

PAPER – MIGRANT CHAPLAIN’S CONFERENCE MONDAY 29 OCTOBER 2007

Dear Friends

Peace and Blessings. What a wonderful opportunity we have to spend this time together as people who have been anointed to minister with a significant number of people who for one reason or another felt the need to leave their native country and made Australia home. We acknowledge the abundant blessings that we and our people have received in the country of ours Australia. At the same time we rejoice with deep gratitude the values and the principles of our native lands which have moulded us in who we are today.

It was so beneficial that we had the opportunity to meet together in 2005 for the Conference entitled “One in Christ Jesus”. This conference gave the opportunity for many of our people who are involved with us in ministering to migrants and refugees to come together. Friendships were established, there was so much learning from the exchange of so many different experiences and the hope was expressed that such an opportunity will be repeated in the not too distant future. We are now planning for a similar conference to take place in 2009. All the people involved in the organization of such a conference were particularly encouraged by the number of migrant chaplains who come together prior to the general conference. This encouragement propelled us to give another opportunity for migrant chaplains to come together during these particular two days.

The purpose of this two day conference is to build on what was initiated in the 2005. “One in Christ Jesus” Conference. It is equally important to honour and thank each one of you for your ministry and to ensure that you feel welcomed and very much part of the overall mission of our Catholic Church in Australia.

In particular, I want also to acknowledge the contribution of Australian born priests and religious who have, over the years, have ministered to people coming from different cultures. Some have found themselves involved in such a situation owing to their ministry as parish priest and assistant priest in various parishes. Others have continued to exercise their experience and language after they returned to Australia either from overseas studies or from a period of time in the mission fields. Over the years migrant chaplains and those working with migrants and refugees in our parishes have acted as reconcilers and interpreters as people tried to settle down in foreign situations. You have helped people find work, communicate with the doctor or the lawyer, helped people fill their tax returns and tried to bridge the gap as the children of the early migrants strove to come to terms with their identity. Generally speaking, when migrants came to the country, they were also accompanied by priest. Only God knows the hurt and the sacrifices of migrants when they arrived into our country. Yet the migrant chaplain provided the necessary comfort and wholesome support as they were present during the most sacred and important moments of our peoples’ lives. The same goes for all those involved in working with the relatively recent arrival of refugees. These two days are aimed to provide a better understanding of your work as migrant chaplains and to try to develop together the best possible ways how to deal with migrants and refugees in Australia. What strategies we can place for the benefit of our people. This meeting provides us with a national focus to explore emerging issues for migrant chaplains in a multicultural Australia.

It is a well known fact that Australia has been greatly influenced by the arrival of so many migrants over the years. A few statistics will help us realize that as migrant chaplains you are dealing with a substantial percentage of the Australian population as well as of the Catholic Church. According to the Australian Census taken in 2006, Catholics make up 25.82% of the Australian population. Out of 19,855,288 responses, 5,718,252 people declared that they are affiliated with the Catholic Church.

It is equally important to note that the massive 2001 National Church Life Survey, which surveyed 86,368 Mass attendees found the following information.

- 1 The majority of Australians born Mass attendees are over 60, while for overseas born Mass attendees the majority were aged between forty and fifty nine.
- 2 The analysis also showed that Catholics born overseas are better Sunday Mass attendees than Catholics born in Australia by a factor of 21%
- 3 Catholic Women (61%) are better Mass attendees than Catholic men (39%), though the best attendees are Catholic women born overseas. Since 1947, the Catholic Church has grown from 1.57 million to be Australia's largest faith community today. According to the National Church Life Survey of 2001, 26,33% of Catholics were born overseas while 40% to 45% of Catholics were either migrant or children of migrants. This gives us a clear indicative that migrants and their immediate descendants make up a very substantial proportion of Catholic people in Australia. This also makes us more aware of the vital part that as migrant chaplains you play in the mission of the church in our country today.

Moreover, a study conducted by a team of researchers from the University of New England (UNE) and published in July of this year (2007) has revealed "that migrants to Australia are generally healthier, better educated, more law-abiding, more willing to participate in society and less dependent on welfare payments than the average Australian-born citizen. The 18 month study, which was based on extensive field work in metropolitan and regional centres of Australia, found that there was widespread appreciation in the Australian community of the cultural and social enrichment that migration brings". According to the Australian Department of Immigration, around one quarter of the Australian population are born overseas and people from around 185 different countries have made their home in Australia. This study also shows that Australia needs to continue to look at ways and means how to attract more migrants. Professor Kerry Carrington one of the researchers commented that, "We have a declining fertility in Australia, a booming North, a shortage of skilled labour and globalization of the economy. We don't have any way of addressing these issues unless there is a contraction in the economy, (which is the last thing a government desires), or we bring in people to fill these gaps".

Professor Glen Withers, a specialist in immigration and population at the Australian National University said that "Australia's immigration program has been successful for a number of reasons: it takes in people from many different countries rather than from just a few which can form enclaves; it has focused on skilled migrants who bring economic benefit to everyone; and it is a continent, which enables it to control its borders". All of this points out to the reality that migration is most likely going to be an important fabric of the Australian society for the foreseeable future.

This has been our story so far. Where do we go from here? I would like to offer you some reflection on certain issues that I consider to be important for all of us to ponder upon as we continue with our various ministries regarding migrants and refugees. I do not for a moment pretend that what I am going to share with you is a complete list of issues. These are simply some factors that I consider worthwhile to put some attention to.

Generally speaking, many of the migrants that we are dealing with today have come to Australia in the years after the Second World War. This means that they are getting into the twilight of their lives. From the limited experience that I have, I have noticed that the older we get, the more we yearn for the values and memories of the life that we had as children growing up. There is a certain ache to be part of the old country in the way we lived and thought during the early years of our lives. This has many implications. However, I am of the firm belief that because of this factor, the migrants who have come to Australia in the early fifties are in need of migrant chaplains and their associates just as much, if not more than when they first arrived to this country.

When they first made the decision to leave their native country, they came with a dream and with an ambition. Many were constrained to take such a step, nevertheless I believe that being young with a sense of adventure and with prospect of bettering one's own life, made the decision a bit more palatable. Now, after the passing of many years, there is still the yearning for the native country.

Senior citizen clubs are flourishing among our migrant people. Within the different communities one can find special programs and care for these migrants who after working so hard are now enjoying retirement and are on a pension. I am fully aware that migrant chaplains have been at the forefront of establishing and nurturing such organizations. However, let us now stay close to them not only in order to nurture their material and emotional needs. Let us not only stay close to them in order to give them somewhere where they enjoy a social life together, where they can speak their own language and eat the traditional food. This of course is important; however, let us also accompany them with solid spiritual formation. Let us nourish them with the Word of God so that they can continue to realize their dignity in God. Let us continue to feed them with solid spiritual food both for their own benefit, and also for the benefit of our country Australia. Let us help them develop and deepen a close personal relationship with Jesus Christ so that they continue to offer to the whole Australian society the necessary values and principles of our Catholic faith and in order to prepare them well for the time that they need to depart from this life.

More and more, experience is showing us that Australia, while continuing to enjoy a very high standard of living and while it has still a very strong and growing economy, is being gradually eroded of Christian values. Increasingly we are becoming more aware that many laws that are being promulgated in our country are very much in contrast and even in direct opposition to what we hold important and worthwhile as Catholic people. Gradually Australian society is embracing a way of living which does not take the Christian values into consideration. Our migrant people can still make a positive and strong contribution in upholding and promoting Christian values; such as the importance of family life, fidelity in relationships, the sanctity of marriage, commitment to one's own responsibility, the importance of friendship and the respect that is due for each human person as created in the image and the likeness of God. Moreover, as the research

conducted by the University of New England revealed, migrants are in the front line in practicing our Catholic faith. In reality one can safely say that parishes where there are migrants present manifest certain vitality and energy. The more we help our migrant people in deepening their relationship with Jesus Christ, the more they can continue to provide much needed moral strength to the very fabric of Australian society.

All of this is tied up with the whole question of the second and third generation. These people as we are well aware are torn between two cultures. I have often heard many of them say, Yes, I have been born in Australia, I have been educated in Australia and yet my values and principles, my way of looking at things especially in the area of family life and discipline is very much what I have learnt from my parents. By birth they might be considered Australian but culturally and emotionally they are very much tied to the culture of their parents. It is our duty as migrant chaplains to nourish in our second generation a pride and an appreciation of the culture of the parents. It is imperative for us to help these people to be exposed to the history of the place where their parents came from. But this also includes religious formation. Much of the history of the places where the parents came from is intrinsically bound with spiritual values and especially with our Catholic faith. This can give us a tremendous opportunity to make sure that we expose these people belonging to the second and third generation to wholesome and comprehensive knowledge and appreciation of their parents' country of origin.

Let us not sell these people short by only feeding them with a certain way of thinking and acting which emanates from a particular and narrow point of view or from a particular slant of party politics. Our role is to encourage and assist these people to take their place both within the particular cultural community as well as within the overall life of the Australia Church. The Australian Church is in desperate need of leaders who are able to articulate their faith and who are therefore endowed with the necessary quality to help enrich our church by embracing a way of expression and thinking emanating from the life and practice of so many cultures.

In a document issued in 1988 by the Bishops of Australia on Migration, they emphasized. "The Church's Mission in Australia is inextricably intertwined with the presence of migrants old and new. A correct vision of the church community must be made up of all people. Where lingual, cultural, ethnic and social differences are seen only as an enrichment of the church and beneficial to the lives of its members and of the whole community. Building communities, understanding values and contributions, establishing parish policies and structures which support multiculturalism, and sharing that all urgent issues related to multiculturalism are taken into account at all levels, promoting research studies and assessment of pastoral needs of all people on the move, are some of the ways in which the church contributes to the success of creating one people of God. The unity and harmony we are called to form by the Lord Jesus, and towards which we strive every day, will be the real and powerful way to announce Christ to those who have landed on this country".

Encouraging in a special way the second and third generation of migrant parents to take an active role in the life of the church and society helps to provide cohesiveness and lessen any prejudice that might surface in the face of ignorance and fear of other cultures. All of this helps to drive a very strong message regarding intolerance to racism. Everybody can contribute because God does not make rubbish. God only makes beautiful people. As a matter of fact all of us are the best thing that God has ever created. This would help our parish to be more welcoming, where

hospitality and acceptance will gradually become the norm. We need to aim at this because after all, this is the very nature and essence of our church. We are Catholics, universal and all embracing.

This would help to eliminate any notion that in a parish there exist different classes of people. Rather the aim would be for parishes to respond with a sense of real pride in being part of a multi-cultural, multiracial and multi-ethnic church. This in time generates empathy which in practice translates into a willingness to respond openly, positively, tolerantly and patiently with each others. This of course, requires patience. However, within our communities there are many capable people, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally who we can nurture not only to support this particular cultural group but also to help the Church be what is supposed to be, the people of God found in every place of the earth. In Australia we have the added blessing of experiencing the worldwide Catholic Church in our parishes and dioceses.

This also applies to all of us as migrant chaplains. It is very heartening to see that there is an overall eagerness to participate in the National Days organized by the Diocese. The major dioceses of our country have a yearly Eucharistic celebration where all different cultural groups are invited to take an active part. At the same time we need to reflect deeper and harder how as migrant chaplains you can integrate more solidly as much as possible with the local clergy. I am the first to say that this is not an easy task. All of us can remember and recall the many hard times that have been experienced in trying to find opportunities within our parishes to celebrate Mass in a language that is other than English. I am also very well aware that there were frequent occasions where migrant chaplains did not find the necessary openness and cooperation from the local clergy in the exercise of their ministry. Nevertheless we need to continue to find ways and means where we are able to work with one mind and heart. It is very heartening to see that in some archdioceses there is a yearly meeting of migrant chaplains with the local Archbishop. It is also very encouraging to note that in our main cities one can find a dedicated office so that the local church might be more aware of the varied riches that our different cultures can bring.

Things have improved in a significant manner. However, I would strongly urge you as migrant chaplains to continue to seek these possibilities where you can relate with the local clergy not only on the sphere of pastoral ministry but also on a social level. Many dioceses have support groups for priests, where a group of priests meet together on a monthly basis to relax together and also to reflect on varied topics that impact the life of the local church. It would be so wonderful if migrant chaplains can also be part of such support groups. It takes a big decision on your part. Nevertheless I believe that, whatever we can do to help us as priests in our varied and rich ministries to become more conscious of how important it is to be together so that we can pull one rope in the same direction, is worthwhile and most beneficial in the long run both for us and for the people whom we serve. We cannot afford to keep wallowing in our own particular sphere of action while neglecting the contribution that we can make to the overall life of the church. More and more our ministry demands that we cease to be lone rangers and work as a unity and in relationship to others. I repeat that this path is not easy going and it takes determination and perseverance. However it is the right way to go. In the same view of things we need to seek every opportunity to be involved in Diocesan activities and organizations. The more present we are, the more the idea is filtered through that our Catholic Church is not made up of one culture or class of people but is a myriad of different colours and shapes that make up a rich and dynamic work of art.

I can appreciate that the lack of a conversational command of the English language can deter or discourage some from seeking to be more and more part of the general life stream of the Church in Australia. A reasonable understanding and capability of communicating in the English language is something to be aimed for. The reasons are varied. It would help us enormously as priest to steer our different communities to their rightful and positive place within the general life of the Church. It would also help our confidence to grow and mature and makes it that much easier to relate with other priests, both those who work in the different parishes or dioceses and also with fellow workers in the field of migration and refugees.

This is something that is becoming more urgent to be looked at on the account of the latest labour agreement that the Catholic Bishops through the service of Monsignor John Murphy and the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office has just signed with the Federal government. This agreement relates to obtaining the necessary visas for priests, religious and lay people to minister in Australia. The previous labour agreement expired towards the end of last year. It has taken so many months for the government to be ready to sign another agreement. The Department of Migration and the Department of Labour are the responsible parties from the side of the government to prepare the general direction and stipulations of this labour agreement. One of the changes in the latest labour agreement is that all those people who apply to minister as priests, religious and lay people in Australia need to have a basic conversational knowledge of the English language. This is based on an international standard known as the IELTS test. The Australian Catholic Migration and Refugee Office can apply for some exceptions. Nevertheless, it cannot be taken for granted that such exceptions would be granted. This might seem harsh, and it surely makes it that bit more difficult to get the necessary temporary or permanent visas in some situations. On the other hand it provides us with a great opportunity to do whatever we can as priests in order to be able to understand and converse in the local language. As I have already remarked, a workable knowledge of the English language can give all of us the necessary freedom to communicate and to mix with others thus widening our horizons and our direction and dreams for the communities that we work with.

There is a very important purpose why I am mentioning all of this. As a church in Australia we are facing very big challenges. As I have already remarked, our society is gradually becoming much more hostile or indifferent to the values and ideals that we profess as Catholic people. We are living in a very secularized society. Many, even committed and practicing Catholics find the Church's moral teaching, especially the teaching on sexuality very difficult. We are also well aware of the rampant number of abortions that are occurring every year. Notice has already been given in the Victorian Parliament regarding a motion aimed to decriminalize abortion altogether. There is also the production of embryonic stem cells.

Oliver James in a book entitled, "Britain on the Couch" asks why we are more unhappy than we were in the 1950's despite the fact that we are richer today as a society. He contends that depression is ten times higher among people born after 1945 than among those born after 1914 and yet we are materially more prosperous. This is pretty much the situation in our own country. I have often heard people saying to me that as children they did not enjoy the comfort, the material possessions and the so called freedom that we are enjoying today. Nevertheless they say that as children they vividly remember that there was much more respect and definitely much more faith and peace.

The 20th Century is likely to be remembered as the lonely century. Mother Teresa used to say that, "In the developing world there is an epidemic of poverty while in the West there is an epidemic of loneliness". There are so many people living alone. It is not the first time that during a visit of aged care facilities I hear this comment. "People here are very well taken care of. They need nothing. They have got everything. However some of them just simply spend the whole day looking at the door hoping and waiting for someone to come and visit them.

Many people spend ridiculously long hours at work while the use of psychologists, psychiatrists and anti-depressants is rampant. I read in a book called "Fatherless America", that according to statistics half of the children in the United States when they go home they do not find their natural father. Such a situation is becoming increasingly more probable in our own country. One can only imagine the huge emotional and psychological problems that accompany such a situation. Moreover, many of you are aware of the rate of suicide among our young people. Studies have shown that suicide is the second most common cause of death among our young people. One can perhaps understand such a situation if we are living in a country which has extreme poverty or where it is torn apart by war. Yet we are blessed with so many blessings as a nation and yet many of our young people are taking away their lives because they do not seem to grasp the meaning for their very existence.

My purpose in mentioning all of this is not to sound negative or to point fingers but to issue a challenge to all of us. As people coming from different backgrounds and cultures we have so many varied gifts and imagination. My challenge is that being confronted with such a social and spiritual situation in our country can we not pool our resources, our energies and our practices to work, dialogue, plan and propose together as a whole church how we can provide an answer to such a reality that is occurring around us. Generally speaking we come from cultures of very good family life and backgrounds. Can we pool our experiences in this area to formulate together some strategies and practical suggestions that can be proposed and presented to the whole church of Australia. Are we not capable of forming a working group together from amongst us so that we can propose to the different diocesan offices ideas and ways of going forward. I believe that we can. In the past such opportunities were limited but now we have the opportunity and the process of making a bigger, deeper and more meaningful contribution to the Catholic Church in Australia.

As I have already remarked, I do not believe that we can afford only to work in our little patch, to take care only of our particular group of people. This is very crucial and important to keep doing. However the communities and all of us here gather possess too much talent, experience and love for our Catholic faith and Church that can be made available to the life of the Church in Australia. I do not have all the answers of how this could be done. I see the potential and I urge that some time ought to be given during these two days where we can reflect deeply and together on this possibility. Many strategies are not simply developed as a result of study and/or in obtaining university degrees. This can help. However, they are also brought to fruition through experience, actual knowledge and direct contact with the situation that our people live in. We have got this necessary experience and therefore we can provide more direct and practical ideas to help the church in Australia in this mission.

With the celebration of World Youth Day in Sydney during July 2008, I cannot help but say something about our young people. As a church we are challenged very seriously in the area of

working with young people. Some of us are doing it more successfully than others. We can learn from one another. Some of our communities like the Maronites and others seem to be able to work effectively and successfully with their young people. Why can't we ask them and others, what they are doing and the reason why they are achieving what they are achieving. Once again this needs a decision from our part to take the initiative to talk to one another, to plan together, to form a group of people from among us here who will carry it forward. This can be of great help to each community represented here but also we can approach those involved in youth ministry and work in our respective dioceses with our proposals, suggestions and practical help. Once again, this needs a commitment and perseverance. But at least, we can start by reflecting on this together and see what can be done. Let us not hide our talents but remember that we are priests and believers for the benefit of the whole church and that the work that we do with our assistants is the work of the whole church and not only for our particular communities.

We have a great opportunity to come as a church and not only as belonging to different communities during the celebration of World Youth Day 2008. I do hope and pray that all of us will accompany some of our young people to these celebrations. This enables our young people to understand that they are part of a very big family. It is an opportunity for our young people to experience themselves being part of something much bigger than what they see around them. They are given the opportunity to experience what it really means to be Catholic, the fruit of a particular culture that forms an important framework of a much vaster picture. It is an opportunity to celebrate one's own culture as a part of a family that is made up of a much vaster richer and fuller picture. I hope and pray that our communities like our parishes can host, and are open to host young people coming from overseas. Let us make sure that all of us take an active part in the journey of the WYD Cross and the Icon as they make their pilgrimage through the different dioceses before finishing in Sydney just before the start of the celebrations of the World Youth Day. Let us give an opportunity for our people to take a full part in everything that occurs within World Youth Day and this does not mean that it is limited only to the young people. Everybody can and ought to be present. This is a unique event for our country.

In my own diocese of Sandhurst we are planning for the Cross and Icon to make a stop at what was Bonigilla Migrant Centre at Wodonga. Bonigilla is very well known among many migrants who settled in Victoria. It was for many the first place of settlement after arriving by ship at Station Pier in Port Melbourne. Many were taken from the ships straight to Bonigilla for a period of time till they could find work and settle in one of the suburbs. We are trying to develop a liturgy at this place to honour the people who spent some time in this camp, to give thanks for the great talents and richness of our migrant people and also to acknowledge and ask for forgiveness for any hurt that has been caused to anybody whilst residing in this migrant camp. We hope and pray that many people who spent some time at Bonigilla will be present. We are intending to issue an invitation to all migrant chaplains to attend with their respective communities. We urge people to come dressed in their national costume and to bring with them their national flags. This will hopefully be a great opportunity to celebrate and be as one community, as one church, while at the same time rejoicing in our different cultural backgrounds.

finally, besides experiencing challenges from some sections of our society, we also experience polarization within our own church. This is not something new. Factions existed even in the early church. We can see an evidence of this in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul admonishes this particular community, "From what Chloe's people have been telling me about your brothers,

it is clear that there are serious differences among you. What I mean is this: Everyone of you is declaring “I belong to Paul”, or “I belong to Apollos”, or “I belong to Cephas”, or “I belong to Christ”. Has Christ been split up”. (Cor. 1:11-13). Today we have similar attitudes within the church. These are not mere intellectual disagreements. Very often one can find the belief that it is only one’s way is going to save the church. As migrant chaplains, like any other priest our vocation is precisely to gather into unity those who think like us and those who do not. We are like bridge builders. However, The reality of being a bridge builder is that both sides walk over you. We cannot be faithful to who we are if we play one side against the other or if we take sides, or when we bring the bride which is the church not to the bridegroom Jesus but to ourselves. In the midst of friction and factions within our ecclesial community our duty is to follow the truth and to tell the truth. Let us always speak the truth boldly. Cardinal Suhard said, “One of the priest’s first services to the world is to tell the truth. This requires courage and humility.

The role of people in leadership, and this includes each one of you, is to live the truth and to form our respective communities to seek the truth, to love the truth and to proclaim only what is true”.

I conclude with the words of the Australian Bishops in the document published in 1998, “We believe that Australia has a unique opportunity at the moment in history to become an example and symbol of the kind of world community of peoples, which should exist in the coming centuries, one in which all of God’s children live in peace and solidarity with one another”. It is our privilege to be at the forefront of this mission. I thank you on behalf of our God and on behalf of our church for your ministry. Let us continue to move forward to give the best to the people that we minister to for their own benefit, for the benefit of the Australian church and for the benefit of our Australian society.

God Bless

MOST REVEREND JOSEPH GRECH, DD
Bishop of Sandhurst