

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?
DARWIN CONVENTION CENTRE JULY 15TH, 2014
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INTRODUCTION:

I would like to pay my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this meeting takes place, and also pay respect to Elders both past and present.

Anh Do, the author of the best-selling book *The Happiest Refugee* told the story of his gig from hell as a novice comedian. He had been poised to go on stage at a country RSL club. Only then did he realize his audience wasn't the usual lot he'd expected. They comprised of World War II, Vietnam and Korean war veterans. "Bloody hell!" he thought as he moved apprehensively into the spotlight. "Who organized this gig?" 200 guys sitting quietly remembering fallen comrades who were shot by Asian men . . . and he was the only Asian man in the room. Slowly, slowly he won them over. After the show an old bloke came up to him and said, 'Jeez, you're funny for a slope.'

Well, I am not a funny slope like Anh Do. Nevertheless, I hope if I don't win you over today, at least I won't have to look for the exit sign too soon.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you not only my thoughts, but also my experience as an asylum seeker. Like Anh Do and many thousand of my fellow Vietnamese boat people who were welcomed into this country, I am also a Happy Refugee. I am proud to be a living testament of what a decent, hospitable, generous and fair dinkum Australia can do to people like me. I am also proud to be an unlikely bishop in Australia and I hope that my being a former refugee will give me an insight into the plight of the marginalised and enable me to stand in solidarity with them in their struggle for freedom, justice, dignity and inclusion.

MY JOURNEY:

Friends, they say God works in mysterious ways. Consistently in salvation history, he has brought unexpected outcomes out of the most crushing defeats. Out of the ashes of the exile, he brought about the new Israel; out of the ashes of the crucifixion, the resurrection; out of the ashes of the Roman persecution, the universal church. Watershed moments can be catalysts for renewal and transformation.

I believe that we are living in a watershed moment of countless possibilities. Just as the biblical exile brought about the most transforming experience that profoundly shaped the faith of Israel, this transition time -the new exile of ours- can potentially launch the Church into a new era of hope, engagement and solidarity that the Second Vatican Council beckoned us with great foresight. We who accompany our people, especially the young and the restless, in their uncertainties and struggles can be ministers of hope in time of change. Let me trace my own personal journey of discipleship and share with you why I believe it is fundamentally important for us interpret the signs of the times and allow ourselves to be guided in the direction of the kingdom.

I was born in the time of the great civil war in Vietnam. It was as some of you might recall the most tumultuous period as the newly independent country sought to stand on its own feet against tremendous odds. Vietnam unlike Australia and many other countries emerged out of the shadows of colonialism only to find itself mired in an escalating war. My parents were refugees, boat people actually from the north. It is a kind of biblical story of Abraham writ-large. In 1954, following the Geneva Convention that divided Vietnam into two opposing sides, they –a young couple in their 20s with a toddler, my then 2 year old eldest sister- uprooted from their home near Hanoi and ventured to the south. They escaped by a small boat and went to a part of the country they knew nothing about.

I thank God they made that courageous decision and instilled in me the sense of risk taking, courage and hope. I like the re-election speech of President Obama, especially the part where he said that *“hope is that stubborn thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting”*. I think my parents without putting into those fine words understood what it meant to have hope and to fight for it.

I grew up in a staunchly Catholic village. At the age of 13, I joined the minor seminary near Saigon. In April 1975, one year after I had entered, we had to flee the advance of the communist troops and the eventual surrender of the South Vietnamese government. I remember vividly when we were on the run from the communist troops during the last days of the war. The roads to the capital Saigon were choked with thousands of people carrying their belongings. Some travelled in cars, bicycles, animal drawn carts. But most of us were running on foot. It was chaotic and surreal like a scene from Apocalypse Now. At one point, we came under heavy artillery and everybody dived for cover. We were a family of 9, including very young children at the time. As we huddled in the ditch by the

roadside, amid the sound of shelling, adults screaming and children crying, we said the Act of Contrition as loudly as we could. We really thought that was the end.

The change of government was drastic for the South Vietnamese people. In Australia, we take for granted certain things like security, stability and continuity even when governments change at elections. It was not so for us. In fact, in some ways, the country was more chaotic and life was more traumatic after the war than before. The communist government applied harsh policies like forced labour, farm collectivization, re-education, land reform etc... that mirrored the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. Then simultaneously, it managed to find itself at war with both China to the north and Cambodia to the south. It was then that my parents fearing the worst for their adult sons began to send them abroad, by boat.

I took to the sea in August 1980. The 7 day journey itself was terrifying. I was on board with my sister-in-law and her two young children an 18 month old boy and a baby girl barely 5 months old. I ended up holding her for the most part of the journey. It was the most distressing experience I ever encountered. It's watching a young child suffer and you are totally helpless to do anything about it. But my experience was mild in comparison with so many of other boat people whose cry could have pierced the heavens. They were those who were shot and killed by the communist coast guards; they were those who were lost at sea without a trace; they were those who were robbed, raped, mutilated or killed by pirates. Some survived to tell their horror stories; but thousands upon thousands of others did not. One study estimates that up to 500,000 of the 2 million Vietnamese refugees died in the pursuit of freedom. Without a doubt, this was the darkest episode in the history of the Vietnamese people. It is something that we will never forget.

For this, I have adopted as my episcopal coat of arms the image of a journey into freedom. It symbolises both the spiritual exodus that I as a Christian am called to make and the real painful quest for liberty that I and countless other boat-people made. My motto "Duc in altum" which means "go further into the deep" is in part meant to honour the memory of my people who suffered and died in pursuing that quest, that dream for freedom and dignity.

My experience in the refugee camp was traumatic but life-changing. You see I wanted to go to Holland where my brothers had gone and settled before. However, after 3 months of anxious waiting, we were told that only my sister in law and her children were allowed to go there. I went into a depression because I was an unwanted person without a future. Then one day, going past a classroom, I heard people trying to learn English for the first

time. I felt I could perhaps help them. And so I began to do something I had never done before. I qualified as a teacher and taught ESL for 12 months in the camp. I discovered the potential I never knew I had. The disappointment of being rejected by the Dutch government turned out to be a blessing. Not only did I learn critical skills in the refugee camp, I was also accepted by the Australian government on a humanitarian basis. Who knows where the course of my life might have led me without that initial disappointment? A crisis can lead to a great opportunity, indeed.

So you can see, in addition to formal education, I have been to the school of hard knocks a bit and have learned a lesson or two from life's painful experiences. It is my belief that the worst experience can draw the best out of you and therefore you should always approach whatever challenge you face with a positive attitude. And speaking of challenges, it is not a good time to be a priest or a bishop because of all the negative publicity surrounding the Catholic church at the moment. You might ask: Why did I choose this career and stay the course? I'd say this, you have to follow your deepest desire and do whatever it costs to realise it. My deepest desire is to do what Jesus did: to walk with the people and to serve them with love, respect and humility. You have to do what you love and my passion is to be a sign of hope for the people in their struggles, questions and uncertainties.

We Catholics often say "God works in mysterious ways" and this is certainly true in the case of the Vietnamese boat people. Initially, we arrived in this country demoralised, confused and uncertain about our prospects in a new country. Three decades on and now we have by and large been successful in making Australia our home, much like many other groups of migrants and refugees. We have demonstrated that vulnerable people wanting to have a better life for themselves and their children should not be seen simply as a burden and a liability to our society. They can become great contributors and builders of this nation. The experience of the Vietnamese refugees is clear evidence that even the most traumatised and the most impoverished group can be integrated in our multicultural society and can make a positive contribution. I feel saddened by the toxic atmosphere inflamed by the politics of fear which underlies our nation's response to the plight of the asylum seekers at the moment. Have we forgotten the lesson of history? Have we become a mean-spirited nation? Where is our sense of a fair go and legendary support for the underdog? Where is the spirit of compassion and solidarity that has marked the history of our country from its humble beginnings? We Catholics have some work to do in relation to these questions, don't you think?

God works even more mysteriously as far as the role of the Vietnamese Catholics in the Australian Church is concerned. At my Episcopal Ordination, I made a tongue-in-cheek remark that we are the new Irish. That might not be a great compliment –to the Irish –or perhaps to the Vietnamese, but I think it is true in some unexpected ways. For a long time, Ireland had a surplus of priests and religious, and many of them came to fill the gap in Australia. Now, it's the Vietnamese turn, it seems, to change the Eurocentric face of the Catholic Church here. Wherever they are, there is more participation and vitality than otherwise possible. I guess you could say the same about the Filipinos, Mauritians, East Timorese and other groups who are known for their piety. What is unique about the Vietnamese Catholics is the experience of trauma but also the experience of grace and redemption in some very dramatic circumstances.

I arrived in Australia in late 1981. I happened to settle in a Franciscan parish of Springvale. This turned out to be providential since without knowing it and being able to name it, I had been shaped by life experiences that oriented me in the direction of the Franciscan spirituality.

People often ask me if being a Franciscan makes it harder for me to be a bishop. It begs the question of whether or not being a bishop is compatible with the Franciscan spirituality and way of life. To be honest, there are aspects of the Episcopal trappings that I am not entirely comfortable with. When I was first ordained a bishop, I often forgot to bring things that a bishop needs to do his job: the zucchetto, the mitre, the crozier, the red piping, etc. I am still uncomfortable when people address me as “my Lord” or “Your Lordship”. I am not sure we should encourage these medieval customs in the present climate. For me, being a bishop should not make living certain fundamental Franciscan values an impossibility, values such as simplicity, openness, approachability, humility, solidarity, compassion, empathy with those who suffer. In fact, I see it as my duty both as a bishop and a Franciscan to accentuate these values more than ever. It is my conviction that we need to embody these values in our lives and apostolates.

HOPE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES:

As you can see, I have a vested interest in the biblical experience of the exile. My personal story of being a refugee, my struggle for a new life in Australia, coupled with my Franciscan heritage have all contributed to the hermeneutics of hope which was the legacy of the exile of old and which should inform and enlighten our present exile experience. Like the prophets who accompanied their people, interpreted the signs of the

times and led them in the direction of the kingdom, we must do the same for our people in the context of this new millennium.

I believe that the crucial task of Christian leaders in the time of uncertainty is that of reframing a harsh reality into a vision of hope. Today, in the midst of many situations of seeming hopelessness, it is easy for us to be overwhelmed and numbed. We feel unable to meet the challenge of delivering new life on behalf of those who feel hopeless. Yet when we stand in solidarity with those without hope and act together, we can be channels of hope. In opening our eyes and hearts to the sufferings of our world, hope can be awakened, a hope that allows us to see things from the perspective of God.

One of the great signs of hope for me is Pope Francis and the way he challenges us to move in the direction of the kingdom. The church, he insists, must not be content with status quo and cling to its security. Instead, it must move to the periphery. It must be the church of the poor and for the poor. Pope Francis has unleashed a new energy, he has poured a new wine which cannot be contained in old wineskins. He has challenged us, bishops in particular, to move in concert with him and bring about the rebirth of the church.

I am endeavouring to follow the pope's lead. I have forfeited my Qantas Club Membership. I fly with Tiger regularly and on overseas trips I am content with the cattle class. I do the house work myself including pushing the lawn mower. But thats the easy part. The harder part is to do what most of you do, which is to labour at the coalface of the church. It is to walk with people, identifying with them in their struggles, their questions and their uncertainties. It is to recognise the fifty shades of grey that life can present to the people in the real world and learn to be a companion on the journey with them. The election of Pope Francis is a game changer. I cannot remain in my safe and secure world. If I did, I would risk losing the tide. I would not be in sync with the Holy Spirit.

Another sign of hope is that the Church is being cleansed, renewed and revitalised. Increasingly, it is becoming the Church of the minority. In Australia, this is strikingly evident in most parishes. The Church is revitalized where there are migrants, refugees and the socially disadvantaged. It is the sign of the times when the Church returns to its ancient role of being a refuge for the poor and an oasis for the oppressed, as opposed to an enclosure for the privileged. When I was in Italy, I was very intrigued by the private tombs in many churches. In medieval time, it was not uncommon for high ranking ecclesiastics, royals and even well-heeled citizens to be buried in ornate church buildings. I wonder if this was a vestige of the time when the Church was the arena for power. I

wonder if this was the natural progression of the imperial Church which came to be born after the conversion of Constantine. Thank God we have moved on and the vision of Church of the “anawim” is being rightfully reclaimed for our time.

Finally, I believe that one of the greatest signs of new life in the Church today is the arrival of the age of the laity and the increasing awareness of their co-responsibility in the building up of the Kingdom. Pastoral ministry is no longer the exclusive realm of the ordained. It is being delivered in abundance by a variety of the baptized, many of whom have been the products of our Catholic education system. A fact of Catholic life today is that families more readily identify with the schools their children attend than they do with the parishes they may nominally belong to. Today, leadership of the Catholic community rests just as much if not more in the hands of school principals, religious coordinators, lay chaplains and pastoral workers than it does in the hands of the declining number of ageing clergy. The re-imagining of our partnerships in the life of the Church beyond its clerical structures can only be a source of blessing and enrichment for all.

As we are cut loose from the safe and secure moorings of the past and launched into the treacherous waters of the future, we grow in the awareness of paschal rhythm. We realise what needs to die and what needs to rise. The prophets of doom tell us that the Church is dying. I wager that they are only half right. They fail to see the other side of the equation. The Church is only dying to that which is not of Christ. But it is rising again to all that Christ and his Gospel stand for. It is dying to worldly trappings, triumphalism, clericalism and rising again to the power of vulnerability, servant-leadership, discipleship of humble service and radical love.

All is not lost despite appearances to the contrary. In fact, there are signs of new life sprouting forth beyond the seemingly barren religious landscape, even here in secular Australia. We see them in the young and the old, in the city and the country, among the mainstream society and on the margins, in our schools and parishes. We see them in the young and their passion for justice, equality and integrity of creation. We see them in the not so young and their concern for asylum seekers, refugees and indigenous peoples. We see them in the fight on behalf of those who suffer injustice and the broader vision of life in its fullness which is at the core of the Gospel.

RADICAL COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE:

The question “who is our neighbour?” is thus understood within that broader vision of life which the Gospel addresses to all, but especially those who are deprived of it. The

“neighbours” in this context are the refugees, the asylum seekers, the sex abuse victims, the gay and lesbian people and anyone else who suffer prejudice, discrimination and dehumanising stereotype.

As the parable of the Good Samaritan subtly points out, it is the holders of the tradition who are often guilty of prejudice, discrimination and oppressive stereotype, the Church today needs to examine its own attitudes and actions towards the victims of injustice and adopt what I would call a seamless garment approach. We cannot be a strong moral force and an effective prophetic voice in society if we are simply defensive, inconsistent and divisive with regards to certain social issues. We cannot talk about the integrity of creation, the universal and inclusive love of God, while at the same time colluding in the ill-treatment of racial minorities, women and homosexual persons. This is particularly true when the Church has not been a shining beacon and the trail-blazer in the fight against inequality and intolerance. Rather, it has been driven involuntarily into a new world where many of the old stereotypes have been put to rest and the identities and rights of the marginalised are accorded justice, acceptance, affirmation and protection in our secular and egalitarian society.

Like most of you and the Catholic world, I am greatly encouraged by the example and leadership of Pope Francis. His abandonment of the unnecessary worldly trappings associated with the papacy is a challenge to all of us to divest ourselves of clericalism and return to the purity of the Gospel. His constant call to the church to be less concerned with itself and to be more outward looking encourages us to walk with our people in the ambiguities and complexities of their lives. The self-referential church steeped in a culture of splendour is in stark contrast with the church of the poor and for the poor.

In one of his interviews on a rather thorny issue of homosexuality, Pope Francis says that we must always consider the person, because – I quote “when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?” It seems to me that the Pope has more than moved away from the approach of condemnation and judgement. He has refocused on the proclamation of God’s love for the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalised; he has firmly placed the pastoral emphasis on the dignity of every person; he has committed the Church to the way of engagement, affirmation and compassion which is at the heart of the Gospel. The Church can only be the conduit of compassion and speak the language of hope to a broken humanity when it truly personifies powerlessness and stands where Christ once stood, that is, firmly on the side of the outcast and the most vulnerable.

Catholic schools are premised on the fundamental dignity of each and every individual person. They are charged with a special mandate to offer hope to those who are disadvantaged and this special attention for the neediest is a cherished part of the Australian Catholic school story. In reading the signs of the times, we are particularly challenged to be places which are deeply rooted in the Gospel values and where the radical vision of fullness of life for the poor and marginalised is fully embraced. The challenge of Pope Francis for the Church to be bruised, wounded and hurt because of its daring commitment to the vulnerable is poignant to us Catholic educators. To be “neighbour” to those who are on the margins of society even at the cost of our own success and power remains the fundamental Gospel imperative.

CONCLUSION:

In summary, I believe we are living a time of grace and hope precisely because this fallow time allows us to rid ourselves of what is unworthy of Christ and to grow more deeply in our identity and mission as his disciples. Hence, it is the time to reclaim for the Church:

- Less a role of power, dominance and privilege but more a position of vulnerability and powerlessness
- Less an enclosure for the virtuous but more an oasis for the weary and downtrodden
- Less an experience of exclusion and elitism but more an encounter of radical love, inclusiveness and solidarity
- Less a leadership of control and clericalism but more a diakonia of a humble servant exemplified by Christ at the Last Supper
- Less a language of condemnation but more a language of affirmation and compassion
- Less a preoccupation for its own maintenance but more a concern for the kingdom of God

Despite all appearances to the contrary, I firmly believe that we are on the threshold of renewal and transformation. The Vatican Council set in motion a new paradigm that cannot be thwarted by fear and paralysis. That new paradigm is one that is based on mutuality not exclusion, love not fear, service not clericalism, engagement with the world not flight from or hostility against it, incarnate grace not dualism. The Holy Spirit is at work even at a time of great anguish.

The spirit is leading us on and we are not afraid of the future. In fact, we have every reason to believe that the future will be even better than the past. Our task is to keep the amber burning bright and to pass it on to the next generation. May we be open to the guidance of the spirit as we journey with each other and together meet the challenge of delivering new life for the world.