



Thank you, Archbishop Prowse, for your welcome and opening prayer.

Thank you, Archbishop Costelloe, for your encouraging words of hope.

I'd also like to thank the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for enabling the Society to contribute to this year's social just statement.

There's no doubt that over the last few years we've all experienced significant upheaval, starting with a global pandemic.

And in its aftermath, we continue to experience economic shockwaves including rising inflation, a cost-of-living crisis and a housing crisis. We are only now just starting to see some relief.

During this period, we've also seen how important it is for people to have secure and safe housing and access to a robust and responsive health system.

What we witnessed during the pandemic was a country that can accommodate its people, and can meet their medical needs, but these actions need commitment and will.

Being homeless and trying to navigate the housing system is hard.

Living with mental ill health and trying to navigate the health system is hard.

The reality is that many people experience both, and often with limited support.

Unfortunately, the housing and health systems operate independently of each other –under different Ministers, and in different portfolios.

This makes it all too easy for people who are homeless and living with mental ill health to fall through the cracks.

The situation can feel overwhelming, leaving many of us to wonder, what can I do, how can I possibly make a difference?

It's easy to step back and ignore the situation or take the view that it's all too hard or not my problem.

But let's not forget that those who are homeless and living with mental ill health are someone's daughter or son, sister or brother, mother or father.

Importantly, this year's social justice statement is a statement of hope.

The title itself 'signs of hope on the edge' bears witness to the indomitable nature of the human spirit.

And fortunately, we know what works.

Thanks to the generosity of the Australian public and of the Society's 45,000 members and volunteers and 7,500 staff, we can make a difference.

The Society's actions – whether that's a helping hand or advocating for change – are driven by the principles of our founder, Frederic Ozanam and by Catholic Social Teaching.

The values of human dignity and common good are front of mind when we're helping those in need.

And helping people transition from homelessness and mental ill health to housing and improved health outcomes takes time and resources.

When we get it right, people can be helped to achieve their full potential.

A case in point is Michael's story which appears in this year's statement.

Michael, if you are listening, thank you for sharing your story.

Michael's story is one of many across the country.

Michael was helped by Bethlehem House in Hobart. He lived on the streets for many years and experienced severe depression and family tragedy. With accommodation, referrals to counselling & support services, and assistance with financial management, Michael is in a much better place. Getting involved with the community at Bethlehem House through a range of activities such as art, sport and cooking has also helped to lift Michael's spirits.

The Society provides a range of accommodation options from crisis accommodation through to transitional housing, specialist disability accommodation, and longer term social and affordable housing.

Housing is the first, important step but it doesn't stop there.

Case management is vital to helping people navigate complex housing, health and government systems.

We conduct assessments and referrals to counselling and social support services

We provide practical assistance through group and social programs and access to training and employment services.

What we've found is that spending time with each person, getting to know them, understanding their needs and supporting them is essential.

For instance, while assessment and referral to health services are vital, they are only effective if people are open to the process and prepared to commit to it.

This often involves rebuilding trust.

Last year in NSW, SA and the ACT we housed nearly 2,500 people through 1,500 dwellings.

- In NSW we run the Together Home Program, which is a Housing First Program that provides secure housing and wrap around support services.
- In Vic, we run Ozanam House, a state of the art, purpose-built facility that integrates accommodation, health services and community programs under one roof, offering a holistic approach to breaking the cycle of homelessness (135 units).
- In WA, we run a Housing Plus Program and Mental Health Service, offering specialised supportive accommodation which focusses on recovery and integration with the community
- We operate soup vans across the country, bringing hot meals, essential supplies and friendship to vulnerable people
- Our assistance centres provide communities with a range of support services including food, clothing, household items and financial aid for bills or rent.
- These are just a few examples of the Society's services, which are not possible without the generosity of everyday Australians.

This year's social justice statement includes many calls for action.

We support calls to

- increase funding of specialist homelessness
- increase the number of supported accommodation places and affordable housing
- better connect mental health services with housing and homelessness support, and
- increase the rate of JobSeeker so that people don't have to make difficult choices between keeping a roof over their heads or accessing health services.

What's important to remember is that we can help in many ways, whether that's by

- lending a friendly ear
- offering food, coffee or support
- helping out a local Vinnies van, or
- raising these issues with your federal MP or Senator

Let's not forget that we can do something and we can make a difference

It starts by offering service to our sisters and brothers and heeding the call of Pope Francis to be messengers and builders of hope.