Villawood Mass

There are Masses and Masses – from those celebrated in the splendour of St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City to much more simple ceremonies in churches worldwide.

Then there is the Mass at Villawood Detention Centre, Sydney every Friday about 10am.

After passing through security checks, visitors walk across a covered picnic area to stroll up a ramp into a sunny and airy room.

The detainees greet them warmly with robust handshakes, hugs and jokes all round. Many of the men are only in their 20s.

The visitors, mostly retired, know some of the asylum seekers' stories and their background - none of the reasons that caused them to flee their homelands.

One visitor, a Santa Claus of man, has a natural ability to get them laughing and smiling with his pretend karate moves.

A makeshift altar is set up on a small table, an altar cloth spread on a low wall and songbooks and Mass response sheets put on chairs. From her home garden, a woman brings roses and other flowers that are arranged at the back of the altar.

Her husband has permission to wheel in an accordion, amp and speakers which he sets up for the hymns.

It's time to start, for Villawood rules require visitors to be gone by 11am. Today a Marist priest, Father Jim Carty, is saying Mass.

Like congregations worldwide, detainees sit in the same place each week – Chinese men down the side, Chinese women in the middle, the Vietnamese near the accordion, the Sri Lankans at the back. There are also West Papuans, Iranians and Japanese.

A young Vietnamese man takes the first reading and a Tamil reads the Gospel in Singhalese.

Father Carty, who jokes about sometimes talking for too long, delivers his homily in English and pauses while it's translated into Chinese, Singhalese and Vietnamese.

Responses are in broken English which adds poignancy to the occasion. But it's the music that defines this Mass, with hymns sung with the passion and gusto of a grand-final winning football team.

The Vietnamese "boys" sing a hymn from their country at communion. It is always moving.

The words of hymns take on a special meaning for born-in-Australia

Australians who have befriended asylum seekers trying to live in their country.

O Lord, hear my prayer; longing for light we wait in darkness; make me a channel of your peace, where there's despair, let me bring hope; come as you are, that's how I want you.

Two hymns always end the Mass: Ave, Ave, Ave Maria has attained top 10 status sung loudly as the Australian sun shines down outside on this detention centre set amid gum trees and the occasional laughter of a kookaburra.

A Chinese hymn resonates with the congregation as it is belted out - Wo xu yao ni yei su – We need you Jesus.

The asylum seekers always thank their visitors for coming, some from far-flung parts of Sydney; some have been going to the Mass for 17 years.

Yet it is the visitors who are grateful for a Eucharist experience that gives the Mass a whole new meaning and underlines the common humanity of man.

As the detainees await the result of their applications to stay in this country, often with the prospect of being rejected, somehow this Mass makes God seem a little bit closer, a little bit more on their side. O Lord, hear my prayer.

BW Morris – A longtime supporter of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia wrote this article a few years ago. However, the situation of providing spiritual support for people in detention hasn't improved. In fact many say it's become more difficult for priests and others to gather together in detention centres to celebrate Eucharist).