

# Justice News

Newsletter of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee

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## The need for compassion

In the final weeks of sittings of the Commonwealth Parliament for 2009, attention was largely focussed on the political manoeuvrings and upheavals surrounding the Government's proposed climate change legislation.

While all this was happening, the arrival of asylum seekers continued to be a lively if secondary political issue. Not for the first time in recent years the steady arrival of the so-called "boat people" has been used to score partisan political points. The result has been that asylum seekers have again become political pawns in an increasingly strident and divisive debate. Amid exchanges in Parliament and in the media about issues of 'border protection', 'people smugglers' and the like, the personal plight of the asylum seekers has been largely ignored. What has been starkly missing from the public discourse is a firm demonstration of compassion for these vulnerable people. As the Director of the Edmund Rice Centre, Phil Glendenning, recently observed – "Compassion for vulnerable people is not weakness, it is our greatest civilizing strength".



Fifty years ago, in 1959, Australia was the sixth country in the world to sign the UN Refugee Convention as the result of the efforts of the then Prime Minister Robert Menzies with the support of the Opposition Leader, Dr H V Evatt. In the 1970's-1980's Australia's political parties co-operated in the reception and resettlement of significant numbers of refugees from Indochina, especially from Vietnam. In recent years, however, political divisiveness and destructive debates have accompanied the arrival and treatment of asylum seekers in this country.

International law and Australian law clearly allow a person to enter Australia in order to seek asylum. That right exists whether the person arrives by plane or by boat. As has been pointed out by numerous commentators, a refugee's claim for asylum is all about the circumstances they are escaping from, not the method of their arrival. The Refugee Council of Australia has recently made the point that as Australia is a nation which has championed human rights, it is important that we do not back away from the Refugee Convention, recognising that it is never 'illegal' for a person to enter our country to seek protection from persecution.

Bishop Joseph Grech, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference delegate for refugee and migrant issues, has called on all Australians, including politicians, to stop and think about asylum seekers and why they were seeking to escape their homeland. Bishop Grech went on to say that while the assessment of each individual's claim for refugee status must be left to the formal process, we should all be aware of the incredible trauma being experienced by many people in present and past war zones such as Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Individuals and community groups have an important and vital role to play in urging Government and political Parties to adopt policies which respect and preserve the rights and dignity of asylum seekers at all stages along their journey. What is needed is less confrontation and more compassion.

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## Family Violence

### A need for an integrated approach

Recent government reports establish both the cost in economic terms and the cost in emotional terms to the victims and the children living with violence. Access Economics in 2002-2003 found that the estimated cost to the Australian community of family violence is estimated at \$8.1 billion per annum. Victoria alone estimated the cost to be \$2 billion per annum. In Victoria 9% of the total disease burden in women aged 15-44 is due to domestic violence. It is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness.

But it is not just women who are the victims of domestic violence. In approx 65% of Family Violence Incident Reports at least one child was present and of these 40% were children under the age of 4. What would be the reaction of a small child seeing his/her mother being beaten? And what is the eventual cost to society of children growing up in families where they watch or are themselves the victims of family violence? Statistics coming from youth alcohol/drug services and homeless services for young people show that the major underlying problem for the large majority of these young people is family violence, either directed to themselves or to their mother. Many young men suffer from guilt for not being able to protect their mother from her partner's violence.

The Victorian Family Violence Database 1999-2004 recorded that approx. 19% of Intervention Order defendants were the parent or step/parent of the victim. In the document titled Victorian Government - A Fairer Victoria, the government outlined a strong response to family violence with both a Common Risk Assessment strategy and increased powers to the Police under the Victorian Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence. The Victorian government has developed a number of strategies to respond to family violence with greater emphasis being placed on trying to ensure that women do not necessarily need to leave their homes and their local communities. While the government needs to be congratulated on these new initiatives in responding to family violence, the need to prevent family violence can only be achieved with a change in the culture of violence being an acceptable response to frustration or anger.

The move by sporting clubs (including the AFL) to support the rejection of violence as a legitimate answer by some males can only be a good sign of a more enlightened approach to defining manliness and the role of males within families. But how many of us have swept under the carpet acts of violence we have been aware of and moved away from the scene just glad it was not happening to us? And yes, family violence does happen in the best of families; it is not just the prerogative of the disadvantaged. Male students at the elite St. Paul's College at Sydney University set up a pro-rape page on Facebook. According to the outgoing master of the University's Wesley College, there was no doubt in his mind that "women are seen as meat - that is the awful, ugly truth of it". He spoke of female students who had left the college saying, "I don't feel safe".

The moves being made by the Victorian government are but one response to family violence. The preventative response lies in the hands of us - parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles and neighbours. Not only should we reject family violence in any form but we should act as role models not just to young males but to young females in the hope that they may accept that violence should not be part of their family relationships.

*Elsie Teer*

### In search of a new home



Throughout history people have had to flee their homes seeking sanctuary from persecution. Matthew's gospel tells how Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus fled their home and escaped to Egypt:

*"An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child and kill him. So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, left that night for Egypt'" (Matthew 2:13-14)."*

#### A prayer for those seeking a new home

We ask you Lord to guide our Government leaders, those in public office, as well as all in our country, to recognise and uphold the human dignity of every migrant, refugee and asylum seeker, and their basic right to seek a new home, free from fear, persecution and exploitation, in our midst.

## Christmas God's way

In the Geelong Advertiser on Tuesday 10 November, a picture appeared of a workman placing a star on a pole in Moorabool Street, under a caption 'Let it glow, let it glow, let it glow'. This was the first of the giant stars, flags, garlands and wreaths to adorn the streets of the Geelong CBD.

It is all part of the festive season of Christmas marking the birth of the Christ Child, so much of which is seen in a variety of external and internal activities, without which the Christmas season would be incomplete.

It is the City of Greater Geelong Council that has made a decision that the time has come to show that a significant event in our year is approaching.

Another decision was made as stated by St. Paul in his letter to the community at Galatia (ch 4:4) that "when the time was right, God sent his Son, born of a human mother". The time was right for God to act, for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem.

The birth of a child is a time of joy, of celebration, of thanksgiving to God because it is the beginning of a life with all its potential and all its challenge. The birth of the Christ Child, being the Son of God, revealed the true nature of God, and also heralded a life of unprecedented dimension.

But what an unpretentious beginning. The pregnant mother arriving on a donkey, a stable for a labour ward and the infant cradled in a manger. This was God's way of bringing light to a darkened world, God's way to enthuse the world with hope! And it has happened!

Ever since the coming of the Christ Child it is a matter of concern for the way the homeless, refugees, asylum seekers are treated, babies are born, and the conditions under which people are nurtured.

The real joy and peace of Christmas stands in stark contrast to the crude facilities into which the Christ Child was born and many are compelled to live today.

The birth of Christ is an expression of God's love for all, and is a time when that love overflows into the lives of others. Let it glow, let it glow, let it glow.

*Rev Bert Bell*



Moorabool Street

### A gift idea for this Christmas

#### Support the work of Caritas



By supporting Caritas Australia you can help to create positive change by alleviating poverty and bringing hope, life, peace and justice to many disadvantaged communities throughout the world, including Indigenous communities in Australia. You can support Caritas Australia's emergency appeals, development programs and education programs with a donation.

Whatever the amount, your gift will make a difference. Caritas Australia will be grateful for any support you can give and donations of \$2 or more are tax deductible. You can donate via their website ([www.caritas.org.au](http://www.caritas.org.au)) or through their toll free phone number 1800 024 413 or by post. To mail a donation, post a cheque or money order to Caritas Australia: GPO Box 9830, Melbourne

*The Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee  
wishes you a joyful Christmas and a peace-filled 2010*



*We're on the web!*

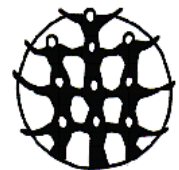
Earlier issues of *Justice News* and further information about the Social Justice Committee are available on the website of the Justice Unit of the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

<http://www.melbourne.catholic.org.au/ccjp/geelongdeanery.htm>

*Justice News* is a publication of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee, and is authorised and published by the Committee's co-ordinator, Kevin Yelverton, c/- St Mary's Parish Office, 150 Yarra Street, Geelong 3220 ([kbyelverton@bigpond.com](mailto:kbyelverton@bigpond.com)).

The Committee welcomes letters and comments in response to items published in *Justice News*. All letters and comments are placed before the Committee and will be replied to wherever possible. The Committee can be contacted via its coordinator, Kevin Yelverton.

## No Interest Loans Scheme - NILS



It is not usual for a group of people to be excited about lending money. But there was great joy at the Geelong No Interest Loans office when the first loan for a fridge was signed off. This has been followed by two further loans and the volunteer workers and committee were as pleased as if they themselves had received a loan.

Over the past two months, news of the program is gradually becoming known and while we recognize that we cannot meet everyone's needs, it is wonderful to be able to say "yes" to individuals who often find it difficult to buy new household goods for themselves, or as one man said: "I will be able to drive my car further now that I do not have to put oil in it every day".

But the highlight of this community micro-finance program here in Geelong is that it is totally run by volunteers, all of whom are very committed to the concept of this dignified means for people to obtain a necessary item with an interest free loan. In the year when we watched as corporations went bankrupt and we became aware of the huge salary packages that corporate executives gave themselves, it is wonderful to meet people for whom the giving of their time is not an imposition but a gift to their less fortunate citizens - people who put their belief in social justice into practice.

There is no monetary reward for the NILS volunteers only the knowledge that by their involvement a family now has a good fridge, that a man can now safely drive his car and the hope that the young teenager who needs a bigger bed will soon sleep in comfort.

Gandhi in 1925 said: "that service is the noblest which is rendered for its own sake". It is probably even more relevant today in a society that appears to be greatly influenced by material benefits.

The joy of giving is not just about presents at Christmas but also about the joy of giving of one's self, in the hope that this gift may change someone's life even in a small way.

*Elsie Teer*

*If you are interested in becoming a volunteer or would like further information about NILS please phone 52 298829*