



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Social Justice – Mission and Service

Social Solidarity in a Time of Social Distancing

Pastoral Message for the Feast of St Joseph the Worker 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

As we mark the Feast of St Joseph the Worker this year, the most significant issue affecting the work life of Australians is the impact of COVID-19.

An unprecedented number of people have suddenly lost their jobs, or income from their businesses. It is an incredibly traumatic experience for them and their families. Like you, I have found it deeply distressing to see so many thousands of people queuing to apply for government assistance. Our hearts go out to everyone who is out of work; to those whose businesses have been forced to close; and to those whose regular income has plummeted while their bills remain.

At the same time, some of us are busier than ever, trying to find new ways of carrying on our work, including working from home. Schools and other educational bodies have done an enormous amount of work to take classes online at short notice. Conferences, meetings and events are being cancelled or postponed, and organisers are scrambling to convert some into online events. Supermarket workers, delivery people and call centre staff are facing enormous pressure, large workloads and frustrated customers. IT people are in high demand! And then there is the demanding, high-risk but essential work of cleaners, health care professionals and personal carers.

All of this prompts us to think about what are really the most important things in life. Are the people who do the things that are actually the most essential for our life together in a civilised society paid well? How do we treat them? Have we noticed that women are over-represented in the frontline occupations? When the health crisis is over, will we simply go back to working in the same ways that we did before? Or will we have learned new ways to work that enable us to better balance our work, family and community responsibilities? Will we adopt ways of working that encourage men as well as women to share more equitably in the unpaid work of caring?

Last year's annual Social Justice Statement was titled *Making it Real: Genuine human encounter in our digital world*. In it, we expressed concern about the digital divide; the benefits of our digital world are not enjoyed equally by every group. Now we have seen that this has compounded disadvantage for many people during the COVID-19 crisis. The differences among schools in the capacity to provide online education provides a stark example of how the digital divide reinforces and amplifies patterns of privilege and disadvantage. Not all jobs can be done online, not everyone can benefit from digital technology in the same way and not all students or employees have access to the internet at home anyway.

Many of the jobs that require face-to-face human encounter were among the first to be lost with the introduction of physical distancing. Tourism, hospitality and retail jobs have been hit hard. Other jobs that can only be done face-to-face, with real, embodied human contact such as nursing, have become even more important. But they are also more risky for these workers now. We are grateful to our cleaners, health professionals and personal carers for the essential work that they do for the good of all of us.

For a long time now, the Bishops Commission for Social Justice – Mission and Service, together with many others, has argued for a substantial increase in the rate of NewStart. It has not been sufficient to support the basics of a dignified life. We are pleased to see that the JobSeeker payment, which has replaced Newstart, is a more adequate amount – at least for the time being. It is also appropriate that unrealistic mutual obligation requirements have been suspended at this time. The JobKeeper payments are also a welcome effort to support both workers and businesses.

Many Australians have been experiencing their first encounters with Centrelink and our income support systems. We are only as strong as our weakest link. Let us hope that this exposure will translate into a broader and enduring societal solidarity with those who lack adequate income for their needs, those who are struggling to simply survive from day to day and others less fortunate in our community.

In any crisis, it is usually the poorest, the most vulnerable and the least powerful who suffer the worst. Casual employees, many contract employees and gig workers are not entitled to sick leave or carer's leave. They are often unable to save from their earnings in order to cover periods of illness or inability to work. Surviving on the JobSeeker payment, or any other form of government assistance, is difficult. However, there are also many people who are unable to access this support and are at risk of falling through the cracks.

Over and over the Scriptures encourage us to welcome and care for the “strangers” among us. Excluding asylum-seekers and temporary protection visa holders from government assistance is not only inhumane and unworthy of a decent society, it is also dangerous to public health at this time. Similarly, international students and non-residents on working visas are not eligible for income support. Would a good host, who invited guests to contribute to the economy by purchasing educational services or filling skills gaps, simply turn a blind eye to their needs at a time like this?

This major shock to our community, and our economy, could provide an opportunity to reset our thinking about how we support the poorest, most marginalised, and most vulnerable members of our community.

In a climate of fear, there is a tendency to narrow our circle. God calls us to a different way: working together, needing each other, being the body of Christ. May St Joseph, model of integrity and solidarity, inspire us to serve and to care for all.

Yours sincerely in Christ,



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Chair, Bishops Commission for Social Justice - Mission and Service

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