

# **New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference Statement on Migration**

***Welcoming others means welcoming God in person! Do not let yourselves be robbed of the hope and joy of life born of your experience of God's mercy, as manifested in the people you meet on your journey!***

*Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2016*

We each have a migration story; a story of how our ancestors, or we ourselves, came to this land. Māori trace their ancestry or whakapapa to the waka upon which their ancestors arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand. As Catholics we trace the migration story of our Church in Aotearoa New Zealand through the arrival in the 1820s of Catholic settlers, followed by Bishop Pompallier and the Society of Mary who arrived from France in 1838, landing first in Hokianga where they were welcomed by the tangata whenua, the people of the land.

As Pope John Paul II reminded us when he visited Aotearoa New Zealand 30 years ago, people coming from Europe and more recently from other parts of the world, have not come to a desert, but to a land already marked by a rich and ancient heritage. We are called to respect and foster Māori heritage as a unique element of the identity of this country. Built on respect for persons and respect for diversity, the Treaty of Waitangi provides a basis for all those who are not Māori to belong to this land.

Today Aotearoa New Zealand is a home shared by people of over 180 different ethnicities. Some arrive from war torn countries, forced to leave their home due to violence and war. Others come permanently or temporarily to work and support their family towards a better life. All have come to New Zealand looking for opportunities for a more decent and hope-filled future to share with loved ones.

We are moved by the stories of migrants and refugees who have come to New Zealand from situations of hardship and suffering. Hearing their stories demands we address the poverty, injustice and violence that make leaving home necessary for many individuals and families.

At the same time we ask ourselves - how well are we as a country offering manaakitanga – welcome and hospitality - to those recently arriving to our shores?

Many former refugees and migrants continue to carry the pain of leaving home and the separation from their homeland after arriving in New Zealand. Questions of identity and belonging linger behind the more practical demands of adjusting to a new way of life. The search for a decent home, meaningful employment and a sense of community can take years.

For migrants and refugees moving permanently to New Zealand on their own, the desire to be reunited with family is often a top priority. For others the loss of extended family networks can be in part compensated for by the welcome extended by the community.

Some from migrant and refugee backgrounds struggle to find meaningful work that matches their skills and work background. Others experience exploitative working conditions when they do find work. These experiences demand that we examine our attitudes and the attitudes of our communities towards refugees and migrants.

As a country proud of our generosity and fairness, it is appalling to hear of cases where migrant workers are being paid below minimum legal employment standards. Some recent cases in the media have featured stories of migrant workers whose work conditions resemble forced labour, where workers are restricted in their movement and work long hours for little pay. It is shocking that these practices exist in New Zealand and in our communities. They must be exposed and eliminated with determination.

At the heart of work is the dignity of the worker. Temporary and permanent migrant workers must enjoy the same rights and be treated with the same dignity as any other New Zealand worker. We have grave concerns about the treatment of people on temporary work visas and their families.

The lack of connection to the local community can often contribute to a migrant's vulnerability to exploitation and difficulty in finding work. This Jubilee of Mercy challenges us to foster a culture of encounter. As newcomers join our communities, we have an opportunity to meet and encounter each other – on the one hand, to extend welcome and friendship and on the other, to discover and celebrate the gifts that people from migrant and refugee backgrounds bring to our parishes, schools, farms and other workplaces.

Our migrant brothers and sisters are people whose dignity is to be protected and who have the capacity to contribute to the wellbeing of our common home. Many new arrivals will end up living in the poorest suburbs, because that is where cheap housing is available. We need to support the whole community so that both new arrivals and long term residents can have what they need to live in dignity.

We are greatly encouraged by the response of parishes and religious brothers and sisters who are taking practical action to welcome refugees. Many have joined the call to increase our refugee intake and others have given time and resources to support families newly arriving to our country. Later this year, as we celebrate the Day of Prayer for Refugees and Migrants in June, and the Social Justice Week focus on migration in September, it is timely to celebrate the stories of encounter and transformation that we are already experiencing in our communities.

*New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, 2016*

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