



2017 Social Justice Statement Perth Launch

**By the Most Rev Bishop Don Sproston
Archbishop of Perth**

Newman Siena Centre, Doubleview
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It is a privilege to be here amongst you. The Parable of the Workers in the vineyard has inspired the 2017 social justice statement for this year “Everyone’s Business”. Marie Taylor said it is a gospel about people working and being provided with what they need to support their life, and the lives of those they are responsible for.

This all came back to me when I spent some time in Jerusalem while staying at the Tantur Institute. I would say that a couple of 100 metres from the institute is the road and the wall that separates Israel and Palestine. It was an important part of our trip to learn about the past, the history and geography of the Holy Land but it was interesting to hear the stories from the people today about the disputes on the ownership of the land.

Every morning people would gather there at the checkpoint at the wall. People would wait for the trucks to come and pick them up to take them to jobs. Not everyone, of course, is picked up so therefore not everyone gets work for the day. And this is how they live from day to day, in very trying and oppressive conditions.

That Gospel that we have read is one that certainly highlights the importance of work, the importance of living in an environment, which I think you would say is what an economy is, an environment where people are trusted and respected, and are allowed to work for their livelihood, but also to enable them to care for those in their responsibility. It has certainly brought back that memory for me and probably helps me in the few comments I make as I open up this document this morning.

Initially, I would like to say how we the bishops go about deciding on a topic each year for the social justice statement. The previous year the Social Justice Council would suggest some topics which we consider and from which we choose one as being appropriate for the social justice statement for the following year.

The statements come directly from the bishops, following from the work that they have been doing in their dioceses and the issues and concerns that they have become aware of through the agencies they have. The topic picked is then handed to the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, and they begin the work of putting together the statement, which is then brought to us. We read and study it and provide comments and finally approve it for publication.

It is a very important statement from our point of view because we own it. Bishop Vincent Long, who is the chairperson for the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, is a refugee himself and has a heart for those in the community who are disadvantaged. He is the Bishop of Parramatta, an inspired appointment to that diocese – one who has been a stranger, one who has been



through many hardships, who has experienced terrible hardship in his homeland and who really understands the struggle for people to be a part of a new land and culture.

He himself has written a beautiful introduction to this Statement, which gives us a sense of why many things have been stated within the document, why some of the concerns have been raised, and why they are in fact very important issues for the Church in Australia to be reflecting upon, discussing and finding ways of implementing strategies to overcome the disadvantage and plight of many in our community. It all springs of course from the teachings of Jesus, and from the practice and experience of the Church right from the beginning.

In the Acts of the Apostles the problem that arose in the community about the care for the widows is recounted. Out of that came the decision to call together a group who are called the deacons to help these people who were vulnerable in the community.

In some ways, even in the early years of the community, the needs of the widows had become invisible and the Church needed to be asked to focus again on this group of people, vulnerable people who no longer had the means of supporting themselves.

This, I think, is one the major reasons why a statement like this is made: to help us refocus and notice those in our community who are vulnerable and live in disadvantaged circumstances, and to respond to them. The Statement also retells the story of more recent times, of the Church's teachings in social justice but also of the economy, of the right to property, the right to work, the importance for us to provide, through the structures of our society, ways of supporting those who are in very dire circumstances.

It takes us back to the Encyclical of Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* and the subsequent documents from the popes which helped us to focus again on some issues that are perennial and new challenges to the dignity of people caused by poverty and grave disadvantage.

The other thing "Everyone's Business" reminds us of is that it's 25 years since the publication of the bishops' social justice statement known as the *Commonwealth for Common Good*. This anniversary provided a reason to return to the subject of the economy and our role as a Church to critique and encourage a reform of the economy for the sake of the poor.

If we go back to that document and take note of some of the things said 25 years ago, then reflect on the current situation, we might not be too astounded that these perennial problems are still with us. Solutions have not been found for many of them. That document pointed out that household poverty was increasing in 1992, that unemployment was increasing, there was a decline in the farming communities, and there was increasing hardship for disadvantaged groups within our society.

It talked about what was considered to be a new reality, "economic rationalism", where the free market was seen as the overarching goal for our society. This approach advocates the reduction of government spending and intervention when it comes to work, employment and benefits for workers. Privatising some government institutions should be utilised in order to reduce spending.

At the base of this particular idea of economic rationalism was the idea that individualism should be enshrined and promoted, that there should be an economic survival of the fittest in our society and at that time the idea that 'greed is good' was popular.



Our document this year brings up a number of concerns. One that has been mentioned already is that 3 million Australians are living in poverty including 730000 children. There has been a greater increase in income for the top 20 per cent of households than for the poorest 20 per cent of households.

The deregulation in the labour market has led to reduced security and benefits, and affected the permanency of employment, and the introduction of more and more short-term contracts. So job permanency has been affected. About a third of working Australians are living in poverty.

These are just some of the facts which you will find in the document which will help us in our reflections. The bishops in this document provide a critique of the economic system.

Five points that call for our reflection are:.

- People and nature are not mere tools of production
- Economic growth alone cannot ensure inclusive and sustainable development
- Social equity must be built into the heart of the economy
- Businesses must benefit all society, not just shareholders
- The excluded and vulnerable must be included in decision-making

There is much in this document for us to read and reflect upon. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to now launch this document here in Perth. I certainly commend it for our reading, study and prayerful thinking, and how in our way, in our circumstances, can we bring about an inclusive and sustainable economy in our country.