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# Can we open our minds and hearts?

Sarah Puls, SGS

**We need to open our hearts and minds to the bigger story of asylum seekers in Australia and seek out information from a variety of informed sources, rather than accepting generalisations presented in our media,**

While community opinion is understandably varied on the issue of asylum seekers, the vigour and passion with which asylum seekers are discussed deserves closer analysis. So often the debate about asylum seekers and refugees in our community is based on half-truths and misunderstandings.

Firstly, Australia has significantly fewer people seeking asylum annually than many other industrialised democratic countries. According to the [UNHCR](#), the United Nation's refugee agency, in 2010 Australia was ranked 15th in terms of the number of asylum seekers it received, while Sweden, Canada, Belgium and Italy all receive vastly more claims.

Secondly, many people are under the impression that all asylum seekers are in detention. This is understandable given that the policy of mandatory detention focuses on those who arrive by sea which is less than half of the total. But the majority of asylum seekers arrive by plane.

It is of grave concern that the situation of thousands of other asylum seekers who have arrived by air and then are living in our



community with minimal support and terrible fear is so consistently overlooked in the media and by activists.

Mandatory detention, particularly of children, is abhorrent and incomprehensible when the people we lock up have not committed any crime. It is important that voices opposing this policy be heard.

To be an asylum seeker is to put your life and your safety in the hands of another. These people are individuals who come seeking protection and are completely vulnerable to the policy, politics, and even the whim of the people who receive them. They are here because it is not safe for them to live in their country of origin.

Any person who comes to Australia seeking asylum is put through a lengthy and detailed process before they have any hope of being deemed a refugee and granted residency. The bar is set extremely high and there is no room for the Department of Immigration to respond with compassion.

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The process of applying for a 'Protection Visa' (to be deemed a refugee and allowed to stay in the country) can be a brutal experience for those whose claims are rejected. For example, being able to show that you have been tortured and raped because of your personal or political situation does not mean that you are a refugee, especially if you are deemed to be able to live safely in another area of your country or to be safe if you curtail your activities.

The impact on the mental health of people going through this process is consistently negative, whether they are in detention or in the community. The long period of uncertainty; the renewed trauma of having to tell and retell your story to an immigration department official whose role is to look at its veracity rather than to see the human being; and knowing that sections of the Australian community in which they are seeking refuge do not want you to be accepted, all have lasting detrimental effects.

To be a good neighbour to these human beings, these individuals with unique and yet consistently traumatic stories, is to respond with an open heart. This means opening my own heart and mind to the bigger story of asylum seekers in Australia and seeking out information from a variety of informed sources, rather than accepting the generalisations and simplified versions so often presented in our media.

*Sarah Puls made her first profession as a Sister of the Good Samaritan in 2010. She trained as a social worker and has experience in the areas of mental health, homelessness and domestic violence. This year she is working at the **House of Welcome** in Sydney, which provides housing, financial and casework support to individuals and families who are seeking asylum and are living in the community.*

**The Good Oil April 2011: monthly e-magazine of the Good Samaritan Sisters.**



The new Principal of Trinity Catholic College, at Auburn/Regents Park in Sydney, will be **JOHN ROBINSON**.

John takes over from Paul Fensom at the beginning of 2012.

John comes to Trinity from Clancy Catholic College, Hoxton Park, where for the last six years he has been the Foundation Principal. He is, though, no stranger to our Marist family, having been Deputy Principal of Marist College Eastwood for a number of years prior to his present appointment.

John's undergraduate studies were completed at

Macquarie University (B.A., Dip.Ed.). He has a Masters in Education from ACU (where he is also currently undertaking doctoral studies) and also Graduate Diplomas in Religious Education and in Theology from Aquinas Academy and the Sydney College of Divinity.

During the consultation with the College community, there was a strong call for a person who could lead Trinity in a Marist way – spiritually, relationally, and educationally – so as to build on the excellent work that has been done by its first two Principals, Brother John Thompson and Mr Paul Fensom, and indeed by all of those who preceded them in the days of Benedict College.

John will be heartedly welcomed back into the Marist Family and Marist Schools Australia.

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# *In Search of a great Soul*

Br Mark O'Connor, FMS

*Rabbi Abba ( the scribe of the Zohar) once sat at the gateway of the Town of Lud.*

*He saw a traveller sit down on a pile of rocks at the edge of a mountain overlooking a cliff. The man was exhausted from his journey and immediately fell asleep. R. Abba watched this innocuous scene for a bit until, to his dismay, he watched as a deadly snake slither out of the rocks and make its way towards the sleeping man.*

*R. Abba, who for some reason was immobilized and transfixed by this unfolding drama, suddenly watched as a new turn of events happened. A giant lizard jumped out between the rocks and killed the serpent.*

*R. Abba continued watching and saw that the man stood up and was perplexed to see a beheaded snake lying in front of him. He quickly gathered his possessions and rose to continue his journey. At that instant the pile of rocks he was sitting on collapsed and fell into the ravine below.*

*The man was about to wander off when R. Abba ran after him and recounted everything he had witnessed. R. Abba asked the man, "My friend, to what do you attribute all these miracles that just transpired?"*

*The traveller at first did not want to be bothered but felt the sincerity of R. Abba's question and confided in him.*

*"Throughout my life I have never let a person harm me nor where I did not pacify him. Never have I gone to sleep without forgiving someone for hurting me in any way. If anyone would hurt me I would endeavour, with all my heart, to resolve whatever animosity was between us. And lastly, I would turn the hateful situation in to doing acts of kindness for the person involved in the misunderstanding."*

*When R. Abba heard this he burst into tears. This person's actions were greater than Joseph. For Joseph had to deal with his brothers; of course he was going to forgive his brothers. But this man forgives anyone and everyone who has harmed him. It is no surprise that God performs miracles on a daily basis for this blessed man*

This Hasidic tale about the man who forgave as a way of life is a wonderful way of showing us that God performs miracles when we forgive.

Yet of all of the 'Works of Mercy' - 'to forgive offenses willingly' - often seems impossible to

me. Blessed with a very good memory, I easily (too easily to be truthful), recall hurts from the past and struggle to let them go.

In short, I have had trouble with forgiveness - forgiving myself and forgiving others - to say

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I'm sorry and truly mean it. To truly repent, I have to learn how to forgive.

Rabbi Harold Kushner has helped me understand forgiveness with his teaching, "Forgiveness is not a favour we do for the person who offended us. It is a favour we do for ourselves, cleansing our souls of thoughts and memories that lead us to see ourselves as victims and make our lives less enjoyable. When we understand we have little choice as to what other people do but we can always choose how we will respond to what they do, we can let go of those embittering memories...."

Forgiveness requires what Aristotle called "a great soul" and it demands magnanimity. The Greek philosopher said that this power lies between the extremes of vanity and timidity. That's exactly where I think forgiveness is to be found — that place uncovered when we get over our "too big" sense of self and grow out of our smallness of mind and spirit.

The Greek word for forgiveness actually means release. When we forgive, we release ourselves as well as the other person. We allow life to go on, to bypass our exaggerated sense of virtue and our worry about being offended.

We can't manufacture forgiveness. It rises up from deep within a soul that allows life to flow. If we are afraid of life and hold ourselves and others to a timid, limited view of what is possible, forgiveness will remain locked up. But the haunting question still remains for me

at times: is that really possible for sinners like me?

The liberating Good News of the Gospel is this: it is Christ who gives us the power to forgive - as a free gift. For only Christ can give us this gift of forgiveness, that reaches deep down into our wounds and heals them.

Part of the beauty of the Catholic Tradition, is that this power of the forgiveness of Christ is superabundantly accessible. As one Church Father commented, the sacramental act of Reconciliation is simply the 'unbinding' of the already risen Lazarus! Our God is so full of magnanimity that, amazingly, we are forgiven before we even ask! That is solid Catholic doctrine. In contrast, certain types of Protestantism that have deeply influenced Western culture portray God as a miserly judge, unwilling or reluctant to forgive. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Cardinal Basil Hume OSB once noted that God's 'judgement' at our death simply means this. At that decisive moment, we are each finally able to whisper into the heart of a loving Father, the whole story of our life, a story that we could not tell no one else except Him.

God graces us with the power 'to forgive offences willingly'. If we accept that gift, as the Hasidic tale assures us - 'It is no surprise that God performs miracles on a daily basis'.



# Human Rights Under Review

Br Jim Jolley FMS

## Papua New Guinea

The human rights performance of Papua New Guinea was reviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> May under the UN Universal Periodic Review mechanism with the PNG's *Permanent Ambassador to the United Nations in New York*, H.E. Robert Aisi, heading the government's delegation. Other members of the delegation were Ms. Nanai Puka-Areni of the Constitutional & Law Reform Commission; Mr. Joseph Molita of the Ombudsman Commission and Mr. Sakias Tamero of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The review attracted quite a number of states participating in the interactive dialogue. The key human rights concerns and issues raised during the review were as follows: *governance and corruption, violence against women and girls, impact of mining and other forms of extractive industries to the environment, bad infrastructure and lack of basic services, police brutality, HIV/AIDS, the right to education and the rights of people with disabilities.*

Our Joint Submission (FMSI, Franciscans International - FI and Edmund Rice International - ERI), which focused on the **right to education and the rights of people with disabilities** was first shared with several country delegations to the UN via e-mail, followed by individual lobbying with some of those permanent missions. A one-hour briefing was held at in the Franciscans International Office just prior to the UPR with representatives from six permanent missions attending, namely: *Australia, Brazil, Maldives, Mexico, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.*



### UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

**Br Jim Jolley with Fr Leonard Tarai, OFM, and the Human Rights Watch representative**

'Human Rights Watch' was also invited to speak about their concerns at this meeting. Fr. Leonard Tarai OFM came to Geneva to be present at his country's UPR and at the meeting he offered his views of human rights in the country. Br Jim Jolley also spoke on the education issues raised in our joint report.

A positive aspect of our Joint Submission is that of all the NGO Stakeholders' Reports submitted to the UN, our Report was most used and quoted by the OHCHR's Stakeholder's Compilation which is one of the official documents used for the UPR.

Although many issues were raised during the review, it was surprising that not a single country raised the issue of human rights' violations committed in Bougainville in the past nor did the PNG national report refer to

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this relatively recent turbulent history of the country.

During PNG's report to the member states, the Ambassador heading the delegation committed PNG to having an *open door policy* for any Special Rapporteur to visit the country, and that other international HR instruments PNG is yet to ratify will be done in due time.

Whilst several state delegations raised concerns about education (such as ensuring equal access and free, compulsory basic education for all children) and concerns about disability issues, some of the more important ones were not put, for example, the need to have more fully qualified teachers in schools and to ensure that there are enough schools and classrooms for all

children, and that the curriculum is appropriate to the needs of children in secondary schools.



***Briefing meeting at the Franciscans International Office***

## *Solomon Islands*

On Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> May 2011, Solomon Islands' Human Rights record was examined by the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. FMSI had submitted a report for this review, focusing on issues of education for children in the Solomon Islands. Of the nine civil society organizations that submitted a report for the UPR of SI, FMSI was the only group that raised issues concerning education.

Prior to the Review, FMSI had met with several permanent state delegations to the UN, including the Philippines, Mexico, Australia, Slovenia and France, to represent our recommendations at the UPR.

The 6-member delegation from SI was headed by H.E. Mr. Peter Shanel Agovaka, Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade. The dialogue between SI and the participating

states was open and frank, with 28 state delegations participating in the interactive dialogue. Key human rights issues raised during the review were governance and corruption, women and gender issues, violence against women and children as well as concerns regarding education.

FMSI's UPR submission on the right to education and related issues were raised by 16 states during the session, many of whom were the countries we had met a few days earlier regarding our report. During the 3-hour session, on matters of education, the SI delegation acknowledged that there were issues of discrimination against girls in schools and that the Government has set as a priority to achieve equal access and a gender balance in schools as well as working towards equal access for children with disabilities. It thanked New Zealand for its support in assisting its efforts towards universal education for Solomon Island children.



At the end of the session, Br Jim met with the SI delegation to congratulate them on their report and to assure them of support from the FMSI network in the Solomon Islands in the follow-up phase of the UPR.

Recommendations made at the UPR of the Solomon Islands relating to the FMSI submission were to:

- ratify and implement the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- include human rights education in school curricula;

- take the necessary measures to ensure a supply of water of good quality to all informal settlements including the provision of water tanks;
- take measures so as to ensure that all children can enjoy their right to free and compulsory basic education, and establish a school programme on human rights education and training;
- provide for free, compulsory education, accessible to all, with particular care paid to disabled children by allocating sufficient financial and human resources to the education system;
- end all forms of corporal punishment of children in all settings, including in the home and in schools, by enforcing its prohibition.

In summary, six of the nine recommendations made in our submission were raised by participating states in the UPR of Solomon Islands. We hope that these will help improve the situation of education for all children in the Solomon Islands in the coming years.



*Happy 90th Birthday  
to Br Dacius Reilly  
at Templestowe*