

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.

