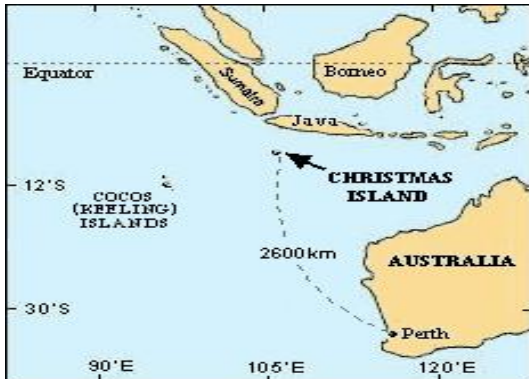




Ring of Fire – Australia March 2007

Refugees

Unfortunately the issue of refugees is once again in the Australian news. Last month 83 Sri Lankans were picked up in a boat off Christmas Island (part of Australia) and incarcerated in the detention centre there.



The men, mostly Tamils, asked for asylum. The Australian Government, in a bid to deter “boat people” coming to our shores, has done a deal with Nauru, a cash-strapped Pacific island neighbour, to take our asylum seekers in exchange for financial aid.



Called the “Pacific Solution” the brutal reality of this situation is that the asylum seekers have severely restricted access to legal assistance, to the migration agent scheme, to adequate medical and psychological help and to pro bono support. It is just too expensive for many charitable agencies to

be able to fly doctors, lawyers or psychologists to Nauru.

The Australian Government refuses to accept any refugees from Christmas Island into Australia and they have to remain there at the cost of millions of dollars to the Australian tax payer waiting for a third country to accept them.

That these policies and actions are in complete contravention of the spirit of the Refugee Convention and against all the recommendations of UNHCR matters not a wit to a government intent on preserving its borders against a relatively minor threat from people desperate enough to take to the seas in leaky boats vulnerable to the whims of unscrupulous people smugglers.

Writing to the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration, Christine Burke, the Australian Provincial, pointed out that *Australia is a wealthy country, mercifully free of the violence and sectarianism which are part of daily living in Sri Lanka* and asked *Surely we could extend some compassion and generosity to people who struggle for their very existence?*

The Old Testament tradition of welcoming the stranger and Jesus’ insistence that the unknown, the unwanted and the undesirable be given a place at table challenges Christian Australians to challenge the government and to open their arms, their hearts and homes to refugees and asylum seekers. Fr Andy Hamilton SJ in an article for Refugee Sunday reminds us that *in the Christian faith, refugees and asylum seekers are important because in them we welcome Christ who comes to us in the stranger. We live out our faith in our face to face meeting with asylum seekers. Nothing is more encouraging than to meet someone who will walk with you and look you in the eye.*

Loreto Schools Justice Activities

This year, for the first time, Social Justice student leaders in our schools have communicated with the JPIC Committee via email. Each of our seven school's student leaders were asked to send a paragraph or two about what their school was doing in terms of Social Justice and what their plans were for the coming year. The responses were then collated and sent to the schools.

Most of our schools have been focusing upon raising money for Caritas through Project Compassion in the first term of the school year. It was wonderful to see the great ideas the girls have such as organising a music concert, a cricket match, a multicultural food festival, and a walkathon, to name a few. Activities which aim at supporting a sister school, mentoring programs and street retreats featured in some of our schools also. It was great to see that environmental awareness was a feature of some of the girls' endeavours and that prayer, inviting politicians to the school was also a part of their justice education. It was apparent that both a global and local perspective was part of the girls planning for the year.

The JPIC Committee encourages our student leaders to communicate with each other throughout the year. It is hoped that this may become a valuable way of supporting the girls in their work, through the sharing of ideas and dissemination of information about justice issues.

News

This year all the Loreto Schools have as their theme **Justice**. To give some focus to this the Loreto Schools Advisory Board (LSAC) organised a conference for the leadership teams of the Loreto and affiliated schools. The

keynote speaker was Gemma Simmonds cj who gave three creative and challenging presentations on *Act Justly, Love Tenderly and Walk Humbly*. Gemma's capacity to blend sound theology, Ignatian–Mary Ward spirituality and wonderful humour was an inspiration to all the participants. They are still talking about her in the staff rooms of Loreto schools.

The recent escalation in military activity and gang violence in Dili, East Timor, resulted in Anne Kelly ibvm and Diaan Stuart ibvm being evacuated to Australia. Both have been supported by Australian Volunteers International which required all their volunteers to return home. Anne Byrne ibvm remained in the relative calm of Bacau. Di is soon to return but Anne remains in Australia while violence ebbs and flows around Dili. Diaan and Anne Byrne both work at the Marist Brothers Teachers' College and Anne Kelly was with the Aloia Foundation founded by Kirsty Sword Gusmao, wife of the President of East Timor.



May 27th marks the 40th anniversary of a famous referendum in Australia when more than 90 percent of Australians acknowledged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as citizens, thus marking the end of one chapter of

a shameful history. A number of celebrations have been organised around the theme *Their Spirit Still Shines*.

The **Loreto Federation** brings together past students from across Australia for a weekend conference. The key note speaker is Jeff Gambin founder of an organisation called *Just Enough Faith*. Made redundant and homeless Jeff was contemplating the remnants of his life when a homeless man offered him his blanket. At that moment Jeff vowed to work for the homeless. Today he, his wife and volunteers provide 400 meals a day for the homeless, arrange medical and legal assistance, supply clothing and give opportunities for young homeless people to work on a farm. Jeff and his wife have purchased two restaurants and the proceeds from these go to supporting *Just Enough Faith*.



Jeff Gambin on the streets serving meals.