

Our brothers and sisters should be welcomed

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Catholics experience asylum-seekers, migrants and refugees not as an imposition or problem to be solved, but as sisters and brothers to be welcomed, protected, included and promoted, writes Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv.

Concern for migrants and refugees has been a key theme of Pope Francis' pontificate. He believes that we can emerge from this pandemic better than before if we act with awareness that we are one family.

Of course, during a pandemic, we cannot always keep our borders open; we can, though, keep our hearts and minds open to the whole world.

At present, around 7,000 people who have already been assessed as requiring protection, and granted a visa under the offshore humanitarian program, are currently unable to travel to safety in Australia. Nor are there effective pathways to reach Australia, even with authorisation, to apply for asylum onshore. People seeking asylum and refugees already in Australia also face challenges.

Department of Home Affairs statistics show that, as of 30 April 2021, the average length of detention for the 1,497 people in immigration detention was 646 days. This is higher than ever before. This figure includes some people who have committed serious crimes and who will be returned to their country of citizenship. But it also includes a growing number of people who are in complex situations. Some of them may not be eligible for refugee status but can never be safely returned to their country of origin, yet they pose low levels of risk to the community.

We need to find better ways to resolve their situations.

The Catholic Church defends human life. Anyone who is forced to flee to protect their lives or human dignity has a moral claim on our assistance, whether they are a Convention refugee or not. It is what we would want from others if we were in their place.

Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv is chair of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service within the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.