

Vatican urges Australian bishops to continue work for asylum seekers

Anthony Barich Catholic News Service | Dec. 20, 2010

PERTH, Australia -- The Vatican has urged Australia's Catholic bishops to persist with their "generous and passionate work" for asylum seekers after at least 48 of them were killed off Christmas Island Dec. 15.

Archbishop Antonio Veglio, president of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, and Father Gabriele Bentoglio, undersecretary of the pontifical council, sent the letter of encouragement Dec. 17 to Bishop Joseph Grech of Sandhurst, the Australian bishops' delegate for migration issues.

On Dec. 15, 48 asylum seekers -- believed to be mostly Iraqi and Iranian -- drowned off Christmas Island after their boat crashed into cliffs in stormy seas. The Australian Navy rescued 42 survivors, and the Australian Federal Police are investigating the actions of three Indonesian crewmen in connection with the incident.

A survivor told Australian newspaper publisher News Limited Dec. 20 that there were about 80 people on board, including 30 children.

More than 2,000 people are being held in an immigration detention facility on Christmas Island, more than 1,600 miles northwest of Perth.

News Limited reported Dec. 20 that relatives of the dead continued the task of identifying bodies that were recovered from the crash site. About 18 persons remained missing, Australian authorities reported.

"With deep sadness I learned the news of the tragic shipwreck, on the morning of Dec. 15, of the boat carrying the hopes of dozens of brothers and sisters seeking asylum, tragically sunk on the rocks of Christmas Island," the Vatican letter said.

"I assure you of my prayers for these souls lost at sea and for the survivors. In the meantime, I encourage you to keep on with your generous and passionate work in favor of migrants and asylum seekers. You may always rely on my support and esteem," the letter said.

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