

Along with Bishop Joe Grech and others, I am honoured to offer words of welcome and thanks to our Migrant Chaplains, their Pastoral Associates and support groups on behalf of the Australian Catholic Council for Clergy Life and Ministry. I am grateful for this invitation, extended by Monsignor John Murphy.

When reflecting on this pleasant task, the first thing to enter my mind ought to have been the Holy Spirit, but strangely it was the Greek god Hermes. As I recall, Hermes was, among other things, a herald, a messenger from the gods. He was an interpreter of meaning between peoples, a god of boundaries and those who crossed them, bridging strangers separated by them.

For this to be possible, I imagine he could straddle cultures, helping people find meaning in new lands while they retained a deep love for the land they left -- necessary for inner peace. We are told that he was 'a bringer of dreams', 'a watcher by night', and 'a god of shepherds'. All these qualities we recognise well and are great gifts. But for us, clearly, they are gifts of the Spirit of God for all to embrace.

As Migrant Chaplains (and I include Australians returned from other lands) we thank you today for embracing these gifts of the Spirit. In thanking you, we acknowledge your role as messengers between peoples and cultures, between your culture and Australia's. To do this, you also stand awkwardly between two cultures, just as Jesus did, mediating meaning, looking forward, looking back.

As priests and pastoral associates, we are invited in *Pastores dabō vobis* to be 'bridges for other people'.¹ By your ministry, you actively bridge the boundaries of travellers who enter this land. You provide them a sense of meaning, bringing coherence to their new setting. You provide them a sense of cohesion in building support-networks for them. And by providing a sense of hope, you make them aware that there is a new tomorrow on their new horizon. Without these gifts many would be lost.

As heralds of hope, we thank you for making sense of the foreign and the unfamiliar, and of the baffling idiosyncrasies of our culture. St Paul and the writers of the

Gospels did exactly that: they were heralds of the Message to people of different cultures and they struggled just as you no doubt do. Like them, you are ambassadors for Christ before your people, creating in them contentment, harmony and stability, engaging them in civic participation, and generating community peace. That's how special your role is. We are proud of your efforts -- as indeed you should be -- and thank you today for the fine gifts you offer to this nation in the persons of these new citizens and parishioners.

The Council for Clergy Life and Ministry congratulates the organisers of this Conference for the positive support it provides its Chaplains. We wonder if you feel that more could be done by way of support. In recent months the Council has been engaged in preparing a document for the Bishops entitled "Welcoming, Enabling, and Integrating Overseas Priests: A Proposal for the Australian Church" to assist both newly arrived priests and their local counterparts work together in welcoming and integrating these men into the life of Australia and the church.

The Council also acknowledges that our culture -- perhaps even our parishes and clergy, have not always made your ministry and life easy. For that we apologise. Common to the West, there appears to be an inherent fear of differences among people, a fear of the other, of otherness. According to Orthodox Metropolitan John Zizioulas, it is almost as if we and others of the West are forced or encouraged to consider the other as our enemy before we can treat him or her as our friend. Instinctively we build fences around ourselves as a protection from the dangers implicit in the other's presence. We accept the other, says Zizioulas, only in so far as he or she does not threaten our privacy or in so far as he or she is useful for our individual happiness. And if we accept certain others, we do so on the condition that they are somehow like us.² I am sure you do not need to be told that such an attitude makes your ministry and life difficult. We thank you for your tolerance.

Social scientist, Hugh Mackay, in his recent book "*Advance Australia ... Where?*" confirms that view: "as ever," he says, "we tend to be resistant to the latest wave of immigrants -- whether Lebanese, Sudanese or Burmese or whoever the next group might be -- just as we were to Greeks, Italians and [others] after World War II,"³ not to mention, may I add, the Vietnamese. Today, sadly, it's the Muslims who make us

nervous. Perhaps we Australians have an overcooked sense of our own tolerance. That being the case, the task is made even harder for chaplains in Australia, whether caring for migrants or refugees.

As Christians we are, after all, a Trinitarian people. Just as the Persons of the Trinity are different from each another but form a perfect unity and harmony, so it must be with us: difference and otherness should fashion unity and harmony, rather than division, as is too often the case. We admire and thank you for your patience and tolerance in the face of failures on our part. The clear challenge for **all** Australians is to enrich each other with the blessings that have been given to us -- a mutual enrichment, "an exchange of gifts" to use Pope John Paul's words.⁴

My job as Director of the Office for Clergy Life and Ministry takes me to all corners of Australia. I experience extraordinary diversity in the community of Mass-goers around the nation. It is a privilege to celebrate that diversity. And on the very rare occasions when I am home, I celebrate Mass at Quakers Hill. The community there, like many others I have been in, includes folk of Maltese, Italian, Indian, Sri Lankan, Filipino, and many other backgrounds. It's a lovely experience celebrating in these places, not solely because of the unity created within such diversity, and not only because every age-group is represented in large numbers at Mass, but particularly because some one over recent times has created -- along with the laity -- this remarkable setting. People like yourselves and sensitive Australian priests have been the effective angels of welcome and integration.

In many respects, these diverse communities lead the way in our Eucharistic celebrations and life. There are times when I'd love to pick them up and take them to those struggling parishes or disinterested people to show them (the latter) how it's done. As Migrant or Refugee Chaplains you have a great deal to be proud of. Many chaplains have gone before you and have prepared the way for you; for some of you it is a pioneering ministry. But I know you join with me in thanking sincerely those chaplains upon whose shoulders you stand. And in expressing our gratitude, one cannot overlook the laity: how well they have contributed to their own integration.

Pope John Paul captures the spirit of our mission -- yours and mine -- in his speech, delivered at the Adelaide Town Hall in 1986: “ ... When we speak with kind words; when we respect and honour one another; when we show true friendship, when we offer hospitality; when we make an effort to understand the differences between people -- then we become a living sign that Isaiah’s vision is being realized, that the Kingdom of God has come among us, that *the universal Advent of history is proceeding towards its fulfilment.*”⁵

I would like to finish with a personal word of thanks, with this story. When at Many Seminary, the Rector interviewed each student shortly after arrival. He sat me down, opened my file, looked at it briefly, peered over the top of his glasses and laughed. As I appeared somewhat quizzical about that, he said “your mother’s maiden name, it’s the Italian word for ‘a moveable piece of furniture!’” I wondered if he thought the Mobilia family took its name from the back of a removal truck. So I explained that Mum was of Sicilian heritage, more precisely of a family from the Island of Filicudi, one of the Aeolian Island group, off the north coast of Sicily. He seemed surprised. Had he lived in Melbourne where Mum and literally thousands of Aeolian Islanders lived he would not have been so surprised.

With that family background, I guess it’s no surprise that some of my siblings married Italians, of the first generation variety. In those days, I watched with keen interest the lovely care provided to those members of my family by the Scalabrinian Fathers. The Scalabrinians provided that sense of meaning and cohesion which made sense of Australia to my in-laws, while keeping them in contact with the ‘old country’, just as you do today. The Scalabrinians meant a great deal to my family. We have fond memories of them and remember them with deep gratitude.

In practical family terms, that is precisely what we thank you for. You are dealing with the often difficult and delicate matters of others’ feelings and emotions, their memories and adventures, their yesterdays and today’s, their identities and belonging, their integration in the here-and-now with the ‘old country’. That is why we value you so much and thank you so energetically today for being “One in Christ Jesus”. It is my privilege to welcome you and thank you most sincerely for your unique ministry and life.

MIGRANT CHAPLAINS CONFERENCE 29 October 2007
Father Frank Devoy, Director of the Office for Clergy Life & Ministry

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis, I will give you shepherds, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Boston, MA: St Paul Book and Media, 1992, no. 43.

² Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York, NY: T&T Publishers, 2006), 1-12.

³ Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia ... Where?: How we've changed, why we've changed and what will happen next* (Sydney, Australia: Hachette Australia Publishers, 2007), 145.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, "Common Declaration signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I," 29 June 1995, no. 4.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *The Pope in Australia: Collected Homilies and Talks* (Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publications, 1986), 184.