



Christmas Island

Some reflections

October 2011

Celso Romanin SJ

The beginning

It all began with a kind of SOS from Aloysius, Director of Jesuit Refugee Service Australia (JRS), saying in effect there was a dire need for pastoral work at Christmas Island, and by that we all immediately think of the detention centre. I somehow went to Our Lord, and put it before him. The thought came to ring Aloysius to get some outline of what was involved, time frame... His response was that the need was great; the minimum time was 14 days, the maximum one month. At that stage there had been no response. Could I do it? Aloysius answered, "if you can't, who can?" - a sentiment echoed by many of my friends and family. I went to Des, who in his own way was very affirming. He said we could manage. I thought that was generous of him, knowing he does not enjoy the most robust health, but he never complains.

So I wrote to my superior and receiving no answer, considered silence to mean assent. And so the wheels were put in motion. Meanwhile Bishop O'Kelly volunteered Iraqi born, Arabic speaking Fr. Khalid, a Chaldean priest on loan to Port Pirie, who was about to go on holiday. Khalid was coming in September. I was to follow in October.

There were some formalities: Clearance from the Federal Police, working with children from WA – I have two from SA, one from Vic, but needed one from WA. Kim, from the JRS office, forwarded the form sent to her from WA. It was the wrong one! Eventually the correct form was forwarded, and arrived the Tuesday of my last week.

It was time to announce it to the people of the parish. I was overwhelmed with the positive response, encouragement and support offered by so many. People stopped to talk, encourage, expressing a deep gratitude that I was somehow representing them taking this step. And the lovely thing was that we all understood it was not so much about me, but a bigger picture that needed to be addressed.

All of this was so daunting. I had eight years of experience with refugees in Australia, Asia and Africa. But the skin gets old, and physically we get less resilient. The heat, the emotional drain... all the devils came to visit. Each of them were addressed and dismissed. I like my comfort, good food and drink, enjoy the company of family and friends. I recalled when I was going to Africa, a friend from the parish of Neutral Bay came by to say farewell, and quickly pointed out that I was mad. I readily agreed! Neutral Bay was a very good place to retire, pleasant surrounds, easy work, beautiful harbour views, lovely life-style. And so to Africa it was, arriving in the dry season, extremely hot, no roads, no electricity, no water, no gas, no harbour views, no music. The Nile was nearby, and whilst it had all the history and story of Moses in the bulrushes, etc, it really was no match for that beautiful harbour.

I often ponder on the things that delight us, our little luxuries, our comfort, our friends, our life-style, being close to family, all of those things that make our life a joy. And yet there is a call that goes deeper, it's the call of the Lord to be of loving service to those in need. And so we follow. I suppose it will all look so good on my CV when I die, but who cares about that!

The positive response of so many reminded me of the beginnings of JRS, when Pedro Arrupe, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, said that with so many institutions, ministries, alumni of the Jesuits throughout the world, surely we were uniquely placed to make a solid impact in the whole world of refugees. And it is true. JRS has been a very good conduit for many volunteers to be with refugees. In a very real sense the positive response from the Parish was yet another indication to me that this was their way to try to make a difference. I was departing on this little journey knowing I was deeply supported. I experienced great consolation.

The Journey

In two days I experienced several worlds. I left the familiar, and was whisked away to another world that I had never experienced before: Chauffeur driven to the airport, QANTAS club, with its free drinks and food, comfortable chairs, quiet space. Then business class travel to Perth – a real touch of luxury: comfortable seats, good food, good drinks, films and documentaries to watch, and finally an apartment all to myself for the night. All of this was beautifully arranged by my personal travel agent.

Next morning taxi to the International airport, and another 3 hour and 25 minute flight from Perth International to Christmas Island. This is the only place in the world that I know where you need a passport and to fill out departure forms to travel within the same country. A different experience, crowded Virgin, minimal service, and finally the landing. Immigration consists of collecting landing form and asking if you had anything illegal. Here I was met by Susan – she and her husband are the focus for the church, and carers of the priest! – and Fr. Khalid, Chaldean priest from Port Pirie, volunteered by Bishop Greg O’Kelly, here for 18 days. It was great to meet with Khalid, have him take me on a quick tour, at least to know where things were.

Christmas Island was discovered by Captain William Mynors of the British East India Company vessel Royal Mary on Christmas Day 1643. It later was transferred to Australian sovereignty. Its main industry was phosphate mining (now immigration detention is the main industry), and the population is cosmopolitan, made up of Malays, Indonesians, Thais, Japanese, Islanders, and some Caucasians. The language is English, somewhat different from our Aussie dialect.

The island is about 4 hours from the mainland, one and a half from Cocos Island and 30 minutes from Denpasar. The local population is 1400. It is 360 km south of Java Heads, 1312 km from Singapore, 2623 km from Perth, Australian North West Cape 1408. The population of the island is around 3,000, with asylum seekers outnumbering the locals. Children tend to go to Perth for higher education, and settle there. The asylum seekers are at the other end of the Island, very secluded. At one stage there were over 3,000, but now less than 1,000. There are several hundred service people to care for them in various ways. Another world!

We seek a comfortable life and life-style. But somehow the call of Our Lord to be of service to those in need goes deeper. I think of the members of the St Vincent de Paul society, who respond lovingly to needs every week, to many who give up their nights to serve soup to those whose home is the street, to the ones who prefer to remain nameless and serve the community in many various ways, who help to keep the church clean and functioning, who make the garden bloom, and to those who ache for justice and feel the pain of powerlessness.

I am encouraged and supported by so many, the local Community at Hawthorn, many friends and family, on this journey. I am indeed not alone but part of a believing community of faith that somehow listens to the Word of God, and tries to put it into practice. I am indeed privileged to be of service within this community.

Immigration Detention Centre (IDC)



IDC is situated at the other end of the island, at the edge of the national park – heavily wooded, and if you have the time, leisure and interest, filled with all kinds of bird life. There is no other livestock on the island, apart from some rats and mice.

At first glance the Centre is a big cage, at second glance it's a bigger cage. I have a key, an electronic key that opens every gate. From the main desk you go to administration

– first of all DIAC (Department of Immigration And Citizenship). From there you go to the open compound, on one side there are recreational and educational facilities – library, classrooms, counselling, a religious fellowship room, which services as a multi-functional room. Then a little further the canteen, where you can buy (using points rather than money) drinks, chips, watches, hats, and sunglasses. A make-believe of normality, but a good meeting point.

From there you look across at four separate compounds: Gold 1&2, Green 1&2, Blue 1&2, and White 1&2. When we had our orientation walk, I remarked that all these seemed to be grey, and was quickly told they are different colours! At either end there are courts that can be used for a variety of games. I've yet to see any games.

Each detainee has a case manager assigned to him. The Detention Centre is solely for single men, most of whom, as I'm discovering have wives and children at home. They are able to make phone calls but the calls are monitored and expensive. But what can make up for physical contact? There is another centre for families and children.



As depression sets in, they are prescribed sleeping pills. Some younger men sleep well into late morning, often missing classes. It doesn't take long, or a medical degree to recognise depression.

DIAC does the processing. SERCO is in charge of the security. If there is any doubt due to military service or other previous activity, ASIO is invited to search, and due to its nature is not transparent, which angers the young men even more. It becomes apparent that the common enemy is the Australia Government. Many say they came here seeking asylum, but now would seek to go elsewhere – anywhere other than Australia.

I tried the cheering up, saying I bring greetings and good wishes from the church. I receive hollow, haunting eyes – and silence.

I was introduced to the compound in with Ellen Hansen (UNHCR), DIAC personnel, SERCO representative and 3 interpreters representing eight languages.

The visit began with Shopfront, where detainees can visit case managers for short visits, with specific questions. Case managers are members of DIAC who sit with “clients” and interpreter. The visit then continued to compounds where various men came to ask questions of UNHCR, about the slowness of their case, and other issues relating to their case. UNHCR does not have any processing role in Australia, but can review a case if asked to by a detainee who has been rejected. The purpose of visit is to monitor the situation and report back to the Government on slowness of casework, conditions, mental illness, etc.

Some of the issues that emerged:

Slowness of processing

- Unfair that newly arrived are transferred first, leaving some waiting for over 14 months, some 20 months
- Overmedication especially of sleeping pills for mental illness, and people sleeping well into late morning – UNHCR concerned with this way of addressing mental illness. SERCO are happy if there are no incidents. One effective way of ensuring there are no incidents is to keep people drugged. DIAC maintains that all medications are very strictly monitored!
- Bullying of converts by some Muslims. Once again DIAC denies, claiming that many stories are manufactured to attract attention.
- Refugees held in detention. There are a number of men who have refugee status, but are still held in detention. This is illegal. But maybe they were involved in a riot, and the court case will not be heard until March 2012.
- Dental care – a broken tooth, told it is not known when a dentist might come.
- Rejections – especially all boat arrivals between January and October 2002. Not one person was given refugee status.
- Many come seeking asylum because of persecution. Now they do not want to stay in Australia because of the treatment they have received. Of course it is not possible to re-settle anyone from Australia. It's all up to Australian Government. People lose all hope and seem to have come to a dead end.

It appears that all are happy enough with the way SERCO treats them. They do a good job. But the Australian Government is not. UNHCR, the Ombudsman, Human Rights... all make representations to Australian Government.

On Friday, 7 October, there was a Muslim prayer service for Hazara people killed in Pakistan. The previous week a number of men were lined up and shot by the Taliban. Apparently more than 80 have been killed since the death of Bin Laden. A number of Afghans have moved across the border into Pakistan but feel the insecurity of their families, not knowing when the Taliban would seal off an area and kill.

Detention, Dysfunction and Mental Illness

In Hong Kong in the Mid-1980s a group of young men from Hei Ling Chow were involved in a violent riot, were removed to Victoria Prison in what can only be described the bowels of the prison. On representation to the authorities the answer was that this, although within the prison, was not in fact prison but part of the detention system. No one ever went there, no lawyer, no caseworker. I, as chaplain went each week, and felt the utter powerlessness of the young men. I listened as best I could to their stories, and felt the hopelessness of their situation. Whilst others lived in some kind of hope that their case would be activated and they would be found eligible for re-settlement in a third country, these young men were deprived of all hope. I often wonder what happened to them, where they are and how they cope with life.

A similar story throughout the camps of Asia, Pulau Galang, Pulau Bidong, Site 2 on the Thai/Cambodian border, and to a much lesser extent the Hmong camps of northern Thailand. A story of young people who had been snatched from their traditional family and cultural environment took to a life of gang adherence, removed from the control of family and reverence of elders. Fortunately many who came to Australia were able to re-discover some of this cultural tradition, especially through family re-integration programme, and have made wonderful citizens.

In Africa a similar story: the men largely were dead or displaced, women and children found themselves in camps, and the mothers because of the hard life and constant work to provide for the family, were not able to discipline their children became more and more difficult to control. They were left in a cultural and spiritual void by wars and lack of self-determination.

So too here at the Detention Centre in Christmas Island. I sit in the compound, surrounded by young men, housed in a cage, in a situation where they wait for someone else to make some kind of decision for them. They need someone else to interpret for them, and then their case is taken away, and they wait. I sit in the compound, surrounded by languages I don't understand. I try to picture myself in their situation, living with others who represent different cultures and languages, carrying different stories of violence and war, desperately seeking somewhere to be able to live peacefully, and most importantly missing family. And this goes on day after day. I stay for a good while, and when I can no longer cope, I have a key and can go out.

But the question persists: What are we doing to young lives? The answer of the Government is to tell us how evil the people smugglers are, and we must do what we can to stop them. And so those punished are the desperate, and the fishermen who receive a small payment for sailing the boats. These are bewildered and totally lost. Most have no language, have no affinity with others in detention, and ultimately are not the ones responsible for people smuggling – they simply are trying to provide for their families. And so, who claims responsibility for young lives lost?

Those who feel the frustration most and become troublesome are further isolated, so that the rest are protected. These young men may become involved in some violence to themselves or others, or damage to property. For this they must then go to court. The next court case is March 2012.

For a short time of my life I can feel something of the emptiness, even the despair of others with very little to hope or live for. I can theorise about the importance of border control, of how just we are as a society to protect our citizens. But to do this we must distance ourselves from the human face of suffering. Here people wait, in despair, when things become too much to cope with, they are given sleeping pills, and when their despair becomes too great they light a fire in their room, or break a window, then there is a court case, no end to suffering, just more of it.

Who is able to repair the damage? Who would care to? I wonder about the cost to human life and to society. We all pay the price.

It all begins when we alienate people from their heritage and culture. The decision to go to war is so easily defended, those who seek asylum are bundled away from family and culture, and move almost aimlessly around the world, pushed at the whim of some government or government instrumentality, or some individual. We go on with our life; but they?

As I talked about my possible coming here with my Lord I was led to see how my comfort and life-style were dear to me, with the delight of little luxuries. But above these is the unease deep within to know that I may well be called to be of some service to others. And here it is, alone with my Lord to talk to, somehow to unravel the senseless spending of money to ensure that people are not free, that some kind of process is satisfied, and the perceived vulnerability is addressed.

Mainland processing

With the shelving of the Malaysian solution, and ultimately the announcement that all processing would be done on the mainland, immediately there was speculation and talk, led by the Prime Minister, that we should expect many more boats to arrive on our shores. Here on the island there was similar talk that many more boats would arrive here, as this is the front door to the nation.

It's interesting how we have been led astray by this kind of chatter and fear. We have successfully camouflaged the pain of people and the real desperation of those who risk their lives, are prepared to suffer, to pay enormous amounts of money to seek some kind of freedom. Listen to people who have done that and listen to their desperation, and look at their resilience, and talk of magnet effect will lose its impact. Allowing people to be processed while living in the community; allowing the community to help with settling, with seeking jobs and assistance; and re-deploying some of the funds presently made available to international organisations to provide security to local organisations who are prepared to befriend and help would show Australians as we really are, a truly compassionate multi-cultural people who make people welcome, irrespective of culture or background.

Mass

Mass at Christmas Island is an event in itself. A congregation of about 40, about 10 are refugees from the Centre, made wonderfully welcome, are encouraged to read the Gospel in their own language, and to sing their own songs. By the last Sunday, the congregation numbered 60, by far the greatest number from the detention centre. During the week there is Mass on Tuesdays and Fridays at 5.30 pm. Once again those from the Centre who would like to attend are escorted, and they bring food to share after Mass. One Friday there was some confusion in the Centre and they came with only water. It didn't matter because Celestine and Lucia brought food: rice and chicken curry and lentil curry. I had harvested a papaya and cooled it in the fridge, bought some oranges, which I quartered, and Lucia had also brought some mango. It was so moving to be part of this little ceremony, which spoke so loudly of a people with a loving heart.

The level of conversation is different in different places. In the Centre, one of the good meeting places is the canteen. Each person is given 50 points; I suppose the equivalent of \$50, placed weekly in his ID card, which works as a debit card. These they can use to buy various things - drinks, chips, other junk food, a watch, some clothes etc. They must spend these 50 points each week, or they lose them. They cannot accumulate them to splurge on a big party or something. The level of conversation here is so different from the one you have at another important meeting place: the Shopfront, where people wait their turn to have a word, ask a question, express a concern with their case manager. Here conversation is so much more focused on their case, their pain and their loss. At the gathering after Mass, the conversation is again different. Here it is much more normal, different topics emerge, people are much more relaxed. It's probably one of the most constructive

things that can be done, to enable people to come away from the Centre for an hour or so, meet normally with others, meet socially over some food with their minders.

It all speaks of what it might be like to do away with detention centres as processing places. Other nations do it and do it well, with minimum time spent in detention to ensure health checks and other security checks, and the rest of the processing done while people live in the community. Imagine the different conversations that would take place, the difference this would make when they ring home. This would enable people to live with some kind of hope rather than a deepening despair.

One of the things I found particularly moving - a couple of young men went back from a Friday gathering with little parcels of food. I asked if this was their breakfast, and they answered no, that some of their friends couldn't come because of some circumstances, and one because of depression. They were bringing back something to help cheer them.

Things that go wrong

Going from a touch of luxury into an unknown world, you really want all the saints to be pulling for you. The first touch of something from left field came at Perth International Airport, when I was told that I had to fill in a departure form, as if I was departing Australia, only to discover that I had lost my glasses somewhere, probably popped out of my pocket in the taxi. Thanks to my travel agent they were later recovered, but I had to make do with a pair bought from the airport. I managed to fill out the form with the help of a fellow traveller, who happened to work for Immigration. The first thing he pointed out was that I had the form upside down.

I took out my hearing aids only to discover they no longer worked. How they managed to stop working on the journey is a mystery.

I expected that I might have had access to the Internet on the island, which would help to keep me in touch, and keep people informed back home. No Internet, no diary access, but I still had my cell phone. And so lines of communication, although somewhat thin, were still accessible. So I was able to keep in touch and follow my brother as he travelled to Italy.

I bought an hour of Internet access at the Internet café nearby. Internet access was so slow that it took an hour to send about a page of news. I decided other emails would need to wait till I got back home. And so the sense of isolation increased.

Next I discovered that I could no longer make calls on my cell phone or receive phone calls, and so was down to text messages only.

And so I face my final week on Christmas Island with a greater sense of isolation. The Island and its people are wonderfully welcoming and friendly. It's not an act but something that obviously comes from their very nature. The welcome they give to the refugees is magnificent. But still the life alone can be very stressful. There are days, especially those days you don't go to the centre, where you see no one all day. One must learn to live the life of a hermit. It helps to have a relationship with our Lord, who can so lovingly lead you to a depth of love that you didn't realise you had. It's as if I was being told, it's all very well to talk about going from world to world, but you need to "leave your



boats behind, leave them on familiar shores, and set out upon the deep". And the ocean here is deep, and it is a different world. To be part of it, you need to leave your old toys behind, live here for a while, and appreciate my presence here with you.

I tried to walk with Bec who had embarked on a 30-day retreat. She was on a journey, and I was able to join her on that as I faced some of my own demons. I'm sure our Lord facilitates communication at a different level and pace if only we allow ourselves to be drawn into his life.

Talk of things going wrong. The day I was to leave the island, the flight was cancelled. The reason given was bad weather on Christmas Island. We looked at the blue sky and wondered! The previous Saturday, the plane did not land. The reason given was low cloud. Yet those waiting to board had a full view of the plane as it circled twice. The next flight, on Thursday, did not land. Friday there were two flights, and I was booked on the second, which did not land. Fortunately, through the efforts of my personal travel agent, I managed to get on a charter flight to Kuala Lumpur. There I waited 8 hours for a connection to Adelaide. I was on my way home. Hardly arrived in Adelaide when the news came that all QANTAS flights were grounded, and so the scramble to find a seat on Virgin. Once again my personal travel agent came to the rescue.

My last day in the centre, there were 712 asylum seekers. The whole place seemed deserted. At about 10.30 am, only a handful of people were on the move, most still asleep. It was so depressing to see young men wasting away with mental depression, their will gradually eroded, wasting away, just waiting and waiting, week after week, month after month. One very articulate man today had been twice rejected and 4 years away from his family despite papers of support from the UK and Canada, and by Amnesty International. He had been contacted by a legal aid person in Sydney who needed a face-to-face interview, but he feels worlds away and powerless to address his own destiny.

The other side of the fence - two who have just had the news that they have been accepted as refugees. They are still waiting and do not know what the next step might be, but at least they have the hope that somehow things will work out and they will be able to live in peace, form a family, and live a life with dignity.

Thursday 20 October

A mixed day. At Mass we announced that two young men from Iran had received refugee status. For us who are distant from all of this it may not mean a great deal. But for those closer, including many from the local community, this is cause for celebration, because it is a sign of hope for others. Now the wait for clearance, which will take at least one month.

The same day, 60 detainees were transferred to the mainland, handcuffed.

It appears that following the Gillard Government decision that all future processing will be done onshore, families and unaccompanied minors will be transferred to the mainland – where and how, God only knows – and also single men who show themselves to be obviously genuine asylum seekers, and cooperative. Those who are somewhat troublesome will be detained here on the island, because there is no escape from here. They may well manage to get out of the compound, but then there is nothing, the ocean is deep and shark infested, on the island there is hardly the infrastructure to hide anyone, and it would be impossible to survive.

And so the story of alienating people continues.

Sunday 23rd - new arrivals were brought ashore. They will be taken to the centre for first process, any suspected of some illness will be screened at the hospital, and then, families and minors will be transferred, single men will wait at the centre. And so it goes on. What it will mean for Christmas

Island is unsure, my guess is nothing much. Thank God for the local community which is one of great compassion.

A conspiracy theory?

Last week was the 10th anniversary of the SIEV X, actively remembered on the Island, hardly acknowledged on the mainland. It seems that there have been several calls for a judicial enquiry into the SIEVX, all blocked by the government of the time. It is claimed that there is one senator who knows the details of the tragedy but is not willing to say anything. Maybe one day freedom of information will allow us to know the details.

The story put out is that people were forced at gunpoint to board the vessel. Once outside Indonesian waters they were attacked by Indonesian navy vessels, which then shot at people in the water. The Australian navy has repeatedly claimed they knew nothing and were far away from that action. It is further claimed that once it was ascertained that people were in the water with no hope of rescue, the Indonesians withdrew.

Is this fact or some kind of conspiracy theory?

Since then the Australian Government has claimed a growing friendship with Indonesia. One might well ask at what cost?

Fact: The people on Christmas Island all sailed from Indonesia. Christmas Island is very close to Denpasar. There have been successive governments who have proposed various solutions to stop people smuggling.

Every effort to uncover the truth has been thwarted.

Questions still haunt: Who knows who the big players are? Does the Indonesian Government know? Does the Australian Government know?

Those who are caught and punished are simple Indonesian fishermen who are paid a pittance for their services.