

“THE POOR NEED HELP TODAY, NOT NEXT WEEK”.

(Catherine McAuley)



The plight of asylum seekers both across the world and particularly here in Australia has tugged at my heart-strings for a long time. So much so, that I simply had to volunteer to go to one of the detention centres, to find out something of the truth of what is happening, and to try to make a small contribution to alleviate the situation. While the location of detention centres and the number of people being held in them is constantly changing there are at present about 10,000 people living in some form of detention both within Australia and off-shore and this figure includes 1,000 children.

The Sisters of Mercy have long been associated with the Jesuit Refugee Service in this endeavour, and have willingly gone to many other countries as well as to various places in our own country, to try to live out these words of our foundress, Catherine McAuley: “The poor need help today, not next week”. When I made my decision and was accepted, I was very grateful for the support and advice of the Jesuit co-ordinator in Sydney and of two of our Queensland Sisters who had ministered in Curtin before me. They were simply a marvellous help. However, I still left Townsville in mid-February with some feelings of fear and certainly not knowing what to expect. All I knew at the time was that this was where God wanted me to be.

The Curtin Detention Centre is situated in a remote and desolate area, 45 kilometres south-east of Derby WA and is managed on behalf of the Government by a company called ‘Sercos’. It has housed men, women and children in the past, but is currently used only to detain men. I travelled there each day from the caravan park where I was staying, in a car that is available to the pastoral volunteers for that purpose.



Some of you who have travelled on the road to Broome, may have stopped and looked at a large Boab Tree. It is very large and is a reminder of our shameful history with the Aboriginal people in this area. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, these people were rounded up to work in the pearling industry, and when they resisted or were convicted of any petty crimes, were chained and held

overnight in this tree and others like it, before being herded off to the Derby gaol. And what have we learned from this? Nothing, I suspect. This boab was a desert prison, and that is exactly how I choose to describe the Curtin Detention Centre – a desert prison, but with one exception – the services, by and large, are humane.

Curtin Dongas

My first couple of days at the centre were an absolute nightmare. On the morning of day 1, I had a 40 minute drive around the compound, and then I was left pretty much to myself. I shuddered as I heard three heavy iron gates bang shut behind me, and when I noticed the electrified fences they were attached to, knowing all the time that Big Brother was watching my every movement.



The whole complex is divided into six living sections – Fox, Bravo, Charlie, Echo, Acacia and Delta. All of the buildings look exactly the same, so it was extremely confusing for me initially. I couldn't help myself when I suggested to one of the officers that they should paint all the six sections a different colour! But it is surprising what you get used to, isn't it, and when I started to find my way around, things improved a little. However, when I returned to my room at the caravan park that first night, I asked myself what on earth I was doing here. Then I read this quote that gave me courage, and at least part of the answer: *"Life is short and we have not too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are travelling the dark way with us. Make haste to be kind"* (Henri-Frederic Amiel 1885).

There were 800 detainees when I arrived – from many countries – Afghanistan, Burma, Bangladesh, Egypt, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan, Palestine, Lebanon, India, Iran, Persia, Iraq, and Turkey to name a few. After only one day, 400 were gone, and of course, I have no idea how many, if any, received bridging visas, or how many were actually deported. Eventually I was told on good authority that if the men do get their visas, they receive \$250 per week for five weeks and then nothing. They are not allowed to work for up to a year so unless they have support from family, friends or charitable institutions, I do not know how they survive, except perhaps by getting into crime. I was also told that it costs the Australian Government \$500,000 to detain one person for a year. Of course the evil in all of this begins with the people smugglers. I asked several detainees what they were told by these people before daring to board an unseaworthy boat such as this one, and was not surprised by the answers I received, for as long as the traffickers get their money, that's all that matters. They don't care what happens to them.

Pope Francis recently spoke out courageously about this at an international gathering at the Vatican, calling human trafficking "an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ". (11 April 2014). Retired Auxiliary Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Pat Power, repeated more of the Pope's words only a fortnight ago, when he said that "refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity". (15 April 2014). On April 13, Christians celebrated Palm



Sunday, and for many years now, peace marches have been held across the nation on this day. The marches this year were directly in support of asylum seekers, and I am very proud that many Sisters of Mercy and our ministry partners were well represented.

It took me only a short time to begin to make connections with many of the detainees, and this was due primarily I believe, to the instant recognition of my Mercy Cross. As soon as they noticed the cross, the men began to ask me about the Sisters who had been at Curtin before me. As well, I had taken a few family photos on the journey, and found that these helped me to build up relationships very quickly. Soon, I had a number of titles. Across the compound, as well as “Hey sister”, I would hear “Hey mam” or “Hey mum” and every so often “Hey grandma”.

I was particularly touched one day when speaking with *Ali, a gentle Muslim from Pakistan. He was a high school Principal there, with 1400 students in his school, and very suddenly had to flee the terror of the Taliban. He was forced to leave behind his pregnant wife and two children. He has never seen his third child who is now nearly 2 years old. However, Ali is possibly one of the lucky asylum seekers. He has received his bridging visa, so there is hope that he will be reunited with his family one day. This, of course, is not the welcome news of every detainee. Bridging visa news each day created either great excitement or great disappointment. If it was the former, the men would run up to me and say, “Sister, I sign” and I would feel like doing a little dance with them on the spot. Instead, we would clasp hands and pray a prayer of thanksgiving and they would often reply in their broken English with something like “Thank you for helping me never to give up hope”. “Never lose hope” became my daily message to every man I met, and on reflection, these words of Thomas Merton came to mind: *“In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything”*.

There were times during my six weeks at Curtin that I experienced loneliness. However, more than once in these lonely times, it occurred to me how fortunate I was to be where I was in this Lenten season of the Church’s year, literally in the desert. I was never afraid. Security made me carry a duress button each day, but it stayed in my pocket the whole time I was inside the compound. The detainees approached me eagerly, hands outstretched in welcome and always with a smile, except when their case manager had told them for up to the fifth time, that there was no progress regarding their visa application.

There was a variety of faiths among the asylum seekers – Hindus, Christians, Muslims, nothing – and they did have their own prayer spaces. Their reverence in these prayer spaces was a great source of inspiration to me, but unfortunately, there was occasional tension as well.

Quite unexpectedly and usually without explanation, the men got the word overnight that they had to move everything to another room. This actually



happened with the Christian prayer space while I was there – much carting and cleaning involved – but it was a great privilege for me to bless the new room when all of this was over. I remember going into this room shortly after, to see one of the men kneeling and praying earnestly before a picture of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. I waited quietly until he had finished his prayer. He told me then that he had a meeting with his case manager later that afternoon, and was praying about the outcome. While not confident that he would be hearing good news, he drew great strength from this particular image. I discovered that differences united, not divided these men of different faiths. Muslims, for example, were delighted to receive our Catholic rosary beads, and to be prayed for in the name of Jesus. Christians and Hindus embraced Muslims and others of no particular faith, and all of them seemed to care about one another. I'll share a story to illustrate this:



I had presided at an Ash Wednesday service for the Catholic Tamils. Two days later, Mahommed, a Muslim, came to me very concerned about his next-door neighbour Mathi, who he said was not eating properly and he asked me to speak with him. Mathi did not speak much English, so Mahommed offered to act as interpreter. During the course of our conversation, I realised that Mathi was actually taking the Christian Lenten fast to extremes. I explained to him the Church's current teaching about this, and what I understood Jesus to say on the subject. He nodded and obviously appreciated my time, but I suspected that because he had been brought up in a very strict Sri Lankan Catholic family, things would not change. I was right, because in two more days, Mathi was taken to the Derby hospital by ambulance. I visited him there twice, and fortunately when he returned to the centre, he appeared to realise the harm he had done. When I left Curtin, Mathi was again in good health, but there is an extra part to this story which clearly shows how communication can be a big problem within the detention centre.



On my second visit to see Mathi, I was carrying the Blessed Sacrament with me, as I had conducted a communion service for the Catholics that morning. I decided that if the doctor said that Mathi was well enough, I would offer him Holy Communion. When I arrived, I introduced myself to the doctor and explained why I had come. He gave the okay for the sacrament to be given, and I entered Mathi's room. There were two Serco offices and an interpreter present. When I told the officers what I was about to do, one said that they couldn't give Mathi anything and therefore neither could I. Of course my answer was "Why not?" and he said "Because you don't have the appropriate permission". So I just prayed with Mathi and then went on my way. The next morning however, I went straight to the Serco Operations Manager, to explain the situation. He was most understanding, and promised to ensure that in the future, Pastoral Care could be provided with access.

A few other individuals at Curtin were a real blessing to me. There is Alphonse, a shy Hindu who loved me to pray with him and whose paintings in the art room I really admired. There is Lakkeerane, a Muslim, whose name was obviously a bit of a problem for me, so after a few meetings he said, "Sister, you can call me Alfie" and I was very happy to oblige. Alfie badly wanted to wear the Mercy Cross. I explained to him that only Sisters can wear the actual badge, but when

I produced a picture of the cross on a prayer card, he was more than happy to post this on the wall of his room.

Another man of no particular faith, with whom I became very close, was Nayex from Persia. Due to his long period of detention, Nayex suffered from depression, but had found great solace in music and in trying to teach himself the guitar. The day he first played for me, I was very impressed, and he was anxious for me to teach him some of our songs, so naturally I tried to focus on music that was simple, bright, repetitive and uplifting. Nayex and I enjoyed quite a few jam sessions together, singing two songs that he particularly loved – “Give me joy in my Heart” and Peter Kearney’s “Lead me to Hope”. On my final day at Curtin, I played the keyboard for him, though it wasn’t much of a keyboard I can tell you.

Abdullah, was another lovely Hindu, very tall with an immaculately trimmed moustache and beard. I first met him one morning after I had passed through the last of the compound gates. There he was at a small hedge, which had white blossoms growing on it. Just what do you think he was doing there? Picking blossoms to beautify the Hindu prayer space! Witnessing this simple act touched me deeply.

My association with Fhaiful, a Tamil Catholic, probably moved me the most, because he entrusted me with something precious – a photo of his terminally ill mother in Sri Lanka. Maria is cared for by Fhaiful’s sister and brother, very poor people who do not have sufficient money to purchase the medication that she requires Fhaiful has asked me to continue to pray for Maria and now I have her photograph on the little prayer table in my bedroom. He gave me contact details for his family, and if at all possible, I intend to see if I can arrange for some funds to be sent over to support this family. Fhaiful first arrived in Australia on August 6, 2012 and he has been in detention ever since: Cocos Island – 4 days; Christmas Island – 1 month; Curtin – 10 months; Yongha Hill (100 kms north-east of Perth) – 5 months; Curtin – 6 months. On April 13, I received this wonderful email from him: *“holl sister to day wairy happy day for mi you now way to day saine mi visa I think next week I will go outside I nawar forget my life thank you Fhaiful. god bless you”*

The strength and resilience of these men has been an inspiration to me and I am so grateful that I undertook this pastoral placement. I believe that many of them, because of their great trials, now possess the wisdom which St James talks about in his letter: *The wisdom that comes down from above is essentially something pure; it also makes for peace, and is kindly and considerate; it is full of compassion and shows itself by doing good. Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which will bear fruit in holiness”*. (James 3:13-18)



I have prayed for the asylum seekers of Curtin and for others in our country and around the world every night during my time there and since I returned home. I will continue to do so, for I have left part of my heart behind in the desert with them. Thank you for your prayers for me and for your great generosity in sending gifts for the men. These gifts have brought wonderful smiles to hundreds of faces. I conclude now with a brief story which captures very well what I feel right now for these gentle, respectful and faith-filled men:

Some years ago, divers located a 400-year-old ship off the coast of Northern Ireland. Among the treasures found on the sunken ship was a man's wedding ring. When it was cleaned up, the divers noticed that it had an inscription on it. Engraved on the wide band was a hand holding a heart. Under the engraving was the inscription which read: *"I have nothing more to give you"*.

Carmel Ruddick rsm

May 2014

**Names of the Asylum seekers have been altered to protect their true identity.*