



# Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

## Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office



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## Media Release

### Manus Island: Five years on

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On 19 July 2013, the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Peter O'Neill, signed the regional resettlement agreement between Australia and Papua New Guinea. The agreement, a follow-up on the Joint Partnership Declaration signed in May 2013, was for any future maritime arrivals entering Australian waters to be transferred to Manus Island for processing and resettlement in Papua New Guinea.

Today marks five years since the Australian and Papua New Guinean governments signed this agreement. In this time, we have heard and seen many tragic consequences of our government's harsh policy of indefinite and inhumane detention of asylum seekers at Manus Island, and the subsequent transit centres in Lorengau.

In these five years, we have seen riots take place and have seen the death of seven asylum seekers on Manus Island -- with some taking their own life. The deteriorating mental health of these men is of the utmost importance. Inadequate access to healthcare as well as substandard living conditions have all added to the hardships endured by these men. The indefinite nature of their situation continues to negatively impact their mental wellbeing.

In 2016, we saw some hope with the announcement of the agreement between Australia and the United States, which would see around 1200 refugees relocated to the US. However, this avenue will not be available for all. For many, it remains a protracted situation. Permanent and durable solutions, respecting the dignity of the human person, must be found, exploring and enacting alternative humanitarian channels.

This date reminds us that the history of migration has now reached dramatic and tragic heights. Every day, we witness the flight of millions of people, many of whom are children and youth. Every day, we witness their rejection. This may still have the power to move public opinion; above all, this shows the limits of the systems of protection of the international community.

The Catholic Church has always advocated for and insisted on the importance of taking a holistic and integrated approach, focusing on the dignity of the human person. The human rights and dignity of these refugees must always be respected, and be the first consideration, for decision-makers. Australia must also look at adopting national policies that prefer alternatives to detention.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Point 3.d, *Towards the Global Compacts on Migrants and Refugees 2018: 20 Action Points*, Migrants and Refugee Section, Integral Human Development, Vatican City.



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Pope Francis echoes the words of the Gospel: “Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age”. (*Matthew 25:35-43*).<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Father qualifies this “encounter” with four verbs and actions: “Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees”<sup>3</sup> and calls on all people to promote the culture of the encounter.

**For media enquiries, please contact Gavin Abraham, 02 6201 9859.**

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, Message, 104 World Day of Migrants and Refugees

<sup>3</sup> Idem.