

Social Justice Statement 2012 – 2013

THE GIFT OF FAMILY IN DIFFICULT TIMES

The social and economic challenges facing families today

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Chairman's message

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, I present the 2012–2013 Social Justice Statement, *The Gift of Family in Difficult Times: The social and economic challenges facing families today*.

In this Statement, Australia's Catholic bishops urge us to consider the essential role that families play in our society – to think how we can strengthen and support them. We are called to give special consideration to those families in our midst that face particular difficulties in their efforts to stay together and nurture each other.

It is particularly significant that this Statement is being issued during the Year of Grace in Australia. The Year of Grace is a time for us all 'to heal relationships, deepen our unity and forge a future full of life in Jesus Christ' – exactly the things we all hope for in our own families as they grow and change. Change, after all, is what family life is: families are the environment in which we are born, mature and grow old, and it is only through grace that we can adapt to this change.

In the 21st century, Australia's families confront new pressures. Our workplaces are changing: more and more workers are employed on a casual basis, many of them forced to find two or more jobs just to make ends meet. There are growing demands to work late hours or on weekends, or even to be away from home for weeks on end. These stresses can make it ever harder for Australians to be with their families, to nurture love, to strengthen bonds, to learn and to teach.

Some families are particularly vulnerable and require our special generosity. These are the marginalised and the disadvantaged, to whom the Bible says we owe a special debt: many Indigenous families, asylum seekers and refugees, those in poverty, the homeless and those with special needs with regard to disability. We are particularly aware of the corrosive and long-lasting effects of violence and abuse within families. We are mindful of the need to heal the wounds of the broken-hearted.

As we seek guidance and grace to find ways to strengthen and unite families, we look to the example of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. We pray that all families will be strengthened as intimate communities of life and love – the very foundation of our society.

With every blessing,

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

THE GIFT OF FAMILY IN DIFFICULT TIMES: THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES FACING FAMILIES TODAY

The family is the first and fundamental school of social living: as a community of love, it finds in self-giving the law that guides it and makes it grow. The self-giving that inspires the love of a husband and a wife for each other is the model and the norm for the self-giving that must be practiced in the relationships between brothers and sisters and the different generations living together in the family.

Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981¹

It is in the heart of the family that life comes into being. In the heart of the family the joys, hopes, sorrows and worries of life are shouldered and shared. This intimate community provides our first experience of love, rejoicing when a child is born, educating and guiding little ones as they grow. It is where we learn the importance of sharing, overcoming disagreements and offering forgiveness. In the family we learn compassion and care for those who are ill, in need or in trouble. In the family we draw on the wisdom of generations and pass on the faith. These are some of the aspects of family life that each person longs for and that prepare us to take our place in society and meet life's challenges.

Families can be a beacon for a more compassionate and just society. Through the words and actions of their parents, a child will learn and emulate either an attitude of selfish insularity or an outlook of openness, kindness and inclusion. A child's heart will be richly blessed by a family's spirituality that teaches a genuine reverence for all people as sons and daughters of God.

Nurturing a family is a vocation, and not an easy one. It requires commitment, sacrifice, love and generosity of spirit. In this Year of Grace, we celebrate and thank God for the gift of families. The family is the domestic Church, the basis of our community of faith. In the family we see the expression of God's love and the unique gifts of the Spirit to be fostered in each member so that each can contribute to the common good by serving and sharing with others.

The family is not only at the heart of the Church. Families are the basic units of society. As intimate communities of life and love, their wellbeing is so vital to our society, culture and economy that we can say that 'the future of humanity passes by way of the family' – no country or political system can plan its future without considering the wellbeing of future generations.²

It is a concern, therefore, that in our prosperous nation many families are facing social and economic pressures that threaten their survival: they are struggling to meet the costs of raising a family, to live in dignity and to contribute to the genuine development of their members.³ There is an urgent need to address the social and economic structures that influence the formation, unity and healthy functioning of families.

The social and economic challenges facing families

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (1965)⁴

As members of the Church, the adopted sisters and brothers of Christ, we are all called to embrace the challenges of modern life and seek a way forward that respects human dignity and strengthens the ability of families to protect and care for their members. Since the bishops of the world spoke the words above in 1965, we have seen developments in the world of work, in competitive economies and in family relationships that have made it more difficult for families to perform their duties and meet basic needs.

Competing for time

Time together as a family – for mutual care and relaxation – should be regarded as a right. Pope Benedict XVI refers to this right as the ‘raw material’ of life, which is essential for the loving attention of children, but which for many people seems ever more scarce and barely enough to meet individual needs.⁵ The demands of work have increased and placed real pressures on family time.

For well over a century Australia pursued the goal of an eight-hour working day, safeguarding time for relaxation and rest. Over the past three decades, however, the demands of work have increased. Since 1985, the average weekly hours for male full-time workers have increased by almost three hours to 42.3 hours, and for women by over two hours to 38.6 hours.⁶ In our larger capital cities, the many hours spent commuting each week can see mothers and fathers returning home exhausted and lacking the spontaneity required to truly engage with their families. Pressures can be overwhelming on those who are required to work far from home. For example, fly-in-fly-out contracts can fragment family life and at worst reduce workers to fly-in-fly-out parents.

Australia has become one of the hardest-working nations in the developed world: it has been estimated that the two billion hours of unpaid overtime worked each year are worth over \$70 billion to the economy. With the increasing participation of women in the labour market, over two-thirds of people of working age are in work or looking for work, and around 55 per cent of all couple families are dual-income.⁷

But Australia also has one of the highest rates of casual and irregular work among the industrialised countries. Up to one-quarter of Australian workers are in casual employment, and around one-quarter of the workforce are required to work weekends.⁸ In many low-income families, the need to cope with cost of living pressures has resulted in both parents working irregular hours, sometimes in multiple casual jobs.

Technology was once hailed as promising revolutionary increases in leisure time. But computer and mobile phone access has seen work encroaching further into family time. A recent survey found that over 80 per cent of workers with work-provided phones or computers had family time regularly interrupted by work demands.⁹

It can seem that there is simply no ‘getting away from it all’, no respite, no retreat into sacrosanct family time. Time, which in many ways is the real space for human development, is snatched away from families, often when they need it most.

Certainly, technology now provides families with entertainment and some new opportunities for communication, but it is also of increasing concern to see simple family rituals like conversation, shared meals and prayer being replaced by the attractions of electronic media. Family members can be alienated from each other. Unchecked, these media can expose the vulnerable to violent imagery, pornography, cyber-bullying and uncompromising materialism.

There are families where contact between members is reduced to a bare minimum. Sometimes children are able to see parents only for very brief periods of time in between jobs. Married couples sometimes see very little of each other as round-the-clock shiftwork takes over their lives. Both mothers and fathers in these families say their primary challenge is finding a balance between the competing demands of work and family.¹⁰ The guilt felt by many of these parents is enormous. They are faced, however, with the impossible choice between spending time with their families and making ends meet.

Competing for wealth

Australia devotes enormous energy and innovation to increasing productivity and being able to provide a dazzling array of consumer goods. As a nation we agonise over budget surpluses, the balance of trade and international credit ratings. By comparison, how much time and energy do we devote to supporting families in their core responsibilities of love and care?

If Australian families are competing for time, they are also engaged in a competition for wealth. This is reflected in our national debate. We have heard our political leaders using terms such as ‘mum and dad investors’ and ‘working families’. Often this is a way of identifying with the real economic aspirations and struggles of families. There is a risk, however, that these slogans can mean family life is perceived in purely economic terms, valued only for its consumer power or as a source of labour.

One of the key factors pushing families into a spiralling cycle of work and spending is the rising cost of housing. The home – a place of security, care for family and hospitality – is regarded now less as an essential need and therefore a right, and more as a financial asset. Increasingly that asset is beyond the reach even of middle-income Australians, unless they are prepared to shoulder huge debt. One social commentator has referred to the life of middle Australia as being ‘income-rich but mortgaged up to the eyeballs’.¹¹

Australia's housing market has become one of the least affordable in the world. A huge gap has opened between housing costs and household income. Over the last decade, house prices grew by 147 per cent to an average of around \$420,000, while average household income increased by only 57 per cent to \$57,000. Regional areas, particularly those hosting booming industries such as mining, have also experienced rapid price increases and housing shortages.¹² The high cost of housing combined with a shortage in the supply of rental dwellings has made it more difficult for poorer families to access secure and affordable accommodation.

Around 690,000 middle to low-income households now spend more than 30 per cent of their weekly income on rent or mortgage repayments. This puts them in housing stress and potentially at risk of losing their dwellings. Over 800,000 children live in these families.¹³

There is another less attractive side of the housing market: the desire to acquire more than is required. Since the mid-1980s, the average size of houses has increased from 162 to 215 square metres, while the average number of occupants has fallen from 3.5 to 2.6 people.¹⁴

It seems that those empty rooms have been filled with yesterday's purchases. Despite high levels of household indebtedness, Australia has become a nation of shoppers. One study has estimated that around nine out of ten homes have at least one room cluttered with unused or rarely used purchases.¹⁵

In a consumer society, people's worth is assessed less according to their inherent dignity or their contribution to society, and more by their ability to consume. Shopping becomes a form of entertainment in pursuit of a false notion of happiness, while those without purchasing power often miss out on the essentials of life, are pushed to the margins of society, or are simply ignored.

Sales assistants working irregular hours in supermarkets at their second jobs may have children at home missing their mother or father. They may be working to cover their education or sending remittances to family members overseas. Many are not offered penalty rates for their irregular hours, let alone leave or superannuation. There is little prospect of career advancement and conditions can be very taxing.

We think also of the producers on the land. They have suffered the impact of natural disasters and the economic pressures of global competition. As a nation we need to consider the tension between our interests as consumers to get the lowest price and the needs of producers to receive a fair price. Many cannot cover costs of production and provide a basic standard of living for their families. There are many cases of farmers who have to sell up with the consequent hollowing out of regional communities. The most tragic consequence of financial pressure has been seen in the loss of loved ones through suicide.

These are the people who serve us. But the consumer focus on winning the lowest price rarely extends beyond the point of sale to consider the need of others.

What price our relationships?

The market is interested in individuals as workers or consumers. Without regulation, it does not recognise the individual as a parent or member of a family who is called to provide love and care that is beyond price. The great irony of the consumer culture is that we can be duped into thinking that we freely consume when in fact it is we who are consumed. Families can end up striving for the opposite of what they want.

For our relationships to thrive they must be nurtured by setting aside time. Married couples need time to stay in touch with each other's needs. Parents need time to stay connected to their children. Siblings need time to strengthen their relationship with each other. This is what families say they want.

Studies estimate that four out of five workers are unhappy with their hours and want more time for family, rest, socialising and personal pursuits. It is no surprise that six out of ten workers say their spouse and family are their greatest source of happiness. Three out of ten say good health, networks of friends or religious life are the most important. Only one in ten puts money, work fulfilment or a nice place to live at the top of their list.¹⁶

Children say the same thing. The majority of young people would prefer more time with their parents over the benefits of the money their parents earn. This desire is particularly strong where one or both parents work irregular and demanding hours. One of the most common family activities young people desire is 'just being together'.¹⁷

Parents are also quite clear about the pressures that impede family formation. For both men and women, the primary consideration affecting their decision to have a child is their financial capacity – in particular, adequate income, stable employment and the ability to balance work and family life. And despite the fact that we have witnessed a dramatic fall in fertility rates – from 3.5 births per woman in 1960 to 1.9 in 2009 – most parents say they want to have more children. The fertility rate has been consistently below our population's replacement rate for a generation.¹⁸ This has serious implications for the future of our society.

Pope Benedict XVI captured the nature of the challenges faced by families and society in his 2012 World Day of Peace message:

*We are living in a world where families, and life itself, are constantly threatened and not infrequently fragmented. Working conditions which are often incompatible with family responsibilities, worries about the future, the frenetic pace of life, the need to move frequently to ensure an adequate livelihood, to say nothing of mere survival – all this makes it hard to ensure that children receive one of the most precious of treasures: the presence of their parents ... I would urge parents not to grow disheartened!*¹⁹

To families enduring financial or personal hardships that threaten the bonds of marriage and family life, we wish to say that we recognise your strength and determination. We pray that your efforts to find agreement and reconciliation will come to strengthen family life. For those who have experienced separation and divorce, particularly where domestic violence and abuse, addictions and neglect have caused family breakdown, we pray that you will find healing and that trust will be restored. And for those who experience loneliness or loss as a result of the pressures of the modern world, we hope that you will reach out for the support of others and receive the gifts that the family has to offer.

The gifts the family offers to society reveal a model of self-giving that counterbalances the challenges mentioned above. Consider these words of Scripture, so often read at weddings:

Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

Families have a calling to embody this culture of love, which is so often sought but rarely found in the rush of the working week or the false promise of consumerism. Each is called to be a prophetic witness to the love so eloquently expressed by Saint Paul.

Our concern for the most vulnerable

God's gifts are fully realised when they are shared with others. How we receive and use those gifts will be ultimately judged by how we treat our neighbours – particularly those who are most in need.²⁰ The demand to show a special concern for the poor is summed up in Jesus' account of the final judgement.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me. (Matthew 25:35–36)

Jesus was unequivocal: it is he whom we encounter when we act with justice and love towards our marginalised sisters and brothers (Matthew 25:40).

We do not need to look far to find families that are excluded or pushed out of the mainstream of society. The forgotten ones, the excluded ones, are the face of Christ in our midst.

When families are struggling to survive, we have a special obligation to assist them. They should not be considered a burden or as 'irksome intruders' in our consumer society.²¹ At a time when many lay the blame for poverty at the feet of the poor themselves, we emphasise that the causes of poverty are structural and historical. People should not be blamed for their own exclusion.²²

The Holy Father has spoken of the conditions necessary for stable family life:

*The family needs to have a home, employment and a just recognition of the domestic activity of parents, the possibility of schooling for children, and basic health care for all. When society and public policy are not committed to assisting families in these areas, they deprive themselves of an essential resource in the service of peace.*²³

With the impact of the global financial crisis, we are more acutely aware that competitive markets are not equipped to ensure disadvantaged individuals and their families have access to these essentials of life.

We note the commitment of current and previous governments to require Family Impact Statements on all submissions presented to the Federal Cabinet. This family impact focus was intended to ensure that all new policies were evaluated in terms of their likely impact on families and children and to adopt a preventative approach – addressing the causes and not just the symptoms of disadvantage.

However, it is a concern that this process remains in-confidence to Cabinet. There is a possibility that it could be seen to be an empty gesture or a process of limited importance. Making Family Impact Statements publicly available through parliamentary debate on legislation would provide a valuable tool for policy assessment and help to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are considered in any policy or program that will affect them.

We renew the call we made for the International Year of the Family in 1994:

*Australian governments have a special responsibility of care entrusted to them by the community ... Families, as the essential element of our society, need to be given due consideration before the imposition of government policies or legislation. Responsible government means placing the interests of Australia's families at the heart of all government decisions.*²⁴

We need to consider the needs of some of the most vulnerable families in Australia as a basis for a renewed family focus in public policy. Let us consider some sections of Australian society where families are most in need.

Indigenous families

*Mary is an Aboriginal woman with five children. Her husband is in jail about 450 km from their home. She has moved to be near the jail so the family can visit. She has no transport and relies on Church workers to take her to visit him. It is hard to keep children in school. She misses her own extended family and 12-year-old daughter, who is still up north with Mary's mother.*²⁵

The story of Mary's family indicates the reality of disadvantage that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experience.

It is a source of national shame that, over the past decade, the number of Indigenous people incarcerated has increased for women by 59 per cent and for men by 35 per cent. Indigenous juveniles are detained at 23 times the rate for non-Indigenous juveniles. Indigenous parents die younger than non-Indigenous people: on average men live 11.5 years less and women 10 years less. They are frequently overwhelmed by infant deaths, which are up to three times higher than for non-Indigenous infants.²⁶ Indigenous people experience homelessness at over three and a half times non-Indigenous levels, at about 191 per 10,000 people, and they represent about 30 per cent of those turned away from homelessness services each day.²⁷

One important reason that Indigenous people experience such disadvantage is that they lack opportunity for empowerment and self-determination. We see this in the history of the Stolen Generations, a policy devised by white Australians purportedly for the benefit of Indigenous children. Its real effects were the destruction of many Indigenous families and ongoing trauma across generations.

Similarly, the Northern Territory Emergency Response was introduced to try to protect Indigenous families, especially children. Five years later, however, we have to ask whether this intervention has done much to strengthen Indigenous families or to help their most vulnerable members. 'Income management', for example, is sometimes successful in ensuring that social security income is spent on essentials such as food and clothing, but it can also cause harm to the dignity and self-respect of those parents who have worked heroically to feed, support and educate their families.

There are much better ways to empower Indigenous families and ensure they have the support and services most Australians take for granted. Australia has a duty to provide justice to Indigenous Australians by creating jobs, safe environments for children and access to education and health facilities. This must be based on true consultation and partnership, respect for traditional culture and identity and a thorough understanding of the particular needs of each community.

In all matters affecting Indigenous families, the government should abide by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly ensuring that Indigenous people have the right to participate in decision-making, that they are consulted in good faith, and their consent is sought before legislation and programs are implemented.²⁸

Supporting the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination and self-management should be central to the government's approach.

Asylum seeker and refugee families

Leaving your country for good is one of the hardest decisions you can be forced to make. It means a break with all that you know – your family, your livelihood, your friends. All the familiar sights, sounds, smells and tastes ...

An Afghan refugee²⁹

Australia has had a proud tradition of generosity towards people fleeing violence and persecution in their own countries. Many Australian families have stories of a parent or grandparent who left their homeland, often fleeing danger or persecution. Many who came here as refugees have made enormous contributions to our society.

In recent years, however, Australia has been much less welcoming to people who have come here seeking refuge, especially those who have arrived by boat. Governments have tried to deter people who have a right to seek refuge here by locking them up in remote centres, or diverting them to other countries.

The experience of detention has been disastrous for many families. Children have limited access to schooling and little contact with a normal community. Many mental health experts have confirmed that prolonged detention is a major cause of mental illness, especially for the young and vulnerable.³⁰ Desperate people, uncertain of their future and already traumatised by their experiences, are driven to depression, self-harm and even suicide. Children who witness these events often suffer serious psychological harm, in addition to the trauma that they have suffered already. Parents are not able to make a career and are deprived of their God-given right to work to nurture and support their families.

Australia should honour its international obligations and not add to the suffering of people who have already experienced violence and trauma. In particular, we must not damage the family structures that have been an essential support for people in terrible circumstances. We have a special duty of care to children at the most vulnerable stage of their development.

Detention of asylum seekers cost more than a billion dollars in 2011–12.³¹ The federal budget allocation for immigration detention tripled over the two years to 2011.³² This is money that could be far better spent.

We have consistently called for Australia to adopt a more humane approach by caring for these people in the community until their application for refugee status has been determined. Detention should be for the shortest possible time, and only to establish asylum seekers' identity and to ensure that they are not a threat to Australia's health or security.

Once in the community, it is vital that there be adequate support for asylum seeker families, including education and training, language classes, and access to health care and to counselling and treatment for victims of trauma.

This call for justice also makes good economic sense. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship recently confirmed that moving 30 per cent of asylum seekers in detention into the community would save around \$400 million in 2012–13.³³

Families in poverty

*We live in the shadows of the dismal statistics. We are not mad, bad, sad or totally dysfunctionally overwhelmed by our life circumstances. Many of us are highly skilled and well educated. We are all doing what we can to contribute to society with the resources we have ... it is getting too hard to make ends meet, let alone work towards our dreams.*³⁴

The persistence of poverty in a prosperous nation such as Australia remains a challenge to our ethos of egalitarianism and calls into question the effectiveness of our minimum wage and social security systems.

Over the past decade the unemployment benefit has fallen from 54 per cent to 45 per cent of the after-tax minimum wage.³⁵ Currently over 600,000 people live on Newstart allowances as low as \$35 a day for a single adult, and many have done so for over a year. More than a million people depend on this and similar allowances.³⁶ Keeping the unemployment benefit well below the poverty line is no way to help prepare people for work.

Putting pressure on vulnerable groups such as single parents to seek work of any sort and get off social security quickly is punitive and likely to fail. Practices such as compulsory income management stigmatise families and fail to address the structural causes of poverty and disadvantage.

Poverty does not necessarily come to an end once a person finds employment. Research from the 2006 census shows that almost 390,000 Australians, including 87,000 children, had incomes below the poverty line even though a member of the household was employed. A little over 60 per cent of people in working poor households were couples with children.³⁷

Families, even if they have one or more members in paid work and even after receiving family benefits, are turning to charities for assistance with essentials like rent or prescriptions. Costs for other essentials including education, health, transport, utilities and childcare are prohibitive. Sometimes there is no alternative but to pawn furniture and possessions or seek help from loan sharks or payday lenders.

It is time to build a genuine social security and wages system that guarantees social inclusion. We need a renewed assessment of the true costs of living for parents and children. This should be the benchmark for setting and adjusting minimum wages and income support payments. Parents should be able to choose whether they enter the labour market or not. No parent should be penalised for choosing one way or the other. Our concern is to ensure a

decent life for all parents with family responsibilities and all children whether they live with one, both or neither of their parents.

Homeless families

Karen is a mother of three young children. She was forced to flee the family home three years ago due to domestic violence. For some time she and her children had no place to sleep except the car. She would drive around at night, telling her children that they were going on an adventure or searching for kangaroos until they fell asleep. She remembers this time as a period of great fear.³⁸

Homelessness has a terrible effect on anyone, but it is particularly devastating for families. In our rich country, more than 100,000 Australians are homeless on any night. Almost 220,000 people, or one in 100 Australians, were being supported by homelessness services in 2009–10.³⁹

For a family, homelessness can have many effects beyond simply a lack of security and shelter. People who are homeless have more health problems than the general population. Being homeless makes it far more difficult to nurture friendships and relationships with extended family. For children, it can disrupt education and relationships, and is often a traumatic experience that can give rise to emotional and behavioural problems. This increases the likelihood that a person will have difficulty finding a place in society later in life. Being homeless makes it harder for parents to find and keep employment, which makes the cycle of poverty worse.

Parents with children are the most likely to be turned away from homelessness services. In 2009–10, 82 per cent of couples with children and 67 per cent of single people with children were turned away.⁴⁰ The most common cause of homelessness is relationship breakdown. It is distressing that 22 per cent of people seeking the support of homelessness services have done so as a result of domestic or family violence.⁴¹ Their homelessness adds to the terrible trauma already experienced when violence occurs in a family. The overwhelming reason why these organisations cannot find accommodation for those who need it is simply that there is no housing available.

Governments are making efforts to deal with this situation, and they are to be applauded. To give a few examples: the federal and state governments have joined in the National Affordable Housing Agreement and the National Rental Affordability Scheme, and have entered agreements to improve housing for Indigenous people.

However, when we see the numbers of people affected by homelessness it is clear that more needs to be done. In particular, there is a need for immediate measures to supply low-cost emergency housing that ensures secure and safe accommodation.

Families with special needs

I sometimes feel so guilty because mum and dad have given their lives to support me and without much government funding. Over the years they have faced discrimination and not much support from our local community. I can't remember when they last had a holiday. People just do not understand. Now I see them getting older and I wonder what will happen to them and to me.⁴²

It is a real indictment on our society that this young person lives with significant doubts about what will happen in the future. People with disabilities and others with special needs and their families are often ignored by wider society and experience real discrimination in their daily lives.

Finding oneself in need of care is not a 'life choice'. Nor is giving care. The care of family and friends is generous, provided out of love and compassion, and often where there are no alternatives for support.

Around four million Australians have a disability resulting from a health condition. Almost 1.3 million people have a severe disability that requires the support of a carer. There are over 2.5 million people providing informal care to people who are ageing or have a disability. Families and friends provide over 1.3 billion hours of care each year, which would cost around \$40 billion to provide if informal care were not available.⁴³

The costs to those who give and receive care are enormous. Forty-five per cent of people with a disability live in or near poverty and are significantly disadvantaged when it comes to social activities, education, employment, income generation and buying a home.⁴⁴ Those who provide informal care may be passed over for promotion because they have to balance the demands of work and home. Carers can be forced to withdraw from work or education when the need for care increases. Often overwhelming demands fall on children or ageing parents and grandparents.

Those who give and those who depend on informal care should be supported by our society. For this reason, we applaud the current range of proposals, including a National Disability Insurance Scheme, which promise much-needed support for families struggling to meet the needs of loved ones. An adequately funded and properly functioning scheme at all levels of government is necessary to ensure that people with disability are able to participate fully in Australian society. To achieve this there must be better access, choice and control over service delivery to move beyond the present approach, which is crisis-driven and does little to ensure the dignity of individuals and their families.

A new approach is needed that ensures enough funding for essential care including respite, therapy, equipment, home modification and access to community care and education. Families need to be supported and resourced so that they can offer care and protection. As a

nation we need to redress the discrimination and exclusion of our fellow citizens and make sure that this basic level of social justice is met.

The Holy Family is our inspiration

We believe the lived reality of the families we have considered highlights a lack of charity and justice in our society. Their circumstances show us what needs to be done to create a more inclusive society. The resilience of their love and loyalty through the most difficult of times reflects the Gospel accounts of the trials endured by the Holy Family.

The Son of God did not come in power and glory, as he will at the end of the world, but as a child, needy and poor.

Fully sharing our human condition in all things but sin (cf. Heb 4:15), he also took on the frailty and hope for the future which are part of being a child.

Pope John Paul II⁴⁵

From the beginning, the Holy Family found itself in trouble and danger. The spirit of hope was central to their survival. Mary faced disgrace because she was pregnant out of wedlock (Matthew 1:18–25). Jesus was born in a stable because there was no room for his family at the inn (Luke 2:6–8). The young family were forced by Herod's wrath to become refugees (Matthew 2:13–23).

When Jesus was presented at the Temple as a child, the wise and devout Simeon foretold the great pain and burden of compassion Mary would bear during the sufferings of her son (Luke 2:22–35). Mary was the closest to him, from the moment of his birth to his crucifixion. It is hard to imagine the distress and grief of a mother witnessing the death of her son. Even at the hour of his death, Jesus expressed care for those he loved and united Mary and his disciple John in a new family.

... Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, this is your son.' Then to the disciple he said, 'This is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. (John 19:27)

What characterises this story is not the grief and anguish of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, but the joy and hope of Easter when his victory over death became for us his offer of salvation.

With the Holy Family as our inspiration, we see all families are a gift and are graced with the ability to share in the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time.

As the family of God, we are called to bring the saving presence of God's Kingdom into this world, here and now. We are called to respond to the challenge to be supportive of all families, especially those who have been pushed to the edges, socially and economically. We

are bound to embrace the presence of Christ in the suffering humanity in our midst – to reach out and to be of service to each as any have need (Acts 2:45).

During this Year of Grace we propose three challenges for the benefit of all families, especially those who are struggling.

1. Let us rediscover the importance of Sabbath

Mark's Gospel (2:23–28) tells how Jesus was accused by the Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath because the disciples were picking and eating ears of wheat. Jesus responded by reminding his accusers that the Sabbath is for the benefit of people and not the other way around. Today we might understand this to indicate that the true meaning of the Sabbath is not simply a prohibition against labour, but a time for the full development of people through relaxation, worship and freedom from the demands of the working week.

Families are pulled apart by social and economic structures that dehumanise and compartmentalise people, and deny them time together – 'the raw material of life'. We need to ask whether these structures are serving people, or people are being forced to serve the system. In the fast pace of the modern world, characterised by the competition for time, we need to consider what is most important to us, to give priority to family and friends, and to realise that our strivings at work and at home are a means to an end. We must find the space that is necessary to come home to ourselves and there to satisfy our hunger for the sacred.

The biblical notion of Sabbath offers us an antidote to the competition for time that preoccupies so many people. Rest gives the opportunity to recognise that we share in God's work of creation and that we are all created in his image and likeness. Sabbath protects us against excessive demands of work that can destabilise family life. It was instituted in defence of the poor, recognising that the accumulation of wealth by some could cause deprivation for others.⁴⁶

In our families and parish communities, let us consider what we can do:

- What simple action or gift of time will you give to each member of your family?
- What practical assistance can you and your community offer to families who are forced to work multiple jobs and irregular hours?
- How can you support parish ministries, Catholic charities and social services that reach out to people who are struggling to make ends meet?

For us as Christians, the qualities of the Sabbath now belong to the Day of the Lord. Our day of worship lifts us out of the normal daily demands, which are so often dominated by work or consumerism, to reveal the deeper meaning of our time together. Our full human and spiritual growth is found in our encounter with the Risen Christ who brings the gift of the Spirit and promise of salvation.⁴⁷

2. Let us show a special concern for the poor

In the context of our society's great competition for wealth, the Church's social teaching calls us to show a 'preferential option for the poor'. This doctrine has its foundations in the public ministry of Jesus Christ, from the moment he unrolled the scroll in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and announced that he had come to fulfil the scriptures – to serve the poor, bring freedom to captives and the oppressed, and to heal the afflicted (Luke 4:16–21). As his disciples, we are called to share in this ministry and consider how we can show a special concern for vulnerable families.

We applaud the many services provided to families by dioceses, religious orders and lay Catholic organisations. Vital work is done by agencies like St Vincent de Paul and Catholic Social Services to assist families pushed to the margins of society. There are ministries that help prepare couples for marriage and support parents and children through times of crisis. We also note the Catholic institutions in the areas of health that assist in the care of family members who are sick or frail. In all of these we see the commitment of women and men to a ministry of service to people in need.

The circumstances of families who are most in need tell us that the language of economics cannot encompass the humanity of families, that people must come before profits and that time is not just a tool for productivity. The consumption of material goods cannot of itself feed the needs of the spirit.

Let us consider in our local Church communities how to strengthen the resilience of all families and be a source of charity and love in the way we reach out to families in need.

- How can we be attentive to the needs of families in crisis?
- How welcome are parents, particularly sole parents with young children, who have gone through separation and divorce?
- And what of those who have no one to call 'family': people who are alone, people living with mental illness, or people returning to society after having spent time in prison?

The Church wants to be welcoming and responsive to the needs of people, whatever their family situation. We believe that the traditional family is the most important basis of support for children, across all generations, and particularly in times of crisis. Our support for the integrity of marriage and family life will also strengthen our communities and promote a special concern for those in need.

3. Let us share the love of God

Each Sunday we gather as the family of God to give thanks for the bounty that flows from the triune God. When we worship God and observe the Lord's day, we offer the hospitality of the community of faith to a world hungry for new life.

When we worship at the table of the Lord, we come to share in the Sacrament of love of God and neighbour. We come not as individuals, seeking what we need for ourselves to the

exclusion of others. We come to the Lord's altar as a community offering gifts, receiving nourishment through God's Word, the sacred presence of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. All work for social justice that is based in this love finds its fullest meaning when we gather as one family. The Lord, who breaks his body and spills his blood and offers himself to us in the Eucharist, sends us to give of ourselves wholeheartedly in service of others.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us:

*... "worship" itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented.*⁴⁸

This is not a love to be possessed or hoarded. It is only fully realised when shared with others. The Eucharist requires the service of charity towards our neighbour.

Indeed, the Holy Father has said of the Church's commitment to the poor:

*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.*⁴⁹

As a community gathered to share in the Eucharist, we assume the identity of a family. As members of one family, we know intimately the self-giving love we are called to freely give to our brothers and sisters. In this way, every week we start afresh from Christ.

The love of God cannot be contained and calls us to seek out and serve those who are most in need. This is the challenge for all families: how can we be a source of God's love wherever family relationships are under pressure or at risk?

The Love of Christ urges us on

Australia needs to consider the fundamental needs of all families to ensure the stable future of our nation. Healthy families enable a healthy society. Their resilience is something we should nurture and support.

Our task as a nation is to have the humility to listen and respond to the most vulnerable, for they show us what needs to change in our society.

Families are affected by all aspects of social and economic policy – not just 'family policy'. Government policies need to be assessed in terms of the impact they will have on families – particularly the most vulnerable groups that we have mentioned.

The Church's mission is to serve all people, and this includes in a special way those parents and children who are shouldering the burdens of contemporary life.

We believe that we will be judged on the way we respond to the needs of the poor:

Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or lacking clothes, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help? (Matthew 25:44)

We look to Jesus for our inspiration.

In this Year of Grace, we are invited to ‘contemplate his face’. Christ is presented to us not just as a great and inspiring figure from the past whom we seek to imitate. He is also a living person who, through the gift of his Holy Spirit, empowers us to have in us the mind of Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5). He feeds and sustains us through the gift of his body and blood in the Eucharist and he sends us out to be his witnesses to everyone we meet. ‘The love of Christ urges us on’ (2 Corinthians 5:14). It is this love which inspires us to confront the urgent challenges of our own time.

Let us acknowledge the precious gift of family life and the fundamental contribution of families to the life of our nation. As a community of Faith we pray for the wellbeing of all families and each family member.

*Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care,
that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace,
they may be defended always by your protection.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.⁵⁰*

Notes

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