

SPEECH

Migrant and Refugee Sunday and Our Response to the Afghanistan Crisis

Tim McKenna, Chair Vincentian Refugee Network

To Vincentians and other Catholics in the Archdiocese of Canberra Goulburn

Wednesday 15 September 2021

Thanks Kym and Claire for inviting me to participate in this webinar.

I too, acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respect to their Elders.

Today I'd like to talk to you about Migrant and Refugee Sunday, but also about our response to the Afghan Crisis.

MIGANT AND REFUGEE SUNDAY

Sunday 26 September is the Catholic Church's 107th, World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

So, since 1914 (at least), our World Church has been concerned for the well-being of migrants and refugees. Pope Francis has had a particular interest.

Both the Australian Church and Vinnies continue to benefit from the wonderful involvement of migrant and refugees in their organisations.

And both the Church and Vinnies minister to those migrant and refugees in need, and advocate on their behalf.

The Vatican Office responsible for organising Migrant and Refugee Sunday, notes that it is an opportunity:

- to express concern, for vulnerable people on the move;
- to pray for them, as they face many challenges; and
- to increase awareness about the opportunities that migration offers.

The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO) has produced a resource kit to help Australian parishes and other Church communities celebrate the Day.¹

So, in this talk I use this kit as the basis for discussing the Day, starting with the Pope's message.

Pope Francis' Message

The Pope's theme for the Day is, ***Towards an Ever Wider 'We'***. He says to all of us, as part of the Church and as part of the world community:

*"... we are all in the same boat and called to work together, so that there will be no more walls that separate us, no longer **others**, but only a single **'we'**, encompassing all of humanity."*

¹ <https://www.acmro.catholic.org.au/resources/migrant-refugee-kit/booklet/1310-migrant-and-refugee-kit-2021/file>

He calls on the Church to “go out into the streets of every existential periphery ... to heal wounds ... without prejudice or fear ... to embrace everyone ... [including] ... migrants and refugees.”

The first part of his prayer for the Day, is an important reminder to us all:

“Holy, Beloved Father, Your Son Jesus taught us, that there is great rejoicing in heaven, whenever someone lost is found, whenever someone excluded, rejected or discarded, is gathered into our ‘we’, which thus becomes ever wider.”

So, what does the Resource Kit Say about our Australian Church Engaging with Migrants and Refugees?

- The Kit includes stories which celebrate our approach to an ‘ever wider we’, including:
 - the Filipino community in Adelaide,
 - a church in Armidale, and
 - the Catholic community in Coober Pedy.

It also includes a video from a migrant in Melbourne, about his experiences – both good and challenging – in settling into the community and into the Church.

But importantly, there is also an article about *150 Days of Action, for Refugees and People Seeking Asylum*,² which addresses the **darker** side of Australia’s response to people seeking protection. The article discusses the injustice experienced by two groups who are already here in Australia:

- 20,000 refugees still on temporary visas (300 in Canberra) unable to bring their families here, and
- another 10,000 people (over 300 in Canberra) still struggling through a refugee application process, condemned as unfair by the Australian Human Rights Commission.³

Supporting this second group of people, as they fight this unfair process, while left destitute by the removal of Government benefits, has been one of the toughest challenges for Vinnies and other refugee support organisations in the last five years.

The problems facing refugees on temporary visas for nearly a decade, have become more acute recently. As their visas expire, they must struggle through the same, unfair refugee application process a second time.

They must re-live the trauma as they repeat the application process, compounding their insecurity and stress.

And as the years drag on, no access to close family re-union, becomes a heavier cross, for these vulnerable people to carry.

² <https://catholicsforrefugees.org.au/cfr-resources/150-days-of-action/>

³ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/asylum-seekers-and-refugees/publications/lives-hold-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-legacy>

We in Vinnies strongly support this *150 Days* campaign, particularly, as the crisis in Afghanistan has starkly exposed the true brutality of indefinite temporary visas. But more about Afghanistan later.

What action is suggested for the day?

The resource kit provides guidance for the celebration of Mass on 26 September, including suggestions for the homily and Prayers of the Faithful, all drawing on Pope Francis' message. It also advertises two multicultural masses on the Day in the cathedrals of Adelaide and Brisbane.

And the kit notes the *150 Days* campaign will hold an online evening vigil – also on 26 September. The vigil will again call for justice for refugees on temporary visas and for those still struggling through an unfair process.

It will also bring to mind the people who have sought our protection but suffered more grievously, dying in Australian immigration detention.

Archbishop Christopher's Reflection

Our Archbishop Christopher Prowse (Canberra Goulburn) is responsible for ACMRO, so he presents a reflection for the Day. He says:

“Let us be encouraged by Pope Francis' message and show neighbourhood closeness, to (migrants and refugees) in their vulnerabilities.”

For Archbishop Christopher simple, practical kindness helps people feel part of our wider 'we', rather than simply feeling the 'I', of facing their difficulties alone.

What can we do?

Despite the limitations of COVID there are things we can do to participate.

Download the ACMRO kit, read it and check that your parish office has done the same.

<https://www.acmro.catholic.org.au/resources/migrant-refugee-kit/booklet/1310-migrant-and-refugee-kit-2021/file>

Secondly, if you wish to help a parish celebration on the 26 September, contact me.

People are working on this in 12 parishes across Canberra Goulburn. If yours is on my list, I'll put you in contact with them, if not, you may wish to contact your parish directly.

Thirdly, on the Day, celebrate the contribution migrants and refugees make to our community and to our Church, pray for them and resolve to support them, as Archbishop Christopher suggests, by showing 'neighbourhood closeness in their vulnerabilities'.

Fourthly, support some of the most vulnerable refugees in our community, but also remember those who have died in immigration detention, by attending the *150 Days* campaign vigil at 7pm on the evening of the 26 September.⁴

The ACMRO resource kit was finalised before the latest Afghan Crisis, but I believe, given the number of refugees it has already generated and will continue to generate, we can't ignore it on 26 September.

So now let's talk about Afghanistan.

OUR RESPONSE to the AFGHAN CRISIS

The Australian Government's Response

The long Afghan tragedy took another sad turn, with the rapid Taliban takeover in August.

The Australian Government joined a multinational operation, evacuating over 4,000 Australian citizens, permanent residents and visa holders, including locally employed Afghans.

The Government will take another 3,000 Afghan refugees, within the existing quota for this financial year. In following years, it will increase our intake of Afghans.

It has stated that none of the 4,300 Afghan refugees already here on temporary visas will be asked to return to Afghanistan while, to quote the Minister, 'the security situation remains dire'.

Canberra has started to receive its first arrivals, including 13 'family households' (maybe 60 people), all with a family contact here.

These people will receive the same support that all refugees on the Humanitarian Program receive, which is coordinated here by Red Cross. The Red Cross has said this support includes initial treatment at Companion House and at this stage no public donations are needed.

But Red Cross could call Vinnies' refugee conference (Caritas Christi), for unexpected needs.

Australians have welcomed these steps. But many people say we should do more.

Over 500,000 Afghans, have already fled their homes this year. So the UK and Canada, have both committed to accepting 20,000 people. For the 8,500 Afghans in Australia (600 in our region), all with family members in danger, the Government's offer to take a further 3,000 refugees, offers them little hope.

Delaying a government decision to lift numbers above this 3,000 'floor', to an unknown ceiling, only prolongs their stress.

Furthermore, Canberra colleagues and people across the country, are responding to large numbers of distress calls from Afghans seeking help to bring their families here.

⁴ <http://justiceandpeace.org.au/call-to-lamentation-and-commitment/> Registration details are at: <https://sydneycatholic.zoom.us/meeting/register/u5Isf-6oqzWjG9bpHsFra87yFgKyns9auQ3l> .

Canberra's MPs (whom I've recently visited with the *150 Days* campaign), Vincentians and other Catholics have confirmed the same thing. Even among those who have just arrived, there is this same distress.

On Monday, the Canberra Times ran a story on an Hazara Afghan, who was evacuated from Kabul in August, arriving in Canberra last week. Sadly, his wife was unable to escape with him. He now fears for his wife's safety and her evacuation is his top priority.⁵

How can a husband or wife, a mother or father, a brother or sister be truly safe, free and at peace in Australia, knowing their loved ones remain in terrible danger with no path to safety?

But this issue is even more fraught for the 4,300 Afghans already here on **temporary visas**, who (the Home Affairs 'Afghanistan Update' website notes) "are **not eligible to propose relatives** through the Humanitarian Program. (It goes on.) This is in line with the Government's Operation Sovereign Borders policy, that no one who comes to Australia ... by boat, will settle here."⁶

And that's the other catch for these Afghans, still on temporary visas.

After nearly a decade in Australia, being spared deportation by our government, 'while the security situation (in Afghanistan) remains dire' is all very fine.

But when does anyone think that these people, made refugees because of their opposition to, and treatment by, the Taliban, will ever be able to return safely to their homeland, to re-establish a reasonable life there?

So, they remain in indefinite limbo, or more accurately purgatory, with no permanent home and no chance to re-unite with their family.⁷

So, what has been the response from Australia's Christians

An unprecedented coalition of Christian organisations (Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, Pentecostals, and the Uniting Church) has come together as ***Christians United for Afghanistan***.⁸

This group is unprecedented because it not only involves the regular advocates for refugee issues such as Vinnies, but other voices such as:

- The Australian Christian Churches, the umbrella organisation for Australian Pentecostal churches (including the Hillsong Churches); and
- The Australian Christian Lobby.

The group is calling for the Government to do more, by taking four actions:

⁵ Canberra Times, Monday 13 September 2021, p3.

⁶ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-and-support/afghanistan-update> Note 'illegally' is misleading. Under international law, people have the right to seek asylum in any country. As well, people seeking asylum and arriving by boat have not broken Australian law. But it is illegal for a crew to transport people here in this way.

⁷ Vincentians in Shepparton & Adelaide, working with many Afghans confirm this unjust situation. <https://thesoutherncross.org.au/news/2021/09/03/refugee-service-flooded-with-pleas-for-help/>

⁸ [Christian church leaders lobby Morrison government to boost Afghan refugee intake](#)

1. **Welcome Afghan Refugees** - Declaring an intake of an additional 20,000 refugees now.
2. **Protect Afghans in Australia** - Granting permanent protection to **all** Afghans in Australia on temporary visas or awaiting application outcomes.
3. **Reunite Refugee Families** - Making immediate arrangements to bring the families of **all** Afghan refugees already here to Australia.
4. **Support Refugees Through Humanitarian Aid** - Providing additional emergency and long-term support through reputable organisations working in the region.⁹

Importantly, this group's proposals have been deliberately aligned with those of the Afghan Community in Australia. They are part of the group's 'wider we'.

This was confirmed most graphically by an Afghan Australian, in yesterday's Canberra Times. He wrote, supporting the same proposals as the group, noting that until his community's loved ones were safe in Australia, "it means many sleepless nights to come".¹⁰

Bishop Vincent Long and Vinnies' National President, Claire Victory, are quoted on the group's homepage and Vinnie's Logo is also there. Bishop Vincent in a recent article, *Our moral duty towards Afghan refugees*, endorses all these actions.¹¹

Archbishop Mark Coleridge¹² and the Victorian Bishops, led by Archbishop Peter Comensoli¹³ have spoken in support of some of these actions.

Archbishop Anthony Fisher launched an appeal,¹⁴ complementing *Action 4*.

The Catholic Bishops of Papua New Guinea reminded us there are still 20 Afghans held in Port Moresby, calling for safe settlement of these people and of those similarly held on Nauru.¹⁵

Catholics for Refugees, as part of the *150 Days* campaign, also support the first three actions.¹⁶

In Canberra-Goulburn, last week Vinnies President John Feint wrote to Archbishop Christopher, updating him on Vinnies' activity for 26 September, including this seminar.

Archbishop Christopher replied, particularly happy about the positive work for Afghans.

So, what are some further actions you might consider?

⁹ <https://www.unitedforafghanistan.com/>

¹⁰ Canberra Times, Tuesday 14 September 2021, p16.

¹¹ *Our moral duty towards Afghan refugees*, Bishop Vincent Long, Eureka Street, 30 August 2021.

¹² <https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/increase-afghan-intake-archbishop-coleridge-urges-pm/>

¹³ <https://melbournecatholic.org/uploads/documents/Statement-on-Afghanistan-Bishops-of-Victoria.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://justiceandpeace.org.au/archbishop-launches-afghan-refugee-appeal/>

¹⁵ <http://asianews.it/news-en/Port-Moresby:-Calls-for-a-solution-to-Afghans-rejected-for-years-by-Canberra--53906.html?fbclid=IwAR3hzR1z08iQ5soOHUJa6up2itjH9ya1xZ2NVSACFKpW5AxICUjHztp2wLQ>

¹⁶ https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms_docs/327323_Catholics_for_Refugees_Catholics_unite_to_call_for_action_from_Scott_Morrison.pdf

- Firstly, join **Christians United for Afghanistan** in seeking more Government help for Afghans left on society's periphery by recent events and current policies.
- Secondly, if you know of any Afghans who are desperate to save their family, and don't know where to start, please contact your local Labor member of the House of Representatives (or me if you would prefer) to see what can be done.

(In recent weeks I've joined other Catholics in meeting the three ACT MHRs, who've already been helping Afghans to at least get their family's names on a government list.)

- Finally, I ask that you:
 - pray for the plight of all Afghans using the prayer written by *Christians United for Afghanistan*
 - see if your parish will pray it too on 26 September, and
 - encourage parishioners to join the **Christians United for Afghanistan** campaign.

CONCLUSIONS

So just to conclude...

This year Pope Francis calls us "to go out into the streets of every existential periphery ..to heal wounds ... without prejudice or fear ... to embrace everyone ... (including) ... migrants and refugees."

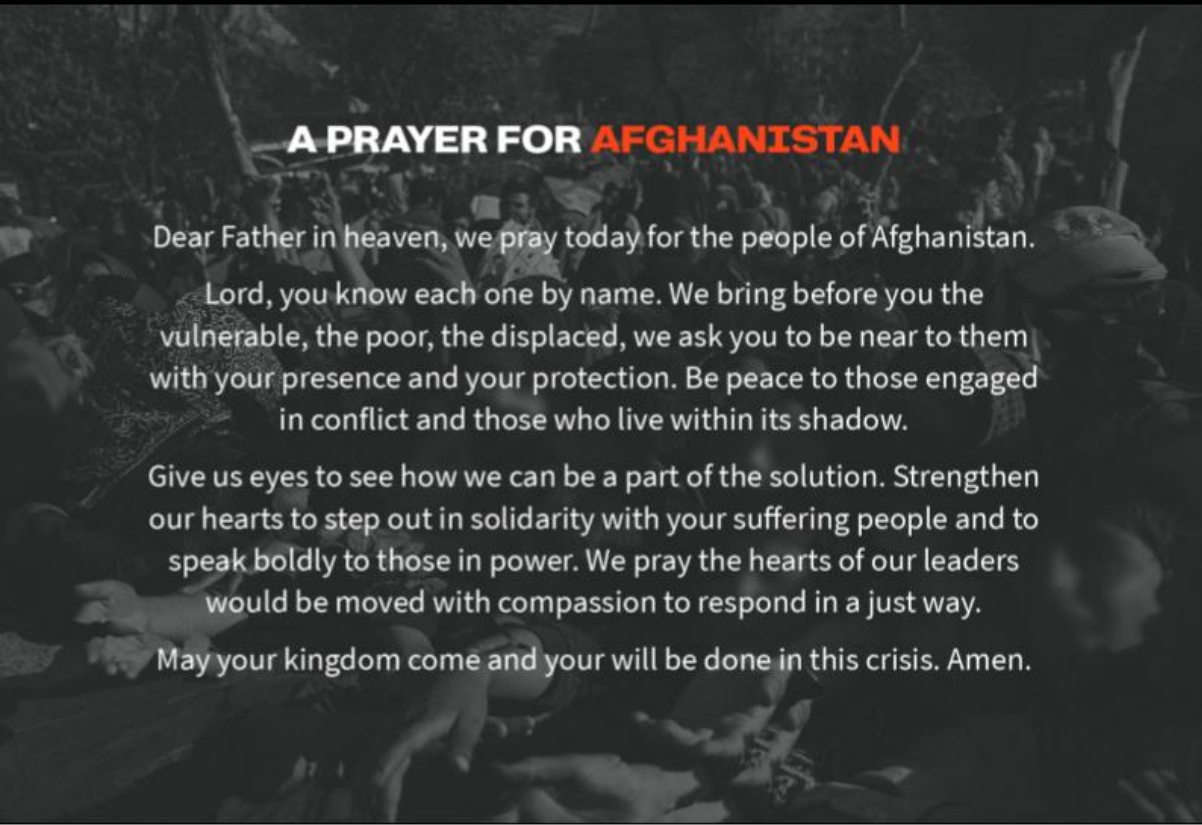
On Migrant and Refugee Sunday we should use the ACMRO resource kit to:

- Celebrate the contribution of Migrants and Refugees,
- Pray for them and offer vulnerable people 'neighbourhood closeness', and
- Support vulnerable people by attending the online vigil that evening.

In addition:

- Join **Christians United for Afghanistan** and encourage others to do so.
- If an Afghan needs help with family reunion contact your local Labor MP or me at timothy.mckenna@vinnies.org.au
- Before 26 September, and on that day with your parish, pray for Afghans using the prayer written by Christians United for Afghanistan, below. (See the last page of this script)

Thanks for listening. I am now happy to take questions.



A PRAYER FOR AFGHANISTAN

Dear Father in heaven, we pray today for the people of Afghanistan.

Lord, you know each one by name. We bring before you the vulnerable, the poor, the displaced, we ask you to be near to them with your presence and your protection. Be peace to those engaged in conflict and those who live within its shadow.

Give us eyes to see how we can be a part of the solution. Strengthen our hearts to step out in solidarity with your suffering people and to speak boldly to those in power. We pray the hearts of our leaders would be moved with compassion to respond in a just way.

May your kingdom come and your will be done in this crisis. Amen.