
Refugees: An Act of Conscience

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AN ACT OF CONSCIENCE

A statement on the proposed refugee sanctuary movement by the Social Affairs Commission of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario

Conscious of the pain and sorrow experienced by refugees who are torn from their homelands, and often from their families by violence, war and repression, the Social Affairs Commission of the Ontario Assembly of Catholic Bishops wishes to respond to the recent decision of some refugee workers to renew the practice of sanctuary as a measure of conscience and last resort in the face of injustice.

In deporting genuine refugees, Canada's government fails to fulfill its obligations to protect refugees under international law, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Immigration Act.

In particular, we regret that the lack of meaningful appeal based on the merits of the claim, prevents Canada from ensuring the recognition of all genuine refugees.

We are also concerned about the government's policy of expelling failed refugee claimants without providing a meaningful review of their case based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

We recall the pointed reminder from the Pontifical Councils *Cor Unum* and for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Travelers in their joint statement "Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity" (October, 1992):

Scrupulous respect for the principle of voluntary repatriation is the non-negotiable basis for the treatment of refugees. No person must be sent back to a country where he or she fears discriminatory action or serious life threatening situations. In cases where government authorities decide not to accept asylum seekers, arguing that they are not true refugees, these authorities are duty bound to make sure that such people will be guaranteed a secure and free existence somewhere else. (Paragraph 14)

The decision in conscience to offer sanctuary, which is a decision of last resort, is part of every major faith tradition and recognizes the profound and sacred dignity of every person, irrespective of his or her national origins.

The initiatives on the part of Canadians of providing sanctuary demonstrates the extent to which Canada's refugee system is failing the genuine protection needs of refugees. We wish to affirm our support for these women and men of courage and conviction who stand by some of the most vulnerable in our society. We add our voices to those calling on the government of Canada to provide for the protection needs of those men, women and children in need of sanctuary by allowing them to stay in Canada. We also urge the government to institute a meaningful appeal process.

In the words of the recent Church statement:

Human solidarity, as witnessed by any community that welcomes refugees and by the commitment of national and international organizations that care for them, is a source of hope for the real possibility of living together in fraternity and peace. (Paragraph 37)

Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontari
