

PRAYER FOCUS FOR MONTH OF DECEMBER 2015

Displacement and homelessness



REFLECTION ONE

We have all looked with horror and a sense of helplessness at the scale of displacement happening across Europe. Some 60 million are fleeing wholesale slaughter. Friends and family have been killed and their homes bombed. They face starvation and persecution. They are Syrians, Iraqis, Afghanis and more. They come from all walks of life. They are fathers carrying children on their shoulders, mothers with toddlers, brothers and sisters with elderly parents in wheelchairs. Some cast their eyes forward and hope. Others just sit and wait for help or advice - a seemingly endless flow of humanity! Too many people have found their path to freedom and safety blocked by countries closing their borders to prevent them entering. Those countries that do offer welcome are overwhelmed by the sheer numbers to be accommodated. The numbers could increase if Islamic State militants are not beaten back. (*"No looking back for those on the road to a dream Europe,"* Sydney Morning Herald, Sept 19-20, 2015)

Climate Change too could add to the increase. A prolonged drought in the Middle East and Africa, together with rising sea levels in low-lying coastal areas like the Bay of Bengal could drive millions of Bangladeshis from their homes at any time. (Sydney Morning Herald article, *"The mass global migration crisis could be just beginning"* Nov.2, 2015)

Australia has a poor record with regard to those who have come by boat. They are labelled illegals. Most are now prevented from arriving and their boats are turned around, the Australian government claiming it has stopped people drowning at sea. While public opinion is divided on this 'turn back' issue, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that it has actually added to the numbers of people drowned at sea on the way to look for shelter elsewhere. Those who have made 'land fall' are locked up in detention centres offshore,

many are just children. We are a wealthy nation which could afford to offer them hospitality on the mainland of Australia. We know the reports of the inhumane treatment the detainees are suffering in these centres, as well as the uncertainty of not knowing what their ultimate fate will be.

These harsh measures may become another stain on Australia's history. The history of a nation proud of its tradition of a "fair go for all" – albeit with some "exceptions!"

As we read about the plight of all these people, we are surely moved to draw on the greatest recourse we have in prayer to ask our compassionate God to restore some level of peace to these troubled parts of our world. In faith and hope we pray, believing in the One who, when here on earth was moved to the core of his being when he encountered human suffering. Might we, too, be moved "to our entrails" to seek the God of courage and gratitude who lives in the hearts of those who seek to make their home with us, so that they may enjoy the freedom and security we are privileged to enjoy in our daily lives.

*God of Mercy, help me remember:
My ancestors came across the seas!
Help me keep in my mind
Those who came long ago
And those who now come to our shores.
As I face you in prayer, God of Compassion,
I remember my country's words:
Send them back or Stop the boats.
Then I fear, not your anger
But the steady gaze of boundless love
and unlimited compassion
that impel me to hear Jesus' command:
Love one another, as I have loved you.
And Pope Francis' call to open our hearts
to a universal communion
which excludes nothing and no one.
Daring to step into such relationship, I pray
for those forced to leave family,
home and all they hold dear.
May they find safe passage and helping hands.
I pray for an end to the wars and oppression
that forced them to leave;
I pray that those who welcome them are blessed in abundance.*

(ACSJC Social Justice Statement 2015-2016, "For Those Who've Come Across the Seas", Prayer Card)

REFLECTION TWO



The issue of displacement is a serious one in both Australia and Papua New Guinea. In Australia, displacement in the form of Homelessness is on the rise especially in the cities. According to recent figures from *Homelessness Australia* 28,191 people are experiencing homelessness in NSW – more than any other state, and a small percentage of these are over 75 years old. This is a scandal for a rich country like Australia. Many factors contribute to this complexity with no single solution. Financial difficulties especially caused by a housing affordability crisis, and inadequate or inappropriate dwellings, together with unemployment. Domestic violence and relationship issues, family breakdown, violence and assault are also factors. Mental health issues often combine with substance abuse. Other causes can be the transition from custody, lack of support, discrimination.

Data from *The City of Sydney Homelessness Unit* showed there are more people ‘sleeping rough’ in inner Sydney this winter than in any winter since 2009. A typical example is a 42 year old man, homeless in Sydney for just over a year. A spiralling ice addiction cost him his job, his house, car and marriage.

One night the mercury dropped to six degrees but with the wind chill it felt like two. This experience would be replicated across many Australian towns and cities.

A homeless woman in Leichhardt told a Capuchin friar that it is particularly tough for a woman given the violence meted out by other homeless people. Small groups of people are moved by compassion by what they see, like the Capuchins and their young volunteers who take a van out and hit the streets on Friday and Saturday evenings with food and hot drinks.

The issue of homelessness is widespread and not restricted to Australian cities. An unknown number in the Blue Mountains are living in severe isolation in caves and makeshift camps. Given the severity of the winters there, the mortality risk is high.

Walking past a homeless man on the street sitting with head down and hat at his feet hoping for a coin or two from passers by, possible reactions might be pity, indifference, or judgment. I might ask myself: what is my response?

Let us be mindful that every life can be turned around and many homeless people have achieved this. All it might take is a helping hand from someone who can provide some relief. When we encounter the homeless person could we offer a silent prayer – as well as a “hand up” if not a “hand out!” as Shakespeare so eloquently said “the quality of mercy is not strained...”

On Pope Francis’ visit to the U.S. as crowds moved into the city of Philadelphia for a large public Mass on the Sunday, the homeless were heading out – part of a high-security lockdown forcing people off the streets. Pope Francis showed his own priority by choosing to lunch with homeless people in the nation’s capital, forgoing an invitation with dine with members of Congress.



A poignant story of homelessness can be read on the Eureka Street website where Sydney lawyer Kerry Murphy writes of Yassin ‘the concierge of Pitt Street’. [READ HERE](#)

Source: *Eureka Street* Vol 22 No 15 – Kerry Murphy 7th August, 2012

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Sources:

- Homeless in NSW; Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, 2012; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services 2012-2013
<http://www.cityofsydney.new.gov.au/community/community-support/homelessness>

- Sydney Morning Herald, 8-9/8/,2015 Homelessness on the rise. Extreme weather causing havoc.
- Sydney Morning Herald,18-19/7/2015. Winter most bitter for those sleeping rough
- Catholic Weekly 6/9/2015.Helping hands. Capuchins, youth hit streets to help the homeless.
- Religion News Service Alex Jacobi 26/8/ 2015 Police move homeless people off Philadelphia streets ahead of Pope Francis' Mass