



2018 Social Justice Statement Perth Launch

SPEECH

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Newman Siena Centre, Doubleview
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I am grateful for the opportunity again to be here at the launch Social Justice Statement 2018.

The Statement brought back a few memories for me. One was when I was living in the house where Emeritus Archbishop Hickey is living at the moment in Highgate, which used to be a presbytery.

I came home one evening and drove my car to the garage that is at the back of the block. I got out of the car and made my way to the back door of the house. It was then that I found two people sitting on the back verandah. They were a young couple, and the young Aboriginal woman had given birth to a child. The couple had been together for some time. The baby had been taken from them by the Department and was put into care. It was winter time and the only place they could find for shelter was that back verandah.

So, I allowed them to stay there, following the example of Emeritus Archbishop Hickey who used to do the same sort of thing at his little cottage at the Cathedral. It gave me the opportunity to learn about their lives, to learn about them personally and to understand their circumstances.

Then one day I heard that their little baby had died, and because the department couldn't find them for two weeks. Imagine the grief that they were experiencing when they finally discovered the little child had died and had been dead for two weeks already!

That's just one example that I have had of getting to know a couple who I presume are still living in those kinds of circumstances. They are a couple that make up the number of 116,000 homeless people in Australia. Of course we know that many people are living in that situation for a whole variety of reasons and this is why the bishops chose to make the statement for this year on Social Justice Sunday, on the issue of homelessness.

We had about four topics to choose from last year, but this was the one that got the resounding vote of the Bishops' Conference, because in every diocese around Australia, we know the experience of homelessness of so many of our people.



The document makes a very strong point that housing is a right and not just a privilege. This, I think, goes back to the very first writings of scripture, in the writings of the laws of Moses.

There is a law that the Jewish people were given: that it was permissible for you to take from another what was owed to you. You could even take the persons cloak. But the law was tempered by mercy and said you must return the cloak to that person in the evening because that cloak serves as covering and protection during the cold of the night.

This is the law which the people were aware of, but didn't always follow. Because, as we know, the enticement of advancing one's wealth means that we can so easily make decisions purely based upon what we want for ourselves, and overlook the needs and rights of others.

In many cases, we will compromise the perspective of looking beyond our own needs, our own rights, and our own aspirations.

When we become blind to the needs and the rights of others, especially in the case of homelessness, we lose sight of the fundamental right of people to have a place called home. So this statement will always bring us back to examine our own hearts and aspirations, to put the needs of others before our own wants and needs. The members of our community need places to live because a home will give them a sense of security, and as Pope Francis described it, a place that also provides a sense of worth, not just protection.

One of the facts that I found interesting in the document is that in 1947, 50 per cent of Australians owned their own home. By the mid-1960s, that proportion had grown to 72 per cent. Since that time, however, home ownership rates have fallen to about 65 per cent.

Since the 1990s, the greatest decline in home ownership was happening to people in the prime of their working lives. It's likely that there are increasing numbers of people under 55 years of age that will enter retirement not owning their home or will be still paying off their mortgage.

There are more facts in the document which are interesting to us and will inform us about the question and challenges of homelessness.

Some years ago the Heads of Churches asked to have an annual meeting with the premier of WA.

When Colin Barnett became Premier, he immediately contacted us, arranged an appointment with us and sought to establish an annual meeting with the Heads of Churches.

The very first issue that was raised was the issue of homelessness and at that time there was a program that had been agreed to by Commonwealth and State of Governments, to help homeless people across the nation.



So it was in that spirit he worked with us. So, with the help of St Vincent de Paul and the financial commitment of the State government, a new hostel was built which was named after Tom Fisher, a well-known Catholic supporter and a worker for St Vincent de Paul over many years, who passed away over 12 months or so.

This was the result of collaboration between the churches and State Government.

It seems that this sort of policy and initiative has perhaps been put on the long finger since then.

So this document, I think, helps us to understand the context that we are in. We need to be a voice for the voiceless, to be a voice for those who are homeless in our community and to keep raising this question with those in government, for we need them to be with us in these sorts of initiatives.

The last thing I would like to say this morning is from Pope Francis in the letter that he gave to the Church early this year on holiness. He gave us a beautiful commentary on the Beatitudes. One of the points he makes on the Beatitudes was that they help us see the needs of those around us and a way in which we can respond to the needs of others.

He said another benefit is for ourselves to be changed; to see in the other the face of Christ and allow the virtues the Beatitudes to develop in us, being transformed, to become more human and Christian.

So with that thought, I would like to end this little introduction, by recommending this document very highly and suggesting that the document be taken into the parishes, agencies and communities within the Archdiocese, to be read and studied, perhaps in groups, and reflected upon and an examination of the way we see the needs of others in our communities.

So it's my pleasure then to officially launch this document and draw to your attention the other excellent documents that are available from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.

I think these are important documents which can inform us, not just on the question of homelessness, but other social justice issues in our countries today.