

Social Justice Sunday Statement 2003

A GENEROUS HEART  
IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST



***Challenging Racism in Australia Today***

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference



## Chairman's message

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, I present the Social Justice Sunday Statement for 2003, *A Generous Heart in the Love of Christ: Challenging Racism in Australia Today*.

We live in a time of national and international divisiveness and bitterness, often based on racial and religious differences. The Statement traces Australia's own story of welcome and exclusion, from the impact of the early white settlers on our first inhabitants to the development of a multicultural nation, but notes the recurrence today of widespread racial hostility and rejection, expressed most clearly in our attitude to prospective refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from the Middle East.

The Statement presents, however, positive and helpful advice based on the stories and actions of Jesus who meets strangers, looks into their faces, engages them in conversation and reveals a God who loves all human beings.

It suggests steps that we, as individuals and members of our parishes, schools and local communities, can take to respond to the challenge of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II:

*How can the baptised claim to welcome Christ if they close the door to the foreigner who comes knocking?*

(Message for World Migration Day 2000)

I would like to express the deep appreciation of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council for the wise pastoral guidance of my predecessor, Bishop William Morris.



With every blessing

Christopher A. Saunders, DD  
Bishop of Broome  
Chairman  
Australian Catholic Social Justice  
Council

## Acknowledgements

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An electronic version of the Statement is available on the ACBC website at [www.catholic.org.au](http://www.catholic.org.au) and the ACSJC site at [www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au](http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au).

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# A GENEROUS HEART IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST

## *Challenging Racism in Australia Today*



One of the loveliest sights is that of a child running with a smile towards mother or father, and being welcomed with open arms. And one of the saddest sights is that of a little child running happily towards an adult, only to be pushed away with a frown and harsh words. We all know how encouraging we find it, even as adults, to be welcomed, and how devastating it is to be shut out and excluded.

To be rejected is bad enough if we have done something wrong. But it is even more bitter if we are excluded simply because of our religion, our birthplace, our colour, our race, or the way we speak. We are upset when people decide we are worthless even before they know us. Equally, to be welcomed by people who do not know us encourages us.

If experiences of welcome and rejection are significant for us as individuals, the same is true of our national life. Australian life has been a story of relationships. First, Indigenous Australians related to one another within the clan and with other clans. Later they had to relate to the powerful British immigrants, who also related to would-be settlers from other parts of the world. These patterns of relationship have constantly changed: sometimes excluding, sometimes welcoming. The more welcoming a family, town, city

or nation has been to strangers, the healthier is its spiritual state.

In Australia, as in other nations, there have been groups whom people have always found it difficult to welcome and easy to exclude. The relationships of white immigrants to the first inhabitants of the land have been difficult, beginning in violence and banishment, and continuing in uneasy and often patronising co-existence. For much of Australia's history, too, people of races other than Caucasian have not been welcome, while many Chinese and South Sea Islanders were expelled. All this happened in the name of the White Australia policy.

Today, when fear of terrorism abounds, asylum seekers are widely feared and loathed, and Muslim immigrants often meet hostility in schools, workplaces and the wider community. That Jewish communities have also been targets of racial hatred at this time reminds us that a strain of anti-Semitism periodically reasserts itself in our society.

Even in times when society is inhospitable, however, we hear inspiring stories of people who go out of their way to welcome strangers and make them feel at home. We are proud that many of these stories belong to the Christian churches, reflecting, in the

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*‘We all know how encouraging we find it, even as adults, to be welcomed, and how devastating it is to be shut out and excluded.’*

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parable of the Good Samaritan, the hospitality of a God who sent His Son to die for all human beings of every race and religion. Of course, we Catholics have also often shared with other Australians a blindness and lack of sympathy towards strangers. But this does not reflect the Gospel. Nor does it display the proud Australian tradition of "a fair go".

In this Social Justice Sunday Statement, then, we shall reflect on our Australian story, exploring our reasons for welcoming or excluding those different from us. We shall then ask why our faith in Jesus Christ commits us to be hospitable to strangers, and suggest ways we can welcome those different from us.

## The Australian story: welcome and exclusion

### *First Australians and settlers*

The early relationships between the white settlers and the first Australians illustrate the many reasons we so easily exclude people and do not welcome them.

When the British settlers met the Indigenous people, the differences of language and culture were so great that it was difficult for them to meet as fellow and equal human beings. It was easier for the powerful newcomers to look down on the first inhabitants as primitive, as barbarians, as less than human. Lack of mutual understanding makes it difficult to look into the faces of strangers and to welcome them.

Lack of understanding soon grew into hostility when the newcomers took control of resources on which Indigenous people depended in order to maintain their traditional way of life. They built on traditional sites and fenced land on which the Aborigines had hunted. Competition for resources led to hostility, violence and fear. In many parts of Australia there were massacres and incidents of a kind that are more common in civil war than in peace.

Sicknesses to which Western bodies had become accustomed also proved lethal for Indigenous Australians. The result was a land organised by the new settlers in the interests of the economy that they themselves had instituted. The relationship between the settlers and the Indigenous people was now one between a powerless group and an economically and politically dominant group that made the decisions for the weaker.

It is very difficult for adults in unequal relationships to welcome one another. In the Australian situation the dominant regarded the others as racially and culturally inferior, destined to die out because of their inferiority. Although the plight of the Indigenous

people aroused some sympathy, the newcomers saw the first inhabitants through their own eyes, and made laws that did not respect Indigenous traditions. The powerful white settlers removed children from their distressed families, placed them on reservations and subjected them to a regime the settlers would never have accepted for themselves. Indigenous Australians were regarded as a problem to be solved.

The early Australian history of relationships between races is bleak. But in it we also read accounts of people who became interested in the first Australians and related to them as human beings. Some formed loving relationships and marriages that crossed racial boundaries. In rural areas, stories are told both by landholders and members of the local clans about some relationships that were respectful on both sides. Some settlers risked ostracism by criticising their neighbours who treated Indigenous people cruelly and exploited their labour. Unsurprisingly, there was exclusion; more surprisingly, there was also welcome.

This pattern of exclusion and welcome was also seen in churches. Their members shared many of the attitudes of their society, but they also preached and tried to live by the Gospel of welcome. Guided as they were by principles of love and commitment to their faith, many Christians accepted hardship and suffering in establishing missions to the Indigenous peoples. Some also protested at the way in which the latter were exploited and mistreated. Missionaries were, however, commonly disappointed at the lack of impact they believed they had made on the people whom they served. Their sense of failure arose partly out of their desire to convert nomadic people to the forms of a European Christianity. They found it hard to appreciate positively the religious world, nomadic life and marriage customs of the Indigenous peoples. In turn, the Indigenous people saw the missionaries as a source of material goods, but also as agents of an excluding and uncomprehending culture.

### *White Australians and other races*

In time, the predominantly British and Irish immigrants to Australia had also to deal with immigrants of other races. The most significant groups were from China and the Pacific Islands. The former came to seek their fortune in the gold rush, while many of the latter were kidnapped and forced to work on the canefields where, it was believed, Caucasians could not safely work because of the heat.

The same factors that led to the exclusion of Indigenous Australians also made it difficult to welcome the non-white immigrants. Because the Chinese differed so sharply from their fellow miners in their language, customs, dress and appearance,

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*‘The powerful white settlers removed children from their distressed families, placed them on reservations and subjected them to a regime the settlers would never have accepted for themselves.’*

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they often provoked hostility in their fellow diggers in the harsh and volatile conditions of the diggings. Pacific Islanders, too, were feared as cheap labour which would cost native-born Australians employment under fair conditions. To make a more equitable society was an all-consuming struggle for many workers. When issues of racial difference and economic justice coincided, the concern for equity was supported by the wildest of prejudices.

At Federation, Australia adopted the "White Australia" policy, which effectively restricted immigration to people of European descent. Many Chinese and Islanders, including some born in Australia, were deported to their countries of origin. Would-be immigrants were subject to a dictation test designed to exclude those of other races. Australians who came from minority groups met

*he told me 'sit down' and I just sat down and found it hard to leave him. He was such a beautiful person."*  
(Lake, p14).

These stories, with their mixture of exclusion and welcome, of discouragement and encouragement, of the extraordinary power of kindness shown by a good person, will be familiar to any Australian who has belonged to a minority group.

### *Immigrants after 1945*

After 1945 the face of Australia became much more diverse and the nation more prosperous. The experience of the 1939-1945 war led Australia to accept many people of a non-British background.



Br Gary Wellismore cfc

St Mary's  
Primary  
School,  
Bowraville

*'We are made in God's image, each deeply loved by God, and that is finally the source of our human dignity.'*

both exclusion and welcome. Exclusion was always bitter, but the effects of welcome were often more lasting. The distinguished Australian, Faith Bandler, born in 1918, a descendant of South Sea Islanders and later to become an advocate for racial justice in Australia, recalls playground prejudice. She was 14.

*It was recess ... and she was trying to stop a gang of kids taunting a Jewish girl who had just arrived in town. They were shouting at her: "You killed Jesus Christ! You killed Jesus Christ!" Says Bandler: "When I told them to give it away, they started following me chanting: 'You killed Captain Cook! You killed Captain Cook!'"*  
(Marilyn Lake, *Faith: Faith Bandler, Gentle Activist*, Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, 2002, p15).

But Faith stayed at school because some of her teachers welcomed her. With her lunch money she bought a tie for one teacher who had been kind to her.

*"Shyly I handed him this tie and I looked in his eyes and they were full of tears. I'll never forget that. So*

Governments believed that we needed a larger population to defend ourselves and to industrialise. As our needs could not be met solely by British immigrants, we sought people from Southern and Eastern Europe, many of whom had been displaced by war.

Immigrants from this time remember the mixture of welcome and exclusion facing them in Australia. Although the exclusion they experienced was often not deliberate, it nonetheless had an adverse effect. They might have been accepted personally, but most native-born Australians showed little interest in their lives in Italy or Poland or Croatia and their traditions and language were not appreciated. They were expected to assimilate quickly into Australian society as if they had no past, no culture of their own. Until they spoke English they were handicapped; in dealing with hospitals, bureaucracy and business, they found that Australians could understand neither their language nor their customs. Life in Australia could be profoundly difficult, particularly for older immigrants.



Still, many also found people who made them feel at home. Groups established to help immigrants settle were very generous with their time and expertise, and some Australian families offered hospitality. The churches were especially important, because there the new arrivals found a place where they could meet to pray in their own language and celebrate their own culture. In time, most groups had chaplains and found a measure of hospitality within established parishes. Some immigrants found Australian Catholicism cold and forbidding, but many came eventually to find a home. One Australian couple remembers with affection welcoming a large Dutch family, dressed in traditional clothes, coming over the mullock hills to their country church, singing songs of their own land. The family remembers the difficulty of settling into another culture and another style of church life.

### *Multiculturalism*

It was not in the national interest to treat immigrants simply as individuals who could leave behind their own culture and immediately settle into Australian society. Because of this expectation, some immigrants had returned home disappointed while, of those who stayed, many struggled to live productively. Governments eventually realised that immigrants derived from their own communities the skills and courage needed to live in Australia. They encouraged various state community organisations such as Good Neighbour Councils to help people adjust to life in their new adopted home.

These practical steps implied a more welcoming attitude to immigrants: requiring them to accept the responsibilities of citizenship, while respecting their own culture as a gift that could be integrated with the gifts of other Australians. This policy and attitude came to be called multiculturalism. It became controversial in its detail, but in seeing immigrants not as individuals who had simply to assimilate, but as persons gifted by their own communities and culture, it respected their dignity.

As this more welcoming attitude to immigrants was adopted, the White Australia policy was gradually abandoned between 1949 and 1973. Shortly afterwards Australia began to receive a large number of Indochinese refugees. The Government and community groups initially welcomed them with open arms. The churches were particularly important in extending this welcome. Some religious houses opened their doors to refugees, and the St Vincent de Paul Conferences offered great practical help. Indeed, many Cambodians still refer to the Vinnies who first met them as Mum and Dad – they are blessed with hundreds of children!

As well as remembering their past, those who come as strangers often need to let go of it. Refugees

especially have bitter memories of brutal relationships endured in poverty and violence, and unforgiving attitudes between people of different races or religions. To live in a democracy where there is free expression of opinions, and where people must negotiate and represent the values of a diverse society built on tolerance, is a challenge. It has largely been met. In Australia, ethnic tensions among different groups of immigrants have not been significant. The more pressing challenge is for the majority to welcome minority groups.

### *Welcome and exclusion today*

Sadly, the national mood today is more fearful and more suspicious of people who are different. Less welcoming attitudes reflect economic and political pressures and anxiety about security. Australia has seen rapid change in work practices, in security of work, in the emphasis on competition, in public spending that has not kept pace with the community's needs and the withdrawal of services like transport and power from public responsibility. These trends have been worldwide.

Although national wealth might have increased, people generally feel less secure. There is a growing gulf between the richest and poorest in society. Throughout the world, such economic inequalities have bred resentful attitudes to people who are different. These have been intensified by the anxieties caused by terrorism. Pope John Paul remarked:

*Unfortunately, we still encounter in the world a closed-minded attitude and even one of rejection, due to unjustified fears and concern for one's own interests alone. These forms of discrimination are incompatible with belonging to Christ and to the Church.*

(Jubilee of Migrants and Itinerant People Homily of Pope John Paul II, June 2, 2000 par. 3)

In Australia, the desire to exclude is expressed most clearly in a hostile attitude to refugees and asylum seekers. The refusal to allow the asylum seekers on the Tampa to land, the excision of parts of Australia so that these are now places where people cannot claim refugee status, and the detention for prolonged periods of people, including children, behind barbed wire fences in the most inhospitable parts of Australia, are powerful symbols of Australian exclusion. These policies, exacerbated by some influential newspapers and talk-back radio shows around the nation, have won the support of a politically significant number of Australians, many of whom themselves were once welcomed as refugees.

These patterns of exclusion have also touched the lives of refugee groups and immigrants from the Middle East. The events of September 11, 2001, the

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consequent military action in Afghanistan, the bombing in Bali, the war in Iraq and subsequent terrorist attacks have caused distress and anxiety in many Muslim communities, as well as in the general Australian population. These tragic events have also been followed by crudely argued theories that Islamic immigrants cannot accept Australian values and should not be welcomed here. Such theories have been demonstrated in verbal abuse of Muslim children, vandalism directed against mosques, and hostility among groups of young people in poorer suburbs.

But if the public face of Australia has been harsh and unwelcoming, many Australians, including church groups, have passionately expressed their desire for a more welcoming society. Some have made their houses available to asylum seekers and refugees, organised discussions of refugee policy in rural centres, taught asylum seekers, visited detention centres, provided free medical care to those deprived of medical benefits, offered free legal advice and lobbied the government.



Sr Trish Madigan OP

*‘Welcome begins when we look into the faces and learn the names of those who are different from us.’*

This practical welcome has been largely ecumenical, spontaneously bringing together people from many local churches. The Australian Catholic bishops, too, have been among those who have persistently called on Australia to welcome refugees and immigrant groups within the community. If our time has been one of public exclusion, it has also been one of personal welcome.

The Church recalls the Gospel account of Jesus and his family as refugees seeking asylum in a foreign land. The story of The Flight into Egypt carries great relevance to events faced by millions of children and their families in today's world. In many respects it is their story. It presents a challenge to Australia, as one point of destination for people seeking asylum, to recognise the kinds of threats faced by the Holy Family in this Gospel passage.

## Welcoming the stranger

### *Jesus and the stranger*

The stories that Christians tell are of a welcome that overcomes exclusion. The people of Israel are to be hospitable to strangers because God had welcomed them when they too were strangers. Nor is God exclusive: the Jews are God's chosen people, but other nations, kings and prophets are also God's instruments.

Of course, life did not run so sweetly. Like modern Australians, the ancient people of Israel found it difficult to welcome strangers, particularly in times of war and economic hardship. They easily assumed that because they were God's chosen people they were the only people whom God cared for. The story of Jonah challenged this view: it portrays a God who loves the people of Nineveh, and it discredits Jonah for sulking because God spared the people. In his life and teaching, Jesus stressed God's love for

strangers, particularly people excluded because of their race or their morals. He insisted that God's Kingdom had a place for tax collectors and prostitutes. In the Gospel, meals were often a battleground because the Pharisees believed that only those with whom God was pleased should be invited. Jesus insisted that sinners should be invited because God loved them and invited them to conversion.

The Gospels often praise foreigners. Today the term Good Samaritan is commonly used for a person who shows kindness to strangers in need. Samaritans were members of a despised race and religion, and to hear them held up as models shocked Jesus' hearers. In John's story of the woman by the well, we meet another Samaritan. She is surprised that Jesus should put himself out to speak to her, since she is handicapped by being both a Samaritan and a





woman. But Jesus approaches her simply as a person and offers her God's salvation. In his stories and actions, Jesus meets strangers, looks into their faces, engages them in conversation and reveals a God who loves all human beings.

In his teaching, too, Jesus addresses the anxieties and lack of imagination that make us exclude people. To dispel the anxiety that makes us see strangers as competitors, he invites his hearers to consider the flowers of the field. He also praises the goodness of the hated Samaritans, Romans, Gentiles and tax collectors. He urges them to love their enemies, imitating God, who makes the rain fall on the good and the evil alike.

Jesus' insistence on God's universal hospitality made him a stranger in his own land. He was taken outside his own city to be crucified as an outsider. But the early Christians recognised that it was by Jesus' exclusion that they had been invited to be God's people. Others remarked on their hospitality, both to visitors from other Christian communities and to those in need. Their way of life expressed their gratitude to God, who had called them from being strangers to follow Jesus' way of hospitality.

Right from the start, Christians were challenged to embrace difference. At Pentecost, the crowds heard the Apostles in their own languages. The Spirit united them in faith in Jesus Christ, but respected their differences of culture. They remained Greek or Jew, male and female, slave and free, but were all welcomed by Christ. St Paul later insisted that Jewish religious customs not be imposed on Gentile Christians, who were to be received with acceptance of their own cultures, languages and histories.

### *Human dignity and discrimination*

The Gospel urges us to welcome strangers because we are all precious in God's sight. Our worth does not depend on the colour of our skin, our customs, or our religion. We are made in God's image, each deeply loved by God, and that is finally the source of our human dignity. Because each of us is infinitely precious, no one may be treated as a thing or used to achieve some grand goal. When we welcome the stranger, we welcome Christ.

*How can the baptised claim to welcome Christ if they close the door to the foreigner who comes knocking?  
"If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brothers or sisters in need, yet closes his heart against them, how does God's love abide in him?"  
(1.Jn.3.17. Pope John Paul II, Message for World Migration Day 2000, No 5)*

Because all human beings are equal in God's sight, it is wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of nationality, race or religion. Discrimination corrodes their self-respect and corrupts the humanity of those who discriminate. Ultimately it weakens the society which tolerates discrimination by encouraging a climate of insecurity and selfishness. We can see this in societies that practised anti-Semitism, apartheid or "ethnic cleansing". There, people found it difficult to look others in the face or to see them as equal and free before God. They could not imagine, or they ignored, what it meant for people to be deprived of home, land and livelihood because of their religion or the colour of their skin.

### *The gift of diversity*

Culture, language, religion and nationality are important to us because they are the building blocks of our identity and self-confidence. They shape our relationships to one another and our world. Our language and culture give us eyes with which to see our world, words and silences with which to celebrate it with other people, and the words and rituals that open a path to God. Our culture, language and religion are not like clothes that we can change when we travel. They are like the skin that enables us to go confidently into our world; they are not possessions, but part of our self. To expect people to give up their own culture when they enter ours is like asking them to amputate a limb.

Respect for persons demands respect for their cultures. What makes us different from one another is what most enriches us as human beings and makes possible deep relationships between us. Our differences reflect the variety and inexhaustible beauty of God. If multiculturalism implies that we should not only support immigrants as individuals but should also regard their culture as an enrichment, it simply states what ought to be obvious.

Churches nourish the spiritual and cultural life of immigrants and help them feel at home in their adopted land. Because our relationship to God lies at the heart of who we are as persons, it is vital for us to be able to pray in our own ways and to hear the Word of God in our own language. The churches that receive immigrants make a cultural space where people can pray together out of the richness of their own culture.

This has been true in Australia, too. Many immigrants at first seek strength and comfort in their ethnic church community to help them cope with the shock of their new life. As time passes, they also begin to put down roots in the local church and parishes. The two communities and two cultures knit

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*‘In his stories and actions, Jesus meets strangers, looks into their faces, engages them in conversation and reveals a God who loves all human beings.’*

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together slowly, sometimes over generations, like a branch grafted on to a tree. For the Australian church, the challenge is to welcome them as new branches bearing fruit.

### *Respect for other beliefs*

If our Christian faith lies at the heart of who we are, that is true also for those of other religions. To welcome them as persons, we must respect their conscience and their religious beliefs. This is not always easy. Historically, religious differences have often spurred wars, waged by Christians as well as by others. But one of the most significant documents of Vatican II, the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, insisted that we must respect the right of all persons to choose and to exercise their own religion, because God draws each of us in the depths of our own heart. While God's final saving Word is spoken in Jesus Christ, the ways through which God calls people are

an alleged link between asylum seekers and terrorists, and by claiming that Islam and Australian values are incompatible. In weighing these charges, we should remember that Christians were once the object of similar attacks in the Roman Empire, as were Irish Catholics by their Australian critics.

It is also unfair to identify terrorism with Islam, many of whose leaders have been proponents of peace. That many terrorists invoke Islam to justify their violence should not discredit the religion. If it did, the Catholic or Protestant churches would be discredited by the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland who fly sectarian flags, and Christianity itself would have been discredited by the rogue Crusaders who ransacked Constantinople and committed atrocities in the Holy Land. What these groups did, however, had nothing to do with the life, example, teaching or presence of Jesus Christ in the church.



chilout.org

*‘The detention for prolonged periods of people, including children, behind barbed wire fences in the most inhospitable parts of Australia is a powerful symbol of Australian exclusion.’*

many and mysterious, including their religious traditions. So, respecting the faith and religious views of other people is not asserting that all religions are equally good; it is respecting the mystery of God's love.

*Our encounter requires that we strive to discern and welcome whatever is good and holy in one another, so that together we can acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral truths which alone guarantee the world's future.*

(Pope John Paul II, Meeting with Religious Leaders, November 7, 1999, New Delhi, India)

Respect for those of other religions has come under pressure, particularly after terrorist attacks made in the name of Islam and a climate of anxiety about terrorism. It has been all too easy to identify Islam with terrorism, and to project our fears about security on to Australian Islamic communities and asylum seekers who have fled from tyranny. It is also easy for populist politicians and commentators to feed prejudice against Islamic immigrants by referring to

## What can we do?

### *The first step: Acquaintance*

What can we do as adult members of our neighbourhood, in our workplace, in our community to welcome those different from ourselves? Welcome begins when we look into the faces and learn the names of those who are different from us. If we are alone in a foreign place, the most precious gift we can receive is the friendly interest that a local takes in us. When we meet people who look or sound "foreign", we have a choice: we can pass by with our heads down, or we can meet their eyes and, if the occasion arises, converse with them. Of course, this can be hard to do because we are afraid and do not know what to say. But we can never welcome strangers unless we go outside our own comfort zone. When we are interested in people, it becomes natural to accompany them, and then to welcome them into our homes and churches.



### Parishes

To help strangers find a welcome in our parishes, simple things are often the most important. Visitors to a parish feel welcome if someone greets them; they often feel excluded if no one notices them, although many parishes offer generous hospitality to migrant communities and their chaplains. Some parishes have statues of various national patrons and celebrate their feast days, and welcome the musical gifts and the hymns of different ethnic groups. It is also common for parishes to celebrate a day for all nations. Given anti-Islamic feeling today, we should find ways to make contact with local Muslim groups. Small overtures like these suggest that our diverse languages and cultures are a gift, not a problem.

### Catholic schools

Catholic schools are a treasure for learning the welcome that faith requires. Young people can confront the prejudices of society there, and learn to find in their differences a source of richness. Many primary schools welcome students of 50 or 60 nationalities and diverse religions, including Buddhists and Muslims. When they are encouraged from time to time to pray publicly in their own languages and to explain with pride their native customs, they all come to appreciate the richness in diversity.

After the anti-Islamic anger that followed September 11, 2001, some schools invited students from Muslim schools to speak with their own students. Such actions also confront any prejudices that parents may have. Some schools have had to resist pressure to exclude children of an Indigenous or Muslim background. They have been the conscience of the community, at times changing local attitudes.

### Local communities

At a time when the majority of Australians appear unwelcoming to asylum seekers and immigrant groups, it is essential to change these attitudes at the grass roots. Some people join groups that hear the experience of asylum seekers and offer them practical support. In country areas, groups invite refugees to meet local people and hold meetings to dispel the myths about asylum seekers and Islamic culture. In the cities, other groups tutor asylum seekers and their children, and help provide housing and medical attention for people excluded from the entitlements of ordinary Australians. Others hold prayer vigils to ensure that those detained under harsh conditions are not forgotten.

Many of these activities are organised by church groups, usually on an ecumenical basis. This kind of cooperation in making Australia a more welcoming society also leads us towards the full unity which Christ wants for his church.

### Australian public life

Many aspects of Australian life are built on exclusion. To change them, the first steps are to be critical of arguments put for excluding people, and to encourage public conversation. When the word *racism* is used, conversation usually dies. Those arguing for policies of exclusion are called racists, while those who rebut their arguments are accused of calling them racists. When we listen to the opinions of politicians, columnists and radio talk-show hosts, we must ask whether their ideas and the ways they express them encourage us to be more or less welcoming. Unsupported remarks – for example, that asylum seekers and Muslim immigrants may be

*‘If the public face of Australia has been harsh and unwelcoming, many Australians, including church groups, have passionately expressed their desire for a more welcoming society.’*

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terrorists or may harbour disease – are wrong and encourage fear and exclusion. Teachers in schools near immigration detention centres have remarked how the attitude of local townspeople hardened after such remarks. We should therefore be critical of such speech because it is destructive. But reasoned conversation about the delicate issues of immigration and community harmony should be encouraged. We should be concerned above all that Australian policy be morally based: that it respect the human dignity of immigrants and asylum seekers and recognise the claim that the needy have on the privileged.

Finally, we should also recognise the broader issues that lead a society to be welcoming or excluding. When we are anxious and insecure, we are likely to see other people as hostile and to exclude them. Today, many people are anxious about such issues as national security, economic inequality, the effects of competition, and the struggle for community. Their anxieties encourage a tendency to make scapegoats of groups seen as competitors for jobs or scarce resources.

We must therefore reflect on what kind of Australia



Yoga in Daily Life

World Peace Forum, Sydney, March 2003

*‘We must respect the right of all persons to choose and to exercise their own religion, because God draws each of us in the depths of our own heart.’*

Church groups can and must help define what is acceptable political behaviour. In times of insecurity, politicians are always tempted to find scapegoats against whom to direct community anger. Immigrants, Indigenous Australians and refugees are easy targets. When we believe that politicians are attacking vulnerable groups for electoral gain, as has happened at times in recent years, we must show our concern at such unacceptable behaviour.

will be a welcoming country and will nurture a welcoming attitude in our children. Will it be an isolationist, suspicious and aggressive Australia, or a fair-minded nation characterised by its sense of justice and its generous heart?

May Christians, in the love of Christ, set an example of openness and generosity towards our fellow inhabitants of every race and background.

*‘We must therefore reflect on what kind of Australia will be a welcoming country and will nurture a welcoming attitude in our children.’*



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