Refugees and the Local Community

Scenario

St Joseph's Parish Social Justice Group was upset by negative Australian attitudes to asylum seekers and decided to do something practical in support of people in this situation.

Meetings with other community groups were set up and, as a result, the group is responsible for housing and maintaining a young couple, Aliyah and Amak, fleeing with their two children from religious and civil violence in Iraq. They arrived in Australia legally and applied for asylum in this country. Their initial application was rejected and they are now waiting for their appeal to be heard.

In some ways their plight is more difficult than the plight of the detainees. At least the latter are housed, fed and given medical attention, whereas this couple cannot apply for work, are not eligible for any benefits and are totally dependent on welfare organisations for the necessities of life. So naturally the young family are very grateful for what is being done to help them.

But some parishioners are not so happy. For example, Stan has a background of mental illness complicated by alcoholism. He lives very much on the margins of the community, though he is a regular 'collector' at Mass. He wonders why few people ever speak to him and why the parish is picking up the whole tab for the asylum-seeking family while allowing him only a voucher or two when he is desperate. He thinks we should look after Australians in need first.

What should we say to him and to the many others who agree with him?

The following scenario allows you to explore the viewpoints of a range of different people.

Finding The Facts

We might begin by checking the rights of people suffering under oppressive regimes. Refer to the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Article 14 is particularly relevant here.

Our next task ought to be to make sure we are aware of the actual status of Aliyah and Amak. Are they 'illegal immigrants'? If so, does that mean they have broken the law and should be immediately deported? Are they 'asylum seekers' on temporary visas? Are asylum seekers the same as refugees? The Refugee Council of Australia site will be helpful in sorting out the facts about the status of Aliyah and Amak. See also the Edmund Rice Centre site which tackles some of the 'myths' about asylum seekers.
To explore something of the situation they are fleeing, we could click on the University of Minnesota's Human Rights Library and view the Iraq file.

The Asylum Seekers Project described on the Uniting Church Victoria website clearly outlines the lack of social and material support available to people such as Alisha and Amak, and the limitations on their freedom within the Australian community as does the Hotham Mission site.

A brief summary contained on the website of the Parliamentary Library, relating to the period 1992-2002 outlines the history of mandatory detention during that period. A document from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs entitled Managing the Border conveys the previous Government's attitude to those seeking refuge in Australia. The Rudd government has announced it will end the controversial and expensive Pacific Solution policy and close the processing centres in Nauru and PNG but the situation of people on temporary visas remains largely unchanged. We might want to consider the suggestions of Fr Frank Brennan about how Australia might develop a 'workable, decent, affordable and efficient' refugee policy.

Meanwhile, to discover something of the difficulties confronting Stan, we would need to check some facts about schizophrenia and what kinds of support exists for sufferers. We might find that people with serious mental illness are among the most marginalised in the community, and that those who suffer from mental illness are under-supported and face barriers in getting access to mental health services. Check what support is actually available by referring to the Victorian Mental Health Services page of the Victorian Government health site.

While Stan is supported by a disability pension, he faces issues which are social as well as financial. He has ongoing struggles with the tasks of day-to-day living: accommodation, employment and friendship, plus coping with an alcohol problem. To establish how the parish might make a more adequate response to his problem we could check the sites of organisations dedicated to helping people affected by mental illness, such as SANE Australia or the Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria.

For people who are either refugees or mentally ill we might try to find what means of advocacy are available to them so that they have their problems addressed appropriately.

Consider

- According to Fr Frank Brennan, what features characterise a 'workable, decent, affordable and efficient' refugee policy?
- Explore the SANE Australia site. What suggestions are made as to how

Broadening Perspectives

Reviewing philosophical attitudes to the refugee, to strangers and to those who are sick may be a valuable exercise in helping us to come to a humane, ethical response to the problems of these members of our society who are at its fringes. A good introduction to the topic is International Human Rights - The Pursuit of an Ideal, which is a brief introduction to the evolution of ideas in Western thought about the rights of human beings.

A brief and 'angry' article by Malaika Finkelstein, entitled 'Acts of God: The Deserving Poor and Everyone Else' asks some pertinent questions about exactly who deserves our sympathy and help. Some of these angry questions are examined in a more measured way in an article by John Ozolins, Head of the National School of Philosophy, Australian Catholic University. Ozolins analyses the popular argument that boat people do not deserve sanctuary in Australia because they are 'queue jumpers' who are taking the law into their own hands and displacing other, more worthy, immigrants.

A fine book on what constitutes human beings as 'human' is Raimund Gaita's A Common Humanity, but it is quite a demanding read. To get a sense of what the book is about, look at this review of the book by Lloyd
Reinhardt. Gaita's family arrived as poverty-stricken immigrants to Australia after World War II. His more autobiographical book, Romulus My Father, is an easier read. It shows that mental instability does not strip a person of their inherent humanity, and makes many points about the value of human beings. Reading this book, or parts of it, might help us to appreciate the plight of Stan more sensitively. It might also extend our understanding of the contribution made by immigrants to Australian society, and develop a deeper appreciation of the meaning of love, a concept often trivialised in the mass media.

Consider

- Who deserves our compassion, and why? How is it that we easily overlook some kinds of suffering but are deeply moved by others?
- Imagine a meeting between Stan, Aliyah and Amak. What might they say to each other

Exploring Sacred Texts

A significant part of our heritage is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Turning its pages in an effort to clarify our responses to dispossessed people, we might note that, according to Luke's Gospel, Jesus and his family were themselves refugees in a foreign land in Jesus' childhood. Moreover, the history of Israel detailed in the Hebrew Scriptures is one interlaced with the Jewish sense of being a people in exile, searching for a homeland. It is, at heart, a story of the possession and dispossess of a land.

The prophets of Israel such as Isaiah and Amos were vigorous in their demands for justice and compassion towards those in need.

The Bible, as a whole, is a manifesto of the fundamental equality and dignity of all human beings, as Desmond Tutu affirms eloquently in an speech entitled The Explosiveness of Scripture.

The gospels are full of stories of Christ's compassion towards the sick and outcast, and his teaching is consistent on the principle of love and forgiveness. Christian ethics take us beyond the 'sensible' duty of caring for family, friends, kin and those who are worthy of our love and support. We might re-read Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount, particularly Matthew 5:38–48, to understand just how radical Jesus' teaching is concerning the treatment of others. In another extract from Matthew's Gospel we might reflect on how the followers of Christ are to be judged is also.

Consider

- Why does Desmond Tutu describe scripture as 'dynamite' and say that 'the worst thing you could do when you wanted to oppress people was to give them the Bible'?
- Is 'love of enemies' hopelessly idealistic? Can you recall a personal instance when dislike and rejection have been turned around? Can this happen on a broader scale?

Understanding the Tradition

Over the centuries the Church has endeavoured to put into practice the teachings of Christ. For centuries the Church was primarily responsible for aspects of human care and endeavour - hospitals, schools, work guilds, universities and so on - that are now primarily the province of the State. In Australia the Church is still the largest non-government provider of health care and education, and as such continues to have a strong voice in matters of social justice and policy.

Teaching on human rights has been an important part of the Church's public advocacy, so we might refer to a Theology Library that holds some important Church statements on human rights, among them a 1998 Pastoral Letter of the Australian Catholic Bishops. We might also do well to take a look at the Church's Charter of Rights of Displaced Persons, prepared in the Jubilee Year 2000, and we might refer to the Catechism of the Catholic Church regarding its teachings on immigration and refugees (nos 1911 and 2241).
Alternatively, we might review one of the many proclamations of Pope John Paul II regarding openness to refugees while the Justice Education in Catholic Schools (JECS) site provides other useful links especially to Australian Catholic position papers on refugee policy, the ‘Pacific Solution’ and possible alternatives to the present situation.

To help our group understand the Church's attitude to the sick, we could review the chapter in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (nos 1500–1509) on the Anointing of the Sick.

Consider

- What does the social teaching of the Church suggest about a Christian attitude to refugees and migrants?
- According to UN figures, at the end of 2004 there were approximately 19 million refugees/displaced persons in the world. Assess current Australian Government practice against the affirmations outlined in the Church's Charter of Rights of Displaced Persons.
- What legitimate call on the life of the community has our parishioner, Stan? Construct a role play in which Stan comes face to face with members of the parish social justice group.

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Respecting Other World Views

The paper 'Buddhist Affirmations of Human Rights' by Robert Traer discusses whether an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow human beings arises from the Buddhist concept of 'dharma' and whether, within Buddhism, human nature rather than human rights is central.

Damien Keown's longer article 'Are there Human Rights in Buddhism?' explores this in more detail, making the point that, while the concept of human rights has not been explicit in Buddhism, it is implicitly understood. This point is discussed further in 'Buddhism and Human Rights' an online debate about whether or not it makes sense within the Buddhist world view to speak of human rights.

'Human Rights - Knots and Webs' by the editor of Hinduism Today is sharply critical of the assumption that all cultures need to accept the concept of human rights as understood in the West. In the same magazine, the article 'Human Rights - A Primer' by Dr Kusumita Pedersen is much more positive about the notion, and calls on all the major religions to embrace and give moral support to the cause of human rights.

The Institute of Islamic Information and Education website contains an article 'Human Rights in Islam' that locates the origins of human rights in the will and plan of God rather than in human statutes (referring to the UN Declaration of Human Rights) and sets out the rights of human beings in an Islamic State. In an article entitled 'Are Human Rights Compatible with Islam?', Riffat Hassan discusses especially the issue of women's rights within Muslim communities. Finally, an essay entitled 'Human Rights and the Westernizing Illusion' by Amartya Sen draws attention to the diversity of opinions within both Eastern and Western culture on the question of human rights.

Consider

- On what grounds do some thinkers from other religious traditions have reservations about the notion of human rights?
- Having read some of the opinions of those from other cultures and world views, are you convinced that the language of human rights is still a valuable concept when thinking of human happiness and advancement? Explain why or why not.
Examining Personal Experience

Members of the social justice group might reflect on their own immigrant antecedents - the motivations and impulses that caused their parents, grandparents and great grandparents to leave their homelands and come to Australia. They might also think of difficulties faced by mentally ill friends or relatives, and the stigma and lack of community support generally available to people who suffer mental illness. Having explored some of the thinking behind the issues and reviewed their own attitudes to the variety of difficulties that place people on the fringes of society, they should be in a better position to respond to questions about their priorities.

Consider

After going through the process with members of the social justice group of establishing their response, identify and articulate your own response.

- Find out the facts.
- Broaden your perspectives.
- Explore the sacred texts.
- Understand the tradition.
- Consider other world views.
- Review your personal experience.