Address by Beth Doherty
at the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops'
Social Justice Statement 2019–2020

Making it Real:
Genuine human encounter in our digital world

Isabell Menton Theatre, Mary MacKillop Place, North Sydney, 3 September 2019

In 2013, as the cardinals of the world converged on Rome to elect Pope Francis, there was much discussion about who Pope Benedict's likely successor would be. These conversations made their way to social media very quickly and some of the more tech-savvy cardinals and of course journalists and interested people from across the globe had lively exchanges. The night the Pope was elected, a twitter account carrying the handle @SistineSeagull emerged, and began sending out all manner of entertaining tweets. One tweet has @SistineSeagull peering down into the chimney and eyeing off the cardinals' lunch.

Being the Catholic nerd that I am, I held a conclave party with my friends, and made a conclave pizza, lots of little cherry tomatoes to represent the zucchettos of the cardinals and one piece of bocconcini cheese to represent the white hat of the Pope. My office at the Bishops' conference set up an Aussie Pope Alarm and people would receive a text to their mobile when the Pope was elected by signing up on a hastily coded website.

Earlier in the lively social media commentary a meme had emerged with a cartoon of two cardinals discussing how to stop their brothers from leaking information from the conclave to the public about the progress of the vote. In this image they close all of the windows and proclaim to one another: 'Twitter will be completely prohibited from the conclave.' Outside the window is a dove, knocking on the glass. "Let me in", says the dove, "I'm not twitter, I'm the Holy Spirit."

Well, it does seem that the Holy Spirit managed to make its way into the Sistine Chapel in 2013. Pope Francis is known for his simplicity of life and commitment to justice, and he has embraced some of the new forms of media in a positive way.

Despite likely not necessarily being the one pressing the button on his tweets, he seems to have enormous insight into social media and its power for good, being the first pope to pose for a 'selfie', and being something of a master of the pithy, tweetable one-liner, for example: 'Who am I to judge?' (Alitalia flight in 2013 on his way back from World Youth Day, Rio) and 'The Church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners', among many.

Today we are here however to launch the Australian bishops' social justice statement, which carries the theme 'Making it Real.'

The bishops' delegate for social justice Terry Brady writes in his forward to the statement that 'people of all generations hunger for friendship and genuine human encounter because we are made for community.'

Social media is minefield and miracle, a gift and a curse.

It can be positive and negative and has the potential to be used to promote hate and love in equal measure.

It can be a world of far-flung fantasy and of red, raw reality.

We can use it to escape the world and yet at the same time it gives the capacity to be present to people thousands of miles away.

Across social networks there exist myriad opportunities to share truth, beauty and goodness, and yet often it is used to spread lies, filth and evil.

It is a place to debate ethical perspectives, and yet it can be a warzone from which it can be hard to switch off.

If I go through my newsfeeds, I am just as likely to see parents sharing about the joyful birth of their first child as I am to watch a woman lamenting the miscarriage she has just experienced.

People celebrate birthdays, and seek solace upon the death of loved ones.

People share of death and of life.

And so, it is with our faith.

Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time for every purpose under heaven.

Social media can mirror, magnify, expand, contract, amplify, reduce all of those experiences.

Social media facilitates an encounter in ways that we have perhaps never even imagined.

Between 2009 and 2015, I worked in communications for the Catholic bishops, and there was unprecedented growth in social networks. It was in realising the power of social media that I came to the conclusion that I myself needed to have some protocols, lessons, rules in place for social media.

I shared about my experiences and my discernment in two books, the first of which was a project that culminated in the eBook published in 2013 called *Word made flesh and shared among us,* a collection of essays from Catholic journalists about how they had embraced new media in their work. The second, more comprehensive project was *Tweet others as you would wish to be tweeted: A scripture-based guide to social media for the Church* which I authored in 2015. Being such a moveable feast, much of the information contained therein is hopelessly out of date, but the principles remain the same. Using a play on words of the Golden Rule, I was able to come up with some guiding philosophies that enable us to think deeply about how we use social media as a force for good.

In this year's Social Justice Statement, some of the facts provided are instructive for those of us in the Church who are still wondering if social media is something that might leave us, yet, the stats speak for themselves.

- every day, over one million people worldwide are coming online for the first time
- the world's average internet user spends over six and a half hours online each day
- the top three websites visited are Google, YouTube and Facebook
- on average, social media users spend over two hours on social media platforms each day
- Facebook has 2.3 billion active user accounts; YouTube, 1.9 billion; WhatsApp, 1.5 billion; Instagram, 1 billion
- five billion people use mobile phones

Of course, genuine encounter, making it real is the key message of this year's statement.

The statement reads:

> *every member of the Church has a distinct role to play. Pope Francis is calling us to 'boldly become citizens of the digital world', with the image of the Good Samaritan as our inspiration. We are called not only to love our neighbour, but to bring the love of God to the new global neighbourhood.*

Social media is extremely multifaceted however and we need to exercise caution more than ever. Recently, I caught up with a friend who is one of those magical unicorns that has a left and right brain, and he helps companies to intersperse their marketing and design messaging with the realities of the tech world, which include online monitoring, hacking, analytics, algorithms and is able to explain, in simple language, why often the media messages that we have poured so much time into gets no traction online.

Social Media Land is a space that can be used in overwhelmingly positive ways, but also in some negative ways.

We don't need to go far on social media to see the harm caused by addiction, pornography and the objectification of people, particularly women. Social media plays a part in human trafficking and what we share online can be accessed by those who don't always use these values for good. Whether we like it or not, privacy online is almost non-existent, and we have entered a brave new world in which every google search we do, whether we are an active user on social media, provides analytical information to Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, even foreign governments about our choices, preferences and often our most intimate feelings. This is a particularly important lesson when we search for less savoury content such as pornographic material. However highly structured our privacy settings, we can very quickly share personal information that then leads companies to infiltrate our social media feeds with even more content that leads us down dangerous and addictive rabbit holes that can be difficult to get out of.

So, we need to ask ourselves as a church, today as we launch this statement and in particular, those of us who manage any digital platform, whether it is a parish Facebook page, a personal twitter account where we share stories and links, whether what we are posting and sharing is going to contribute to building up dialogue and encounter, or if it infringes on people's basic human dignity.

A quote from Pope Francis in the statement says the following:

A vital step to realising this encounter is to ask ourselves what kind of 'digital highway' we are on. Just as we would not accept a highway built of rubble, that leads us nowhere we want to go, so too we cannot accept a digital world designed to exploit our weaknesses and bring out the worst in people. It is clear that digital platforms are built to make a profit. But where they operate to maximise profit by undermining human dignity and the common good, we must question their structure, ownership and goals.

Over the years of working in media and education, I have embraced a number of different platforms. One of the main questions that Catholics ask me around social media is 'how can we use social media in a way that is honourable, positive, that respects human dignity?'

How can we bring about the greater glory of God on our social media platforms?

There are lots of ways, and it's important that as we learn about social media that we look for good examples of where people display charity, truth, generosity, beauty and goodness and have those as our guides.

Address by Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen DD OFMConv

Bishop of Parramatta

Chairman, Bishops' Commission for Social Justice – Mission and Service

at the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops'

Social Justice Statement 2019–2020

Making it Real:

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The Solidarity of the Good Samaritan in the Digital World

Good morning everyone. I too acknowledge the Cammeraygal people. Let us join in paying respects to the traditional owners and giving thanks for their care and stewardship for this land.

Whether we have a particular interest in technology or not, none of us can ignore the fact that the world has changed enormously since the invention of the internet. Pope Francis asks us to 'boldly become citizens of the digital world' and his use of social media continues the tradition of the Church embracing new forms of communication.

This is not surprising because communication is essential to the mission of announcing God's Reign of justice and peace.

Yet digital platforms are not only a means of announcing the Reign of God; they are also 'places' that need to be transformed to reflect the in-breaking of God's Reign. They are places where we can communicate like never before, and places that can subtly shape the way in which we communicate. The big questions then are moral rather than technical.

What does it mean to be the People of God, here and now, face-to-face and online?

The Social Justice Statement takes as its interpretive key the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan is moved with compassion to help another in need. Furthermore, the Samaritan crosses entrenched divisions based on culture, race, religious belief and practice to recognize and uphold the dignity of the person who has been robbed and assaulted.

It is not a story of 'vague compassion' as John Paul II put it but of real solidarity.[1] Pope Francis has also made solidarity one of his constant themes, even though he notes that some people, even in the church, see it as 'a dirty word'.[2]

What might solidarity mean in the digital world?

Catholic Social Teaching scholars have articulated three forms or expressions of solidarity; incarnational solidarity, institutional solidarity and conflictual solidarity.

Sometimes our 'solidarity' can be disembodied, distant or merely conceptual. The critique of 'clicktivism' comes readily to mind. Digital platforms have been a godsend for social justice movements, but all the awareness raising, mobilizing and advocacy that takes place online also has to land somewhere in real life; we have to make it real.

Kristin Heyer, a professor at Boston College, says that **incarnational solidarity** requires us to 'immerse our bodies and expend our precious energy in practices of concrete accompaniment in the real world.'[3] The *Ten Steps Towards Making it Real* action leaflet provides good suggestions on how each one of us can incarnate our solidarity – to give it flesh and bones – both online and face to face.

Solidarity however requires more than individual action alone; it requires an institutional response. **Institutional solidarity** calls for structures that offer marginalized persons a genuine voice in decisions and policies that affect their lives so that our interdependence is marked, not by relationships of domination and oppression, but by relationships of equality and mutuality.

In the digital world we need empowered participation in decision-making for the full range of affected stakeholders; we cannot simply leave matters to the tech companies. We need structures of accountability and transparency to govern the digital world for the good of all. The Statement encourages institutional solidarity through its advocacy of the regulation of data gathering by platforms, and international cooperation for the governance of the internet. It also points out the responsibility of governments to ensure that everyone can effectively access essential services.

When we work for the justice of God's Reign, we will be confronted by issues of economic and political power. Although the Church always works for peace and unity among the human family, we sometimes need to take sides and stand with those who are the poorest, the most pushed aside and excluded, those whose dignity and rights have been abused. We call it making an option for the poor.

If the Internet represents an extraordinary possibility of access to knowledge, it is also true that it has proven to be one of the areas most exposed to disinformation and to the distortion of facts and interpersonal relationships, which are often used to discredit. St Paul speaks of the duty that arises out of our being in a relationship of communion: 'Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each to his neighbour, for we are members one of another' (Eph 4:25).

In a digital world where fake news, divisive, offensive and misogynistic content are not uncommon, we may even need to exercise **conflictual solidarity**. We cannot be by-standers in the face of cyberbullying, trolling and the objectification of others. Each one of us can call out bad behavior and stand by victims.

As a faith community we can also be more prophetic in standing up for minorities and vulnerable groups who are subjected to vilification, hate speech and threats of violence online. Being the People of God calls us beyond seeking measures for the protection only of our own rights. We are summoned to build a world where God's vision of peace and harmony for all his creatures, great and small, is enacted.

We are the *pilgrim* People of God, and we are entering new territory on the journey. I hope that this year's social justice statement will help us to discern which paths to take.

It is an honour to join with Beth Doherty and Margaret Van Heekeren as we hereby launch the 2019 Statement: *Making it Real: Genuine human encounter in our digital world.*

[1] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, n 42.

[2] Francis, *Address at Visit to the Jesuit Refugee Service Centro Astalli*, 10 September 2013, Rome. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130910_centro-astalli.html

[3] Kristin E Heyer. "Radical Solidarity: Migration as Challenge for Contemporary Christian Ethics" *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, Vol 14 No 1, 2017, p 7.

Address by Dr Margaret van Heekeren

University of Sydney

at the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops'

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Good morning. I would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners and elders of the land on which we meet.

I note that there are a number of school students here and would just like to let you know that if you thought you were off school for a morning, that I will be beginning with a history lesson. History is incredibly important as it provides the context for our present.

A week after Easter, 85 years ago in 1934, the then Pope, Pius XI, gave an historic audience to all foreign press correspondents in Rome – about 73 journalists, responsible for providing news from the Vatican to more than 5,000 newspapers around the world. Described as an 'innovation' by the London Times, the papal audience can also be regarded as a political move. As historical research reveals, the Vatican had, by this time, long been the subject of fake news, much of it shared on wire services around the globe. Throughout the early 1900s fake stories included a proposal to edit the Bible, the false report of a petition by French priests calling for their vow of celibacy to be dispensed and even an invented interview with Pope Pius X.

I came across these and other reports about fake news and the Vatican a couple of years ago whilst researching the history of fake news and have always planned to look into them further – but haven't had time as yet. However, today seemed rather an opportune moment to share.

As the anecdotes reveal, fake news and disinformation is not a recent invention. Historical research identifies many serious instances, including a brief Wall Street crash due to the faked report of a wire cable-laying ship and, one of the most serious, if not the most serious, fake report of last century, the World War One report that German army was running a corpse utilisation factory, boiling down the bodies of dead German soldiers to extract fats for making fertiliser, lubricant and soap (Neander and Marlin 2010). Due to the similarity of the corpse factory story to early reports of atrocities in Nazi Germany, these true accounts were dismissed as the latest propaganda version of the First World War fallacy, delaying the international response and, according to some scholars, costing Jewish lives (Neander and Marlin 2010; Laqueur 1980).

In the post-World War One period fake news was considered so disruptive that the newly formed League of Nations considered corrective action was part of the 'moral disarmament' needed to prevent further conflict (Tworek 2010).

Today the disinformation environment is of similar gravity, as the Social Justice statement identifies. But whilst social media is often given as the cause, the cyclical nature of fake news outbreaks throughout history suggests is not the technology *per se* that is the primary culprit. A more significant factor is the broader socio-political environment, as it appears disinformation escalates at times of social and political instability.

There is, however, a contemporary advantage in the fight against fake news and it is due to the very same fragmented media environment that has allowed an increase in fake news inventors and channels. Studies have found that fake news often remains ghettoed in the echo chambers of particular social media sites. Whilst still accessed by large numbers of people, their reach is far more limited than in the pre-internet era when fake stories could only, and were, published in the mainstream press. Now, the first people often learn of a fake story is when a mainstream media outlet reports on the latest preposterous tale doing the rounds of social media. Similarly, the increased availability of media access and channels allows greater participation in verification.

Furthermore, reputable news outlets, whether originating as legacy media or newer online start-ups, have responded to fake news and a deficit of public trust by reaffirming their position as news media of accuracy and record (Beckett, 2018), effectively, 'swamping fake news with the truth' (Alemanno, 2018). Social media companies too are investing heavily in such processes, whilst governments, for example in Germany, France, Malaysia and Singapore are taking a legislative response. Fact-checking has become an industry in itself with the number of fact-checking sites tripling in recent years (Stencel and Griffin, 2018).

Yet, even though the opportunities for correcting and limiting fake news are far greater than ever before, there remains a catch. Scholars suggest the very acknowledgment and discussion of the existence of fake news is damaging (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Even in correcting fake news reports mainstream media acts as an amplifier, with an enduring effect on public confidence and belief. (Thorson 2016). This results in a climate of distrust and suspicion that clouds even the most honest facts and intent.

As the statement urges, the challenge, therefore, is the restoration of confidence in information. As has been noted there are a range of choices that media users can make.

At the 1934 audience, Pope Pius XI told the gathered journalists: 'to report the thoughts and facts of the world is a great mission'. Today that mission is shared by all and the onus is on all users of media to ensure sites accessed and information shared is factual and honest.

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