



## WELCOMING ASYLUM SEEKERS BY CARDINAL THOMAS J. WINNING

It would take a lot to make me ashamed to say that I live and work in Glasgow. But the treatment meted out to asylum seekers in recent weeks by some of our fellow citizens comes close to forcing those words to be uttered.

the face of our city has been disfigured by a series of ugly and brutal acts of aggression against people whose only crime is to flee persecution and seek refuge in a foreign country.

As Archbishop of Glasgow I feel duty bound to denounce, in the strongest possible terms, the violence, intimidation, and bullying of asylum seekers in our midst.

More importantly, as a human being, I feel utterly dismayed to think that such activities can be happening just a few miles from our renewed and revitalised city centre.

But our concern should extend beyond recent violent incidents. The Church condemns not only the intimidation, but also the institutionalised discrimination suffered by asylum seekers.

- They are asked to survive on little more than half the income support level - far less than the absolute minimum any British citizen would ever live on.

- They receive only £10 per week in cash, and must seek out shops which will accept vouchers - a humiliation in itself - to buy the balance of their shopping.

- They are not allowed change for vouchers spent - thus a £7 bag of shopping could cost £10 in vouchers.

They are not allowed to work for six months, despite the fact that some are superbly qualified doctors, lawyers, nurses and teachers.

Such sanctions are an affront to the human dignity of the individuals concerned, and an incoming Government should review them as soon as possible.

As a Christian I cannot approve of such blatant discrimination. In the words of Pope John Paul: "How can the baptized claim to welcome Christ if they close the door to the foreigner who comes knocking?"

The acid test of Christianity on this issue lies in Jesus' words: "I was a stranger and you made me welcome ..."

As citizens we must ask ourselves: "Are we making these strangers welcome?"

Indifference constitutes a sin too. The sin of omission.

Thankfully, the picture is not all gloomy.

Throughout the city much good work is being done. Church groups, concerned local residents, council departments and voluntary agencies labour away to make life more bearable for the asylum seekers.

They offer advice, support, material assistance and friendship to people in desperate need.

Glasgow schools are going out of their way to welcome the children of refugee families, and see the whole experience of opening up to different cultures as an enriching and positive one. It's a source of great pride to one head-teacher I know that several of the star players in his school football team are from asylum-seeking families.

But more needs to be done.

I would ask all involved in public life to be especially careful not to play on the fears of host communities. Politicians have a special responsibility to give a lead in offering reassurance and support to all involved in the hosting of asylum seekers in our city. They should reject the temptation to outdo each other in recommending ever more draconian methods to deal with some of the most hurt, frightened and vulnerable people in our country.

It is worth remembering, too, that those who have expressed resentment about the arrival of people seeking refuge in our city are often themselves victims of social exclusion.

It is essential that such people feel that they too are important in the eyes of the authorities. And while nothing excuses violence or intimidation, I would hope that better communication with local residents might help avoid in future some of the problems which have arisen in recent weeks.

On the broader question of "genuine" and "bogus" asylum seekers, as the media and politicians like to distinguish them, I reject the demonisation of so-called "economic migrants". A person who exercises his or her right to search for better living conditions should not be considered a criminal simply for doing so.

It is important to remember that many of us who currently play a full and active role in Scottish life are ourselves the grandchildren or great grandchildren of economic migrants from Ireland, Lithuania, Italy or other countries of mainland Europe.

I reject too ever more restrictive measures being applied which would prevent genuine refugees seeking shelter in our land. It is vital that those who are forced to flee their countries under threat of persecution have access to a country where they can apply for asylum.

Preparedness to offer sanctuary to the terrorised, the persecuted and the victims of war is a litmus test of our commitment to human rights.

A society which bolts its doors against the cries of the frightened and the tortured, for fear of a brief and slight strain on economic resources, is a society which dare not call itself civilised.

It is essential that the traditional image of Glasgow as a welcoming and caring city should not be besmirched by inhumane bullying, xenophobic taunts or acts of violence. It is essential too, that the UK should not impose living conditions on asylum seekers which demean our claim to be a civilised society.

Despite the problems I remain hopeful.

My hope is that Glasgow can overcome this distasteful and shameful blip on the path to a more caring society.

That's why I resist the temptation to be ashamed of this proud city ... I know we can do better.