery of pastoral care to asylum seekers since the early days of immigration detention, most notably in Baxter and Woomera, but also in Port Hedland, Villawood, Maribrynong, Curtin and others.



Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

Since December 2009, the Catholic Church has had a continuous collaborative ministry to asylum seekers on Christmas Island, which is administered by the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia (in collaboration with the Sisters of Mercy) and the Archdiocese of Perth (The Archdiocese under which Christmas Island falls).

JRS Australia Director Fr Sacha Bermudez Goldman SJ and ACMRO Director Fr Maurizio Pettena CS both say that this is an extremely important work of presence, but that they wish it wasn't a necessary one.

“The Church's belief is that we should not put people in mandatory detention for long periods of time. We obviously need processing centres for health, security and identity checks so we can provide care to people arriving after arduous journeys, but keeping them detained unnecessarily is an expensive and damaging solution”, said Fr Sacha.

The Church's accompaniment of asylum seekers on Christmas Island came out of a mutual concern between a number of different agencies in 2009. Fr Maurizio says that he was concerned that the Church seemed to be doing a lot of advocacy, but not being hands-on in addressing the problem.

“One of the problems is that these people are very far away from everyone. It is very difficult to get to Christmas Island, and to Curtin too. The asylum seekers don’t have anyone here to vent their frustration to. I spoke to Bishop Joe Grech and to Bruce Ryan from the Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life and we realised that a whole-of-Church response was needed. I then came into contact with JRS Director Fr Sacha”, he said.

Fr Sacha works closely with Fr Maurizio to coordinate the effort to always have a pastoral presence on the Island. This initially has meant providing a pastoral team of a priest and a religious sister.

Sr Joan Kelleher is an Australian Mercy Sister who has been on Christmas Island since March, 2010. She spends around six hours in the detention facilities each day. Sr Joan had previously worked in education in refugee camps in Malaysia, Thailand and Uganda.

“On a normal day I would leave home at about nine, I would go into the family detention camp which is totally overcrowded at the moment. I spent time wandering through there, and meeting whoever is outside their room”, she said.

“The family centre is just rows and rows of demountables. The children are not at school because there is no space in the schools. It’s chaotic. The staff are really trying to offer quality care to all.”

“As part of our pastoral care we request to take asylum seekers outside the Detention Centre for a few hours usually on the weekend. One day I had four Sri Lankans detainees who were rather depressed and impatient about their long wait for a decision about their case. We had a really relaxing day walking along the beach and just enjoying the freedom. Before we went back to detention one of the men said “Today, I am so happy, I feel my heart has been set free? What a privileged moment!”, said Sr Joan.

“On another occasion I was spending time with a young Iranian man who had been sharing a dormitory facility. He was anxious and had stopped eating and was constantly walking the compound day and night. I visited him a number of times and tried to encourage him to eat. I spoke to the authorities about the depressed state of this man. After a few days I came back and found he had moved into a two bedroom unit and was much improved in spirit. While he is still fragile he is eating and sleeping and caring for himself more.”

“We are often called by the Hindus to provide services for anniversaries. Last Monday, all Saints Day, we were asked by the department to provide a service in the church for 20 Hindus who were celebrating the first anniversary of when 12 of their boat members drowned in the Indian Ocean. Part of the ritual was to light candles, and place wreaths on the altar, and to light incense sticks, and one of their members shared the eulogy during the Parish Communion Service. The Parish put together a little booklet, and incorporated the ritual for the Hindus in the service.”

“Sometimes in and out of the camp, we are called to support people. I see pastoral care as being vital part of the lives of people in Detention. They have no other religious representatives to walk the journey with them. It’s also enriching for the local community, in their understanding of why people are here, when they hear their stories. It really enables the local people to be compassionate and understanding towards the detainees”, said Sr Joan.

Sr Joan will continue her presence there until the end of 2010 and says that she does find some life and hope in providing spiritual care and assistance to all of the people in the centre.

Fr Sacha and Fr Maurizio agree that it is important that every single asylum seeker on the Island has their human dignity respected.

“Some of the Muslim detainees call the priest their ‘Catholic Iman’, which is lovely to think that they have that level of trust and respect” said Fr Sacha.

In terms of working with the Government on this issue, the Church is quite candid that they don’t wish to criticize for the sake of it, but simply challenge people to know the reality for asylum seekers.

“We are pleased with the government’s resolution to get unaccompanied minors out of detention. We don’t want to criticize the government, but we do want to see the government working toward more durable solutions. If we don’t work together on this, it’s not going to go away.”

The work can be extremely challenging and taxing for the people, but there has been great will from Dioceses and religious orders around Australia to lend their personnel for this work.

“The priests come from religious orders and different dioceses which has been a lovely experience, to be able to have all of these parts of the Australian Church collaborating on this mission. We are very grateful to the Sisters of Mercy, to the bishops and heads of religious orders around the country who have allowed their sisters and priests to come and serve in this way”, said Fr Sacha.