




**Cabrini**

SOCIAL POLICY  
POSITION  
STATEMENT

Refugee  
and Asylum  
Seeker  
Support



We are a community of care,  
reaching out with compassion,  
integrity, courage and respect  
to all we serve.



# Message from the Chief Executive

Immigrants hold a special place in the hearts, minds and works of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (the Cabrini Sisters), our owners and sponsors.

The congregation was founded by Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini in 1880 in northern Italy. In 1889, Frances Cabrini set off on her first missionary voyage to New York, where she had been invited to work amongst the poor Italian immigrants. Despite initial set-backs, her unwavering compassion for the plight of her marginalised countrymen and women, together with her capacity to marshal resources to the cause, led to the establishment of education, health and social services to meet their needs.

As her reputation grew, she was invited to other parts of the USA and then to Latin America to likewise care for Italian immigrants. She soon learned that all poor immigrants face similar problems. She expanded her ministry to embrace all immigrants who needed her care. By the time she died in 1917 she had established 67 works in the USA, Latin America, Europe and England.

In 1946, Frances Cabrini was canonised by Pope Pius XII in Rome. In 1950, she was declared Patroness of Immigrants in honour of her lifetime of dedication to their cause.

Today, the Cabrini Sisters and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference urge us to welcome asylum seekers and refugees, and to support all people's rights to security and services that meet their basic human needs. They remind us that this is not just a policy or political concern: it is a human issue involving real people like you and me. This social policy position statement provides the framework for our response.

Dr Michael Walsh  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

# 1 > Asylum seekers and refugees in context

Australia is a land of immigrants. The ancestors of Australia's indigenous people are thought to have migrated here more than 50,000 years ago. Europeans first landed in the 18th and 19th centuries and, in 1788, Australia was established as a British Colony. Since then, we have experienced successive waves of immigration since this time, resulting in the multicultural face of today's Australia.

In 1951, the *United Nations Refugee Convention* was established. It defines a refugee as any person who has been forced to flee their country of nationality due to well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of cultural identity, religion, nationality or membership of a social or political group and is unwilling or unable to return to their country because of this fear. Australia is a signatory to the Refugee Convention.

All refugees have been asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are people who seek to claim refugee status but have not yet undergone any formal status check by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), or a government that is a signatory to the Refugee Convention.

In 1951, there were approximately 1.5 million refugees globally. According to the UNHRC<sup>1</sup>, at the end of 2013 there were an estimated 51.2 million people worldwide who had been forcibly displaced due to conflict or persecution. This comprised 16.7 million refugees, 1.2 million asylum seekers and 33.3 million internally displaced people. Some 10.7 million people were newly displaced in that year.

Australia is geographically isolated from countries experiencing conflict or persecution. There are only two ways that people can arrive in Australia to seek asylum.

- People who arrive by boat with no visa are classified *Irregular Maritime Arrivals (IMAs)*<sup>2</sup>
- People who arrive with a valid visa and later seek asylum onshore are classified as non-IMAs.

The main countries of origin of IMA asylum seekers are Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Since 2010-11, approximately 10 per cent of the arrivals have been stateless. As the *Australian Migration Act 1958* imposes a responsibility on officers to detain all people they suspect are unlawful non-citizens, IMA asylum seekers are held in mandatory detention until they are either granted a visa or removed from Australia. In 2012-13, 88 per cent of IMA asylum seekers were granted a protection visa.<sup>3</sup>

The main countries of origin of non-IMA asylum seekers are China (PRC), India, Pakistan, Iran and Egypt. Non-IMA asylum seekers who apply for protection are granted a bridging visa while their claim is being assessed. The bridging visa gives them work rights and access to Medicare. In 2012-13, 48 percent of non-IMA asylum seekers were granted refugee status.<sup>4</sup>

In 2009-10, the number of people seeking asylum in Australia doubled to 10,578. It has continued to rise in subsequent years, reaching 26,427 in 2012-13<sup>5</sup>. In response, since 2012, successive Australian Commonwealth governments have introduced measures to deter people from arriving in Australia to seek asylum, particularly those who intend to travel by boat. Processing centres have been established in Nauru and Papua New Guinea for IMA asylum seekers, with no certainty of ever being settled in Australia.

According to the Department of Health<sup>6</sup>, Victoria has the highest refugee settlement numbers in Australia. Since 2012, the number of refugees settling in the Victorian community has grown rapidly and is now higher than at any time in the past 30 years. Greater Dandenong is the top humanitarian program settlement LGA, receiving a total of 2,683 refugees between 1 July 2010 and 31 June 2013. This was followed by Hume (2,054 refugees), Casey (1,292 refugees) and Brimbank (1,274 refugees).

## 2 > Cabrini's context

*Catholic Social Teaching*, the vision and corporate stance of the Cabrini Sisters and our mission combine to make this social justice issue a prime responsibility for Cabrini Health.

### 2.1 Catholic Social Teaching on Migration and Asylum <sup>7</sup>

The gospel presents an archetype of every refugee family in the story of Mary, Joseph and their son Jesus fleeing from Nazareth to Egypt. In this respect, the fundamental message is to welcome the stranger and to love others as we love ourselves.

In his successive messages for World Migration Day, Pope John Paul II invites us into an even deeper awareness that the mission of the Catholic Church is to proclaim and defend the dignity of every migrant, displaced person and refugee and to offer assistance as an act of justice rather than an act of charity.

The social teaching of the Catholic Church in relation to asylum seekers and refugees is summarised in six foundational principles:

#### • **The Right to Seek Asylum**

All people have a right to live a dignified life in their homeland. Anyone whose life is threatened due to persecution, armed conflicts, natural disasters or economic conditions has the right to protection.

#### • **Human Dignity**

Human life is sacred because each person is created in the image and likeness of God and human dignity is inalienable. Therefore, the human dignity and human rights of asylum seekers must be respected, regardless of their citizenship, visa status or mode of arrival.

#### • **Devotion to Humanity**

All nations have a right to regulate migration across their borders. This right is an extension of the right of all persons to live a dignified life in their community. However, the right to regulate borders is coupled with the duty to protect and help innocent victims and those fleeing for their lives: Borders are for the protection of people, not for the exclusion of people seeking protection.

#### • **Justice and Mercy**

The purpose of the law is to serve justice and mercy. Laws which subject asylum seekers to arbitrary and prolonged immigration detention or banish them from seeking protection fail to serve justice and mercy and are therefore immoral.

#### • **Solidarity**

As we are all members of one human family, we have a duty to share our resources with the most vulnerable and needy amongst us in the world.

#### • **The Right to be Part of a Community**

All people have a right to be part of a community. Asylum seekers who have been forced from their homeland have a duty to integrate into the host community. We have a responsibility to support this integration by helping migrants to find a place where they can live in peace and safety, where they can work and take on the rights and duties that exist in the country that welcomes them.

## 2 > Cabrini's context

### 2.2 MSC Vision and Stella Maris Province Corporate Stance on Immigration<sup>8</sup>

In 2008, the Cabrini Sisters renewed their commitment to develop new and creative responses to the cry of the poor and the excluded, including the tragedy of so many of our immigrant brothers and sisters.

In response, our Province developed a corporate stance on immigration. In this document, the Sisters urge us to remember our own roots as both immigrants and Christians by:

- Welcoming as brothers and sisters all immigrants to our land
- Supporting the right of all persons to flee political, religious, or economic persecution
- Supporting the basic human rights and dignity of all persons regarding food, shelter, health care, employment at just wages, as well as freedom of religion, customs and traditions
- Working in solidarity with immigrants and with others who share our values and beliefs to promote justice and compassion for all immigrants

### 2.3 Cabrini's Mission

#### • Who we are:

We are a Catholic healthcare service inspired by the spirit and vision of Mother Cabrini and the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

#### • What we believe:

We are a community of care, reaching out with compassion, integrity, courage and respect to all we serve.

#### • What we do:

We provide excellence in all of our services and work to identify and meet unmet need.

1. UNHRC *War's Human Cost: Global Trends 2013*

2. The definition of this term was changed by the Abbott federal government in 2013 to Illegal Maritime Arrival. As we are a signatory to the convention which makes it legal for people to seek asylum, the original definition of the term is retained.

3. Department of Immigration and Border Protection *Asylum Trends Australia 2012-13 Annual Publication* accessed at <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/immigration-update/asylum-trends-aus-2012-13.pdf> on 07/07/14

4. Department of Immigration and Border Protection *Asylum Trends Australia 2012-13 Annual Publication* accessed at <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/immigration-update/asylum-trends-aus-2012-13.pdf> on 07/07/14

5. Department of Immigration and Border Protection *Asylum Trends Australia 2012-13 Annual Publication* accessed at <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/immigration-update/asylum-trends-aus-2012-13.pdf> on 07/07/14.

6. *The Victorian refugee and asylum seeker health action plan 2014-2018* accessed at

[http://docs.health.vic.gov.au/docs/doc/4282CF2214CDD8C9CA257CFD0024AAC0/\\$FILE/Victorian%20Refugee%20and%20Asylum%20Seeker%20Health%20Action%20Plan%202014-2018.pdf](http://docs.health.vic.gov.au/docs/doc/4282CF2214CDD8C9CA257CFD0024AAC0/$FILE/Victorian%20Refugee%20and%20Asylum%20Seeker%20Health%20Action%20Plan%202014-2018.pdf) on 23/07/14

7. Australian Catholic Migrant & Refugee Office *I was a stranger and you welcomed me: What the Catholic Church teaches on asylum and migration* accessed at <http://www.acmro.catholic.org.au> on 16/07/14

8. Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus *Corporate Stance: Just Policies for Immigrants* accessed at [www.mothercabrini.org](http://www.mothercabrini.org) on 30/06/14

## 3> Cabrini's response

We are proud of the fact that the successive waves of Australian immigrants are reflected in our workforce. In 1994, the year the United Nations General Assembly declared the *Year of the Family*, we celebrated our diversity by cross-stitching a quilt with squares representing the 39 different countries represented in our 'Cabrini family'. In 2014, we marked the twentieth anniversary of the *Year of the Family*, by adding 32 new squares to reflect the 71 countries we now represent.

In 2011, the Cabrini Board decided to relocate and expand our linen service. We chose the City of Greater Dandenong as our new home, because it is one of the most culturally diverse local government areas with many new migrants who might benefit from the increased employment opportunities.

Asylum seeker and refugee support has been a feature of our Social and Community Outreach Program since 2005, when we partnered with other Melbourne Catholic hospitals to fund a clinic for Medicare-ineligible refugees. In 2010 we sought to enhance our involvement by partnering with CatholicCare to support its refugee resettlement programs. In the context of Australia's current policies, asylum seeker and refugee support has become one of the four priority areas of our Social and Community Outreach Program and we have actively worked to increase our involvement.

It is argued that for the many people who are fleeing persecution, Australia's current approach compounds the trauma they have already suffered, and increases the likelihood of long-term psychological consequences. In 2013-14 we responded by funding the development of a mental health assessment tool that can be administered by non-professional staff at the first point of contact. This is the first step in a comprehensive mental health service for asylum seekers and refugees.

Published polls show that most ordinary Australians support a hard-line approach to protecting our borders. We believe that this is often the result of fear of people who look, speak and act differently to themselves. In 2013-14 we partnered with Jesuit Social Services to seek to better align the attitudes of the Catholic community to the Church's teaching by showing the human face of asylum seekers and refugees. While this project is in its early stages, we think it is a critical step in living our mission authentically.

We want to do all we can to mitigate the experience of asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Australia today. Our most recent activities are outlined in the *Cabrini Social and Community Outreach Program Annual Report* available on Cabrini's website [www.cabrini.com.au](http://www.cabrini.com.au)



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