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## **Pastoral letter to the faithful of the Diocese of Parramatta on our response to the situation in Afghanistan**

Dear brothers and sisters,

Many of you will be shocked, as I am, by how quickly and easily the Taliban has seized control of Afghanistan. The daily scenes from Kabul airport that we have seen over the past weeks have been heartbreaking. How much more shocked and scared must the Afghan population be, as well as their relatives and friends who are now living here in Australia.

I ask you all to keep the Afghan people in your prayers, especially now as international forces have withdrawn from the country. Please include those in our community who have come from Afghanistan. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference's Office for Justice, Ecology and Peace has published a resource for communal prayer in your households: [Prayer of Solidarity for the People of Afghanistan](#).

Many Afghans are still trying to flee from the Taliban. Especially ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, and those who worked together with the Australian and international military forces are at risk of targeted persecution. Women fear losing their human rights. The Australian Federal Government has so far committed to allocating 3,000 places within the existing refugee program for people fleeing Afghanistan.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, the President of our Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, recently [wrote to the Prime Minister](#). Based on estimates from key humanitarian organisations and pledges from other countries, Archbishop Coleridge proposed that the Federal Government should make at least another 17,000 places available.

This proposal is being supported by many humanitarian and community organisations, including Catholic organisations, and by a broad ecumenical alliance of Christian churches in Australia.

I invite and encourage you all to add your voice to this important call. Under the theme "Christians United for Afghanistan" you can do this by signing the call at [unitedforafghanistan.com/?partner=dioceseparramatta](http://unitedforafghanistan.com/?partner=dioceseparramatta).

I have already added my signature on behalf of the Diocese of Parramatta. Parishes can sign within the category "Church". Catholic schools, agencies and our Diocesan councils are invited to sign as an "Organisation", and every faithful can sign as an "Individual".

Beyond a special intake of refugees from Afghanistan and Afghan refugee camps in neighbouring countries, “Christians United for Afghanistan” calls on the Federal Government to “Welcome. Protect. Reunite. Support.”

This includes granting permanent protection to all people from Afghanistan who are already in Australia on temporary protection visas or are currently awaiting application outcomes. It also includes enabling these refugees to bring their families from Afghanistan to Australia and reunite in safety, as well as additional emergency and long-term support for humanitarian aid through reputable organisations working in the region.

Our partners at Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia and the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA) are supporting this ecumenical initiative and will help to engage the Catholic community across Australia.

As Christians, we believe that God bestows an indestructible dignity on every human being. However, we know that humans can erode this dignity. That is what I fear the Taliban are doing when they persecute those who do not share their beliefs and oppress the women and minorities they live alongside.

So, when it is within our national power to protect dignity, we are prompted by our faith to speak out. As Pope Francis said in 2017 when speaking of people seeking asylum: “Defending their inalienable rights, ensuring their fundamental freedoms and respecting their dignity are duties from which no one can be exempted.”

It is our collective duty as a society to foster and uphold the unity of the family, and in the context of Afghanistan this includes enabling access to family reunion for refugees and members of the diaspora.

Australia has a long tradition of generously resettling refugees and displaced persons who flee their home countries due to war, conflict and violence. We need to honour this legacy by showing the Afghan people fleeing oppression and violence our compassion and solidarity. I believe that this is the true identity of the country I have made my home.

I was a refugee once and fled by boat in the wake of the end of a protracted war in which Australia had been involved. I hope to see the same level of bipartisan support for Afghan refugees now as there was for Vietnamese refugees then.

While the Government has a critical role to play in supporting Afghans in Australia and in their homeland, faith-based and community groups declaring they are ready to help people relocating to Australia is a big piece of the puzzle.

If you have friends, colleagues or neighbours with an Afghan background, please be there for them in this traumatic time. I ask you to open your hearts to newly arriving refugees, and to support our Catholic agencies in providing support to them as well as humanitarian aid in the region.

Also include the members of our Australian Defence Force in your prayers who served in Afghanistan in the past 20 years.

Thank you for your prayer and solidarity with our Afghan sisters and brothers in this difficult time.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to read "Vincent Long Van Nguyen".

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*Given at Parramatta on 1 September 2021*