

In their shoes

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At a recent talk with a group of students from Notre Dame University, one of the students asked me 'Why should we allow so many asylum seekers to come into our country? Why should we welcome those people?' Her question was not necessarily antagonistic. In fact, a friend had asked her that question and she had not known how to respond. She wanted to hear my views. Having just come back from Christmas Island a few days earlier, I thought I would share the stories of some of 'those' people her friend had asked about, whom I had just met on the island.

So I mentioned the story of a young Tamil man who, upon learning that I was a priest, asked me right away for a blessing for himself and his wife and their ten-year-old daughter. The second thing he did was to take a photo out of his wallet to show it to me. It was a family photo which included two other young children. In his broken English he explained how they had been killed when a bomb exploded in their home at the height of the conflict in Sri Lanka last year. He then showed me the shrapnel wounds in his arm and pointed to his wife's torso which had also similar wounds. He asked me to pray for his dead children.

I also shared the story of another young Sri Lankan man who had come on a boat with his father, a journalist who had fled persecution in his home country. They had been on the boat for almost a month, when a storm made the boat capsize before it broke into pieces. Of the 39 people on the boat, 27 survived and twelve died. His father was among the dead. The young man had not been able to talk about the experience for over a month. In fact, he had said hardly anything to anyone for that period of time. His mother is still in Sri Lanka and he has not been able to contact her to let her know what happened. He has nightmares about that night and wonders how he will be able to bring himself to give the news to his mother.

And finally, I shared the story of a young Iraqi man who, while waiting to get on a boat to come to Australia, was imprisoned in Indonesia for six months until he could raise enough money (through his family back in Iraq) to pay the prison guards to be let out. He described how for days on end he would not be allowed to leave the cell at all, and that the only time the cell door was opened was for the guard to give him a bit of food on a plate. He said he felt like an animal in a cage, and was grateful that at least at the detention centre on Christmas Island he could walk about and meet other detainees.

Perhaps a 'simple' answer to the young woman's question, 'why should we allow asylum seekers to come into our country?' is that they are human beings who have suffered so much already, who are in need of our help, of our compassion and our care. Another part of the answer is that as people of faith, our Catholic tradition and Catholic social teaching call us to welcome the stranger and the marginalised. And another part of the answer is

that as a signatory to international treaties designed to protect the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, we have an obligation to welcome ‘those’ people and offer them dignified living conditions while they undergo a fair and transparent process of asylum determination.

Yet, if all these arguments call us to respond in a particular way, why is it that we are so reluctant to do so? I think part of the reason is fear—fear of people who are different from us, whose cultures and traditions and faith expressions are so foreign that perhaps we feel threatened by the effect that they might have in our present way of life. Rather than seeing their presence and all they have to offer as an opportunity to enrich our lives, we see it as a threat.

I think part of the reason too is that their experiences of suffering, persecution and pain are so foreign to us that we find it very difficult to place ourselves in their shoes. And yet that is what we are called to do: to be in solidarity with them and try to imagine what they have gone through and how we would want to be treated if we were in their place. How would you feel if a bomb exploded in your home and you found two of your children dead among the rubble? How would you feel if you saw your father drown in front of your very eyes and there was nothing you could do to save him? How would you feel if you had to spend six months caged in a small cell for having committed no other crime other than trying to save your life and find freedom?

As a celibate Catholic priest I don’t have any children. And even though I have six beautiful nephews and nieces whom I love deeply, I will never be able to fully understand what the love of a father or mother for their child might be like. Similarly, I would not expect married couples to fully understand how my life as priest can be also filled with so much love, generosity and fulfillment, even without children. It is almost impossible for us to understand what most asylum seekers have gone through, but we must try, if we are to respond compassionately and humanely to their plight.

In our Christian tradition we celebrate Easter at this time of year. It is indeed a time of great joy as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new life that has been offered to us through the gift of God’s love in Jesus. Jesus is the hope we have in us! The hope that despite the difficulties, pain, suffering and darkness that we encounter in our world, the light of Christ’s resurrection can triumph and will triumph over this darkness.

But of course, it will only happen if we, like the early disciples, see and believe. We see not with physical eyes as they did, but with eyes of faith and love, which recognise the Spirit of God in each one of us, in friends and family, in the stranger, in those coming to our shores in need.