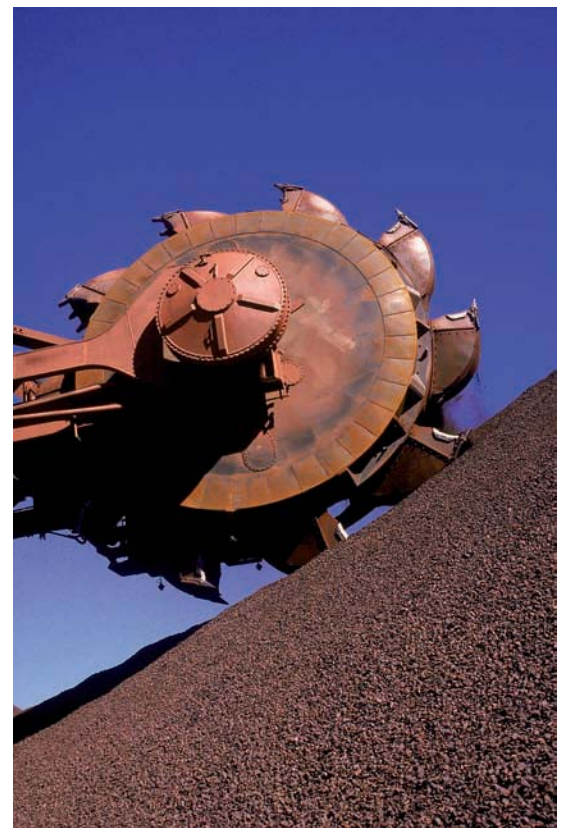


Social Justice Sunday Statement 2008

A RICH YOUNG NATION

The challenge of affluence and poverty in Australia



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Chairman's message

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, I present the 2008 Social Justice Sunday Statement, *A Rich Young Nation: The challenge of affluence and poverty in Australia*.

This year's Statement considers the affluence of our nation against the circumstances of those who experience great hardship. In a land of plenty there are many who are wealthy, but live in spiritual poverty, and there are those who have missed out on the benefits of economic growth.

No matter how well the economy performs, the health of our society can be judged by the treatment of its most vulnerable citizens. Following years of prosperity, Australia has the means to act for the common good and with a special concern for the poor. We are challenged to really consider what sort of society we want now and for the future.

Pope Benedict XVI said in his address at Admiralty House during World Youth Day:

With many thousands of young people visiting Australia at this time, it is appropriate to reflect upon the kind of world we are handing on to future generations. In the words of your national anthem, this land 'abounds in nature's gifts, of beauty rich and rare'.

How we use the world's resources and foster human development are concerns for every Australian. What values characterise our daily lives? Have we become obsessed with economic success and material acquisition? Do we recognise those in need and our obligation to do something about it?

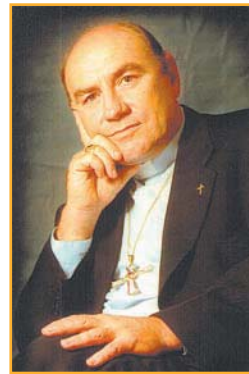
For Christians, the Word of God constantly reminds us of our obligation to the poor. Each time we gather at Eucharist we give thanks for the saving presence of Christ who died for all. As the Holy Spirit transforms the gifts of bread and wine into the Lord's body and blood, so we are renewed in our commitment to be Christ's witnesses to the world.

The Holy Father has affirmed the importance of our shared commitment to the poor when he said of the Church:

... love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word. (Deus Caritas Est, n.22)

This Social Justice Sunday, we are all challenged to consider how we can be the Good News to the poor.

With every blessing



Christopher A. Saunders, DD
Bishop of Broome
Chairman
Australian Catholic Social
Justice Council

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A RICH YOUNG NATION

The challenge of affluence and poverty in Australia



As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No-one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and your mother."' He said to him: 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing: go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Mark 10:17–22

The Word of God calls us to conversion, alerting us to the need for change and challenging us to see and act differently. The rich man had a tight grip on his possessions. They had become the symbol of his identity and any act of charity on his part served to reinforce for him how he had been blessed by riches. He could afford to buy a reputation for being generous. In the long run, the invitation to let go, to leave behind what was holding him back from discipleship and from journeying with Jesus, was asking too much of him.

It was not that the man had failed to live according to the Law or the standards of his society. Jesus asked him to do something more: to think beyond his comfort zone, a world in which he was surrounded by possessions, and to notice the poor and tend to their needs.

Australia is a rich country in many ways. It has experienced spectacular economic growth and prosperity in recent years, and increasingly our international economic status has become a symbol of our national identity. Yet in Australia there are many who are wealthy but in their affluence 'lack one thing' and there are those who have been bypassed by the economic growth and prosperity and live in poverty.

The challenge that Jesus presented to the rich young man is the same we face in Australia today: will we use our great wealth for the benefit of all and particularly for those who have been denied the benefits of prosperity? Jesus looked at the rich young man and loved him, but the man was shocked at the Lord's words. As citizens of this rich young nation, perhaps we too lack one thing. Will we act on the challenge that Jesus offers, or will we too go away shocked at the challenge before us?



An affluent nation

The term 'affluence' can mean different things to different people, and our ideas about what affluence is have changed over recent decades.

Not long ago, many Australians might have thought that an affluent life would include having a second car, a big home and possibly a second property such as a holiday house. Now, many people have access to all these things. Today an affluent family may enjoy luxury houses and cars, regular overseas travel, houses for holidays or investment and very substantial financial reserves.

Along with this has come a rise in expectations about what is required to live a satisfying life. In today's consumer society, no matter how much money people actually have, they can often believe they need more. Products that yesterday were seen as luxury items are today thought of as necessities.

This confusion between wants and needs has been described as 'affluenza'.

When people see wants as needs, it is not surprising that two thirds (in a Newspoll survey) say they cannot afford everything they need. And their feelings of deprivation are real, since thwarted desire is transformed into a sense of deprivation.¹

The survey referred to reveals that a quarter of the wealthiest households in Australia believe they spend nearly all their money on the basic necessities. For these households, the feeling of being deprived is based on the expectation of wealth rather than the experience of real need. This expectation often fosters a consumerist mentality.

Pope John Paul II addressed the problem of consumerism when he said:

It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards 'having' rather than 'being' and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself.²

The wealth of our society is not in itself a bad thing. Our affluence can bring great benefits, depending on how we use it. But as the story from Mark's Gospel of the rich young man reveals, it does not necessarily bring happiness. In fact, it can do the opposite. For example, the drive for increased wealth can mean an ever-greater commitment to work: we see the constant pressure to work longer hours and on weekends. Australia has become one of the hardest-working of the developed nations, and we can see a link between increased pressures at work and pressures on family relationships.³ For many parents, there can be a tendency to make up for their absence by surrounding their children with possessions.

Increased wealth can mean increased debt because of the need to service financial commitments to cars,

possessions and houses. This makes it more difficult to limit the demands that work makes on our time. The worker and the family can be trapped in a cycle of overwork, over-consumption and debt in the effort to achieve material success. Indeed, affluence can give rise to the mentality that one has an inalienable 'right to things'. People can lose a basic sense of gratitude for what they have and instead be grasping for more and more.

The constant desire to produce and consume goods also places unsustainable demands on the earth's resources and leads to the generation of pollution and waste. This cycle can undermine our responsibility to care for God's creation now and for future generations. In these times we must make every effort to reduce our ecological footprint through caring for what we have and asking ourselves before buying more, 'Do I really need this?'

The desire to possess more is at least supported, if not driven, by the media portrayal of what is needed to attain a happy and successful life. Consumerism and aggressive marketing also place self-interest and competition for material things above the idea of a society where we are all in service to one another.

None of us likes to believe that our lifestyle is in conflict with the greater public need. However, often there is resistance to reforms that would increase the distribution of wealth and opportunity to those in need because people believe that service to the community may reduce their personal wealth.

This is reflected in attitudes to taxation. Many people feel that increased taxes will threaten their quality of life. Additionally, because many who are relatively well off regard themselves as struggling, they can feel entitled to demand significant financial assistance from government in the form of benefits or tax cuts.

It remains a concern that electoral pressure to promise massive tax cuts can restrict a government's ability to fund social services adequately and meet properly the real needs of the community. Just as concerning is how the contribution made to revenue by other sources, for example the gaming industry, can affect vulnerable people so directly.

In his 2008 Message for Lent, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on the implications of wealth and the obligations of those who enjoy it:

According to the teaching of the Gospel, we are not owners but rather administrators of the goods we possess: these, then, are not to be considered as our exclusive possession, but means through which the Lord calls each one of us to act as a steward of His providence for our neighbour.⁴

Jesus calls us to build a just society and to work together to ensure poverty is eradicated and that all are able to live a full life. Those with means have a special responsibility to ensure that those who are vulnerable are clothed, housed and looked after.



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Rich and poor in an affluent society

Despite the spectacular economic growth and prosperity of recent years, many Australian individuals and families continue in their struggle to make ends meet.

It is not that Australians lack generosity. Consider the response to the victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and other natural disasters, and our collective efforts to support families and towns around Australia affected by drought, fire and floods. There are many examples of individuals and communities pulling together in hard times. When people and communities are shaken by disaster, we know what is needed: food, shelter, medical help. When it comes to deep-seated poverty, however, it is less easy to see that what is also needed is a change in our attitudes and those of our society.

Australia is a society divided along lines of wealth and opportunity. In 2006, the average annual household income was \$102,470. While the top 20 per cent of households had an average annual income of \$225,350, the average income for the bottom 20 per cent was \$22,500. The differences between the highest and lowest income earners are growing, and Australia has one of the greatest income disparities among the developed nations.⁵ According to one estimate, 4.52 million Australians live in households whose gross income is less than \$400 per week.⁶

‘The worker and the family can be trapped in a cycle of overwork, over-consumption and debt in the effort to achieve material success.’

Even ‘middle Australia’ is falling prey to this divide. Housing affordability is a problem that has always been felt by those in the lowest income groups, and is now affecting many middle-income families. Fewer people have the capacity to buy a house. Families have to borrow more to afford one, and many have over-extended themselves in this market, so that a small increase in interest rates can make it impossible to service a mortgage. There is an increasing awareness of instances of irresponsible lending by banks and other institutions that have enticed people into debt they cannot manage.⁷

A large number of Australians neither own nor are paying off the home in which they live. More than one quarter of all Australian households are renting,⁸ and many are facing huge increases in rents, with the associated insecurity of tenure. In 2007, some rents rose by as much as 15 per cent.⁹ According to recent research, there are 80,000 to 100,000 evictions from rented property each year. Poverty and disadvantage can become entrenched and self-perpetuating in communities, and the high cost of housing is a major contributor to this.¹⁰

As economic growth has slowed, there is now a growing perception that all is not right with our society. The poorest members of our nation have known and experienced this for many years, but their voice is rarely heard. The Church has spoken out through the long period of economic growth on behalf of those who have been left behind in the ‘good times’. The slowing of the economy has given increased urgency to the call on Australian society to address the needs of our most vulnerable citizens.



Poverty and justice

*Poverty is my mother
and oppression is my father.
I was suckled in shadows.
I am the face of poverty,
remember me well
for my features are universal
and your soul represents my dreams
so close yet out of reach.*

*I am strong in spirit
Yet weak in body
My cry for the eradication of poverty is
universal.
Forget me not
in your fight against poverty.¹¹*

From 'Forget not my Face' (1996)
by Rachel Willis, then aged 16.

When Jesus began his public ministry, he announced that he had come to bring good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:16–19). Fulfilling the words of the prophets, he showed in his words and deeds a special concern for the least powerful in the society of his time: the widow, the orphan, the sick and the outcast.

The Gospels tell us that our life will be judged according to our treatment of the poor. In Jesus' account of the Last Judgement (Matt. 25:34–40), his ministry is so intimately concerned for the poor that he himself becomes the face of poverty. When he welcomes into God's Kingdom those who fed, welcomed and clothed him, they ask:

Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

Jesus replies:

Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

We are all one people, each created in the image and likeness of God. The justice we render to one person is justice we render to every human being – and to Christ himself. That sense of universal relationship is at the heart of Christ's compassion and healing – the example he gave his disciples throughout his public ministry.

From the earliest days, the Christian community displayed this concern for the common good. The Acts of the Apostles shows how the community, united in the breaking of bread and prayer, gave practical expression to their faith by attending to the needs of the poor among them: 'they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need' (Acts 2:45). The early Church Fathers were unrelenting in this commitment to justice. In the fourth century, for example, St Basil the Great reminded the community in no uncertain terms of its responsibility for the poor:

The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in the wardrobe is the garment of the one who is naked; the shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit.¹²

Through this commitment to justice, seen clearly in the ministry of Jesus, we receive a strong message of hope about what God's reign on earth can achieve in ending poverty and oppression today. The challenge to us, his followers, is to see the face of the poor and oppressed in our society and to stand with them giving voice to their plight and working for change.

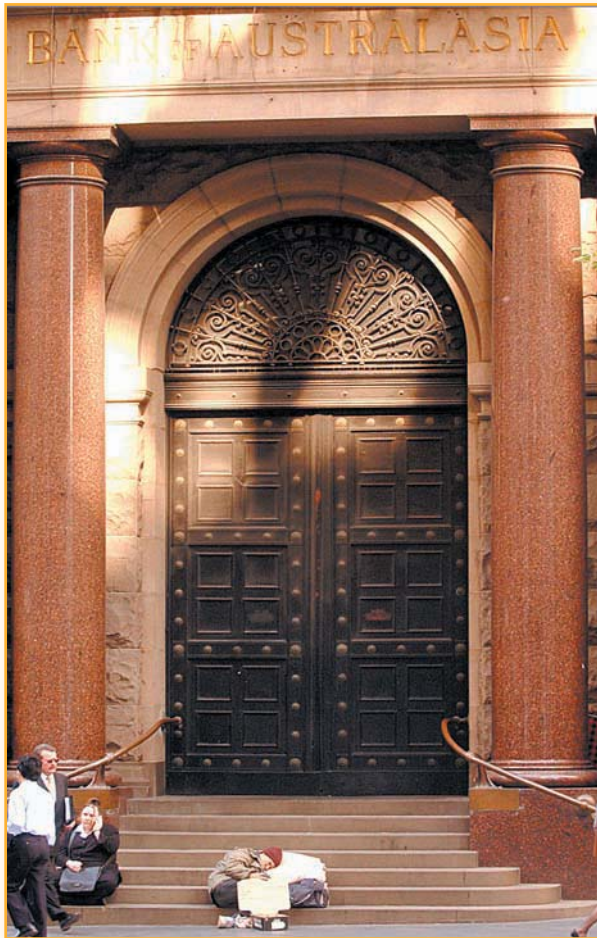


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‘The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the money you keep locked away is the money of the poor.’

The face of poverty

When we describe someone as ‘poor’, we might talk about the person’s appearance, their physical and mental health, what they wear and where they live and perhaps their emotional and social skills. This is one way to evoke the face of poverty, but perhaps not a particularly helpful one, because it stereotypes people and fails to recognise that much poverty and hardship in Australia is hidden from view.

Some people understand poverty in absolute terms, as utter deprivation seen in parts of Africa, in war-torn countries and in many Indigenous communities in Australia. Others see poverty in relative terms: as the disadvantaged conditions some people have to live in compared with those who are better off. There are those who believe that poverty does not exist in Australia because, unlike other countries, we have a social security system that provides an income safety net.

There is much debate, often heated, in academic and policy circles over which particular measurement of poverty should be used. Definitions vary, but there is common ground that we can identify. In broad terms, poverty means lacking the means to live a fulfilling life and regularly going without essential items. It

means worrying constantly about being able to pay bills and juggling these pressures by continually assessing what has to be done without. For many, poverty is a constant state of lurching from one crisis to the next.

In our 1996 Social Justice Sunday Statement *A New Beginning*, we described the experience of poverty this way:

To be poor means

- To have inadequate access to resources and services
- To be unable to do certain tasks that are essential for fulfilling one’s human potential and carrying out one’s social responsibilities
- To be shunned, denigrated, blamed, patronised and ostracised by others
- To have little opportunity to participate in decisions affecting one’s life
- To be, and to feel, powerless, excluded, marginalised, effectively, to live ‘in exile’ in one’s own society. This is at least as damaging to human dignity as the actual inability to purchase certain goods and services.¹³



Poverty means much more than not being able to afford what is needed. In essence, poverty is an assault on the very relationship between humans – the interconnectedness – that is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. It is for this reason that the Church has worked over so many years to improve the health, education and material welfare of families and entire communities.

Recent research undertaken by Catholic Social Services Australia and Jesuit Social Services has demonstrated that there are a number of communities across Australia where social disadvantage has become entrenched. In these areas, there is far less prospect of growing up with the reasonable expectation of a decent education, of finding a job or of access to proper health care. In environments like these, it is more likely that disadvantage will be passed from one generation to the next. The research found that 1.7 per cent of postcodes and communities across Australia accounted for more than seven times their share of the major factors that cause intergenerational poverty. A few of these factors are low income, limited education and employment and childhood deprivation.¹⁴ Further, the research shows that education – particularly early childhood education – is a vital part of efforts to reduce this entrenched disadvantage.

However we define 'poverty' or 'disadvantage', there are some clear indicators that Australia's care for the less fortunate has not kept pace with the economic growth we have enjoyed over the last 15 years. It was found that, in 2006, according to the most stringent definitions of poverty accepted by international research, 2,210,000 Australians, or 11.1 per cent of the population, were living below the poverty line. This figure included 412,000 children.¹⁵

The fact that there are communities that have been in a state of severe disadvantage for many years is an indictment on our society and undermines the egalitarianism we hold up as a defining feature of what it means to be Australian. Australians recognise that a country such as ours should be able to provide well for everyone – all the more so because the disparity between the wealthiest and the poorest in our community is growing.

Many causes of poverty and inequality are structural. We sometimes hear the terms 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor – terms that suggest that some people bring their poor fortune upon themselves while others are innocent victims of life's random events. While we would hope that all people could take some degree of responsibility for their circumstances and the consequences of their decisions, the reality is:



AAP/Torsten Blackwood © 2008 AAP



AAP/Shaney Balcombe © 2005 AAP



‘We are all one people, each created in the image and likeness of God. The justice we render one person is the justice we render to every human being – and to Christ himself.’

In the main, people are poor not because they are lazy or lacking in ability or because they are unlucky. They are poor because of the way society, including its economic system, is organised.¹⁶

Life is not a level playing field. A person may be born into poverty or encounter a series of difficulties with no safety net to fall back on. We cannot choose our parents, our family or our neighbourhood. These are the circumstances that largely determine whether or not people will enjoy a life of comfort and security.

These same circumstances demand a sustained response from our society, not just to emergencies or crises, but to the real causes of poverty in our society. It is the responsibility of all of us, as a nation, to ensure that the basic conditions and opportunities exist for families to provide for themselves, to be freed from poverty traps and not to be welfare dependent.

Who are our sisters and brothers in need?

In a prosperous Australia, we are called to recognise that ‘the needs of the poor are more important than the wants of the rich’.¹⁷ Some particular groups still endure great poverty and inequality. We are again called to hear the voice of the poor and to act with generous hearts.

Indigenous families and communities

On any social measure of health and well-being, Indigenous people, my people, are hugely over-represented at the wrong end of the scale. No matter whether you look at life expectancy, health profiles, custody figures, educational outcomes, unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide – you name it – the trend is the same.¹⁸

– Lowitja O’Donoghue

Consider the abject poverty of communities living side by side with the opulent living standards of an advanced economy. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples struggle with social and economic burdens that most Australians could not imagine.

The rate of poverty endured by Indigenous people is two to three times greater than for other Australians. Levels of unemployment are well over twice the rate for the general population in cities and regional centres, and higher still in remote areas. The proportion of Indigenous teenagers not fully engaged



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‘Every day, Church workers in agencies like Centacare and St Vincent de Paul provide family support and emergency relief to families struggling to make ends meet.’

in work or education is three times that of other young Australians.¹⁹ Indigenous people suffer ill-health and disability at far greater rates than non-Indigenous people. Their average life expectancy is 17 years shorter than for the general population. Many remote communities lack a basic level of infrastructure, which is particularly concerning for those communities whose populations are growing. Housing is desperately overcrowded and lacking in basic requirements like sanitation and cooking facilities.²⁰

Australians have become more aware of the dire poverty and violence experienced by Indigenous people through the media coverage associated with the Northern Territory ‘intervention’. However, these problems are not a recent discovery. The deprivation and marginalisation endured by far too many Indigenous people have caused havoc for many years. As a country with huge reserves of wealth, it is to our great shame that we have not met the needs of these, our sisters and brothers.

The spirit of the broader movement for reconciliation has been revived following the momentous national apology to the Stolen Generations earlier this year. That occasion in the Australian Parliament moved the hearts of so many. We might even dare to hope now that we have moved into a new era of solidarity and support for our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

The causes of poverty in these communities must be addressed in true partnership with Indigenous people and with respect for the dignity of an ancient

culture. As we have stated elsewhere in response to the Commonwealth intervention to prevent child abuse, we now need to move beyond the law-and-order focus to provide a full range of culturally appropriate support services that can foster strong families and communities.²¹

The health, welfare and education agencies and services of the Church, which have worked with remote communities for many years, stand ready to cooperate with our political leaders to bring justice and service to Indigenous families and communities in crisis.

Families in distress and the working poor

*I know families who, after they’ve paid everything, live on twenty dollars a week. How do you survive? How do you feed even one parent and three kids on twenty bucks a week? ... There are people who live day-to-day, you know ... people who can’t survive without ... a food parcel every fortnight, just to feed their kids ...*²²

– Irene Simmons

Women are over-represented among those who live on low incomes, and single parents and the children they care for are a particularly vulnerable group who continue to be exposed to the effects of poverty. Sole-parent families, usually headed by women, face the greatest risk of poverty of all types of family. Even when sole parents enter the paid workforce, they are



likely to be in part-time, casual or insecure employment and, like many women, are less likely to have the opportunity to accumulate wealth and superannuation during their working lives. Costs of education, training and child care remain prohibitive.²³

Picture a fairly typical single-parent family living in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. One child suffers from asthma. The mother receives about \$400 per week from Centrelink to meet the costs of food, shelter, utilities and other essentials. Typical weekly costs are likely to include \$160 for rent, \$150 for food, \$35 for electricity and water and \$30 for phone and pharmaceuticals.²⁴ The total expenditure is \$375. This does not include clothing, medical expenses, transport or school costs or haircuts or occasional treats. Such a family faces a life of constant juggling and going without to avoid deepening debt.

Today, a single parent on social security payments is required to seek employment once the youngest child is of school age. Working, earning an income and having a sense of self-reliance are valuable, but the challenge of achieving this for many sole parents who have to juggle care responsibilities can be overwhelming.

Every day, Church workers in agencies like Centacare and St Vincent de Paul provide family support and emergency relief to families who are struggling to make ends meet. They see first hand the inadequacies of the standard of living afforded by income support payments or insecure low-paid work that lacks flexibility to accommodate family needs and routines. It is a concern that women are already over-represented among the growing number of casual workers in low-skilled occupations and low-paid jobs. This concern is likely to increase where government policy requires parents with young children to enter this area of the labour market.

Australia must realise that the children of all families deserve adequate security and opportunity. We have already seen how poverty can be passed from generation to generation. The solutions, too, need to be intergenerational. They must be truly supportive of family life and the vital role in our society of good parenting.

Refugees and asylum seekers

I want to feel the responsibility of being part of society ... I don't want to be a burden on society. I have the ability to be productive, to build and participate. Why don't they give me a chance to use my abilities, and save the country from helping me? Why do they stop me from working,

*and doing all the other things that make me feel part of the society?*²⁵

– Qasim

Imagine arriving in a new country after fleeing persecution and enduring a perilous sea journey and, even though according to United Nations conventions you have the right to seek asylum, you are left languishing for years in a detention centre. That has been the experience of many asylum seekers under Australia's immigration processing arrangements.

Despite a majority of these people being granted refugee status, until now they have entered Australia with the promise of only limited periods of protection on temporary visas and without the social protections and opportunities that we Australians take for granted. Many people in this situation have been denied social security payments and services or the right to seek work, leaving them reliant on assistance from welfare agencies and charities.

We are encouraged by the Federal Government's announcements about restricting the use of mandatory detention and abandoning the Temporary Protection Visa system. Permanent protection will be restored with all of the entitlements related to health, welfare, education, work and family reunion. At the same time, we know through the efforts of Church groups who have supported refugees and asylum seekers when Government assistance was lacking, that these people are likely to remain vulnerable to disadvantage and hardship.

Catholic schools, parish communities and religious orders have been providing shelter and helping refugee families enter formal education. Our hospitals have addressed the physical and mental health needs of people who have suffered great trauma. Welfare and volunteer groups have been teaching English and basic living skills to new arrivals.

The organisations and community groups that are already over-stretched in meeting these needs require greater support in assisting refugees integrate into the life of the community.

The dislocation and initial lack of familiarity with Australian social customs and practices can lead to much unnecessary suffering among newly-arrived refugees. Attitudes towards women, and the role of police and of public servants in welfare agencies, can be different in other cultures. There is a clear need for the Australian Government to fund immediate post-arrival programs to educate people in Australian ways and attitudes and thus alleviate this suffering.



Australian society as a whole needs to give more consideration to how we welcome the stranger. Many Australians have parents or grandparents who came to this country as strangers, which reminds us of our obligation to people who arrive on our shores, often vulnerable, traumatised and without resources.

People who are homeless

*The hardest thing about leaving home was not seeing my mother every night ... Just not seeing her and being able to talk to her if I needed it ... It's gonna take me a long time to rebuild my relationships with my friends and family. And until I do, you know, I'm the one who's gonna suffer the consequences of not being able to turn to people that I'm supposed to be loved by and that I love.*²⁶

– Barry, 19

For most people, a house is more than just bricks and mortar. A house is a place of security, care for family and hospitality. For many people, there is no such place; these are people who are sleeping rough, or forced to go to refuges or seek shelter in rooming houses, cheap hotels and caravan parks.

It is unacceptable that amid the affluence of this nation 100,000 people are homeless. Over 6,500 families and 10,000 children under the age of 12 are among this number. Each night, 14,000 people are sleeping rough.²⁷

Particular groups are at risk of becoming homeless. People suffering chronic mental illness often experience other disadvantages, and affordable and stable housing is an important foundation to rebuild a life. Such people are already at a disadvantage because the programs established in the 1980s that focused on deinstitutionalisation and community integration have not been matched with funds adequate to provide the necessary accommodation and care.²⁸ The private rental market is competitive, and there is a long waiting list for public housing. Without suitable accommodation it is hard to develop and maintain social connections that might help such people build confidence and ultimately find employment.

Another group who struggle to find accommodation are former prisoners. People trying to make a successful transition from prison back into the community face many challenges. In addition to the stigma associated with prison, there are practical obstacles to be overcome: finding somewhere to live, reconnecting with families and friends, trying to get a job. Many people do not manage this transition well because there is a lack of proper support networks.



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*‘If one person is disadvantaged or left behind, we are all diminished.’*⁹

More than a third return to prison within two years²⁹ – a problem exacerbated by mandatory sentencing arrangements in many jurisdictions, which have led to the overcrowding of prisons and remand centres.

These are among the most vulnerable in our society. They are among the people ‘sick or in prison’ whom Jesus referred to in his account of the Last Judgement.

A growing number of low-income families are at risk of homelessness as a result of the limited availability of affordable rental properties and huge increases in rent. The Federal Government’s policy focus on homelessness is encouraging, as is the announcement of additional funding to build more crisis accommodation and incentives for investors to construct up to 100,000 new affordable rental properties. It is clear that more attention to the needs of low-income families who are being squeezed out of the market will be required in the coming years.



We renew our call

In 1992, towards the end of a world recession, we released a statement on the distribution of wealth in Australia, *Common Wealth for the Common Good*. Even then we noted the growing divide of wealth in Australia, with higher levels of serious poverty, unemployment, homelessness and the emergence of an underclass of gravely disadvantaged people. We called on political and community leaders to ensure that the common wealth of Australia be dedicated to the common good, especially to the poor.

The conditions we noted then still exist in Australia. Once again we call for justice for those afflicted by poverty in our affluent society. We call on all political and community leaders, as they put in place policies based on well thought-out strategies for the years ahead, to bear in mind the circumstances and needs of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Every person and every group in society must be able to meet their material needs and realise their potential in a social, economic and spiritual sense. We are called to realise that, just as it is in family life and among friends, so it is in the life of our community: if one person is disadvantaged or left behind, we are all diminished. We cannot survive without others and can only grow and achieve our potential in relationship with others.

In this regard, one encouraging development is the Federal Government's adoption of a policy of social inclusion, aimed at reducing social and economic disadvantage, and its establishment of a Social Inclusion Board. This policy of social inclusion seeks to make it possible for all Australians to participate in the economic, social and civic life of our country. This focus may be the important first step we need to take to address poverty amid the affluence of the past decade or more. It is important, though, that there is a comprehensive approach in addressing poverty – one that recognises that, in addition to the economic dimension of poverty, there are also significant social, cultural and spiritual dimensions that must be taken into account.

In repeating the call we made in 1992, we remember the words of Pope John Paul II: solidarity is 'not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress' but a 'firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good'.³⁰

The message needs to be repeated in all its purity and simplicity. To the affluent it is an invitation to see the face of Christ in the poor and to release their hold on what the poor need in order to survive. To the poor it is an invitation to believe in God's love for them and in the possibility of change, so that they too

may 'inherit the earth'. To all it is an invitation to conversion, to a demanding, radical discipleship, to be willing to investigate what it means to stand with the poor here and now, in the hope of standing with the just at the end of time (cf Matt 25:31–46).³¹

This is a task for every Australian. We are all responsible for rebuilding community relationships that have been damaged by poverty and the division of wealth and opportunity. In the words of Pope John Paul II,

... those who are more influential ... should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess. Those who are weaker, for their part, in the same solidarity, should not adopt a purely passive attitude or one that is destructive of the social fabric, but, while claiming their legitimate rights, should do what they can for the good of all.³²

It is important that together we face the reality of poverty and seek ways to address it, however difficult that may be at a personal or societal level. As a country that espouses the value of the 'fair go', it is time to act for those who have missed out on the benefits and opportunities that the good economic times have provided this nation.

What we are called to

As Christians we are called to recognise as our brothers and sisters those who are poor or pushed to the margins. We are called to accompany, serve and plead their cause. Do we see in them the face of Christ? Will we respect and restore their human dignity?

This call and how we respond are central to the life of the worshipping community. When Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he did so at a communal meal. He consecrated bread and wine, made from the fruits of the earth that were intended for every person, rich and poor. In the Eucharist we present ourselves to Jesus, not as rich or poor, powerful or helpless, but as brothers and sisters.

To a consumerist society, the message of the Eucharist is countercultural. Where consumerism drives us on to acquire more and be forever concerned about material gain, in Christ we are offered a deeper fulfilment in relationship with him and one another. Christ calls us, as he did the rich young man in the Gospel of Mark, not to have more but to be more.

As members of the Body of Christ, we are challenged to realise our baptismal duty to recognise Christ in the shared communion of the consecrated bread and wine and in those who suffer in our world: the poor, the sick, the refugees. We gather to remember and



celebrate with thanks the saving presence of Christ, who suffered and died for the liberation of all creation. We will fulfil our prophetic call if we go from our Eucharist to liberate others.

We have the opportunity to re-examine our lifestyles and choose to live more simply, in a spirit of solidarity with the poor. By living life more in terms of what we need, rather than what we want, we will be less concerned with material acquisition and freed from the clutter of consumerism. Most importantly, we will be in a better position to recognise the needs of others and to see the face of the poor.

Jesus loves us whether we are wealthy or poor. As we see in the Gospel passages that speak of affluence and poverty, it is what we do with our possessions and gifts that matters. Those with influence and wealth have the means to seek out and serve others. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), the rich man is not condemned because of evil-doing, but because he just did not notice the plight of the destitute man at his gate, the one 'who longed to fill

himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man's table'. We are reminded how invisible poor people are and how easy it is to overlook them amid the busyness of our lives and the wealth of our society.

In the gospels, we hear Jesus asking us in Australia today: how aware are we of the poverty in our community? How often do we do a good act for someone in need without hope of earthly reward? What changes do we need to make so that all Australians have their basic needs met and are able to participate fully in the life of the community?

As individual citizens, as families, parishes, communities and organisations, we can take the initiative to reach out to our brothers and sisters in need and to be enriched by what follows. For in welcoming the poor, the outcast and the stranger in need, we welcome the living Christ, our God and our Creator into our hearts and our lives.

Jesus is the good news to the poor. As his followers, we are called to be the same.

Ideas for action

Across our country there are communities, organisations and initiatives committed to building respectful relationships with people who are in need and to working for change. Here are some suggestions about the ways in which we can help to address and prevent poverty.

- **Give of your time.** Look for information about the work of your parish on the notice board at your church and ask your priest or pastoral associate what support you can give.
- **Consider how you can live more simply,** free of the demands of consumerism. Programs like the 'livesimply project' show that, in reflecting on our lifestyles and choosing to live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the poor, we can help create a world in which human dignity is respected and everyone can reach their full potential. For more information, visit www.livesimply.org.uk
- **Make a donation.** Identify the amount you are able to contribute to an organisation that will maximise the good outcomes of the gift you offer. Catholic charities and social services can ensure your contribution is put to best effect.
- **Think of opportunities to contribute** in your diocese and the broader community. Visit the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference website and follow the links to see the works of organisations in your diocese: www.acbc.catholic.org.au/dio/index.asp
- **Become more informed** about the issues relating to poverty in Australia. Visit the websites of:
 - Catholic Social Services Australia: www.catholicsocialservices.org.au
 - Australian Catholic Social Justice Council: www.acsjc.org.au
 - Caritas Australia: www.caritas.org.au
 - Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office: www.acmro.catholic.org.au
 - Catholic Earthcare Australia: www.catholicearthcare.org.au
 - National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council: www.natsicc.org.au
- **Other useful sources** of information and action :
 - *Dropping Off The Edge* website: www.australiandisadvantage.org.au
 - *Australia Fair* campaign: www.australiafair.org.au
 - *Make Indigenous Poverty History* campaign: www.ncca.org.au/natsiec/indigenous_poverty
 - Society of St Vincent de Paul: www.vinnies.org.au
 - Brotherhood of St Laurence: www.bsl.org.au
 - NATSEM Research Centre: www.canberra.edu.au/centres/natsem
 - Anti-Poverty Week: www.antipovertyweek.org.au
- **Take action.** Contact your local Member of Parliament explaining your interest in addressing poverty. Express your concern that not all Australians have shared in the benefits of 15 years of economic growth. Inform them about this Social Justice Sunday Statement. Contact information for parliamentarians can be found at: www.aph.gov.au/whoswho/

These are just some of the initiatives to which we can lend support. By becoming informed and taking action against the poverty that remains amid the affluence of our nation, we are offering to each person the dignity and respect we ourselves hope to receive. Together we can show that this is an issue we care about deeply.



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