



**PARLIAMENTARY BREAKFAST SPEECH
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA
TUESDAY 17 OCTOBER 2006
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AUSTRALIA**

**Check against delivery

CHURCH AND STATE: A MEETING PLACE

Ministers, Shadow Ministers, Members, Senators, Colleagues from across Australia and other guests.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak here this morning, particularly at this place – the home of democracy and political participation in our nation.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus told the story of a man who fell upon bad times traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Under the social and political arrangements of the day, the man was not in a target group that had been identified for intervention.

A Priest and a Levite – symbols of the religious and political forces of the day – passed the traveler by as they made their way along the highway.

Then came a Samaritan – an outsider – and he stopped and helped.

He received no outcome payment for his intervention.

There was no Job Seeker Account to pay for the wine and oil he poured on the traveler's wounds.

No receipts were required when lodgings were arranged at the local inn.

No service agreement was invoked when he offered to pay any additional expenses incurred on his return trip through the area.

Jesus' telling of such a story was surprisingly political act at the time.

The story was told in response to the questions from a young follower of Jesus who asked "Who is my neighbour?"

The answer challenged the priorities of the social, political and religious elites of the day.

The answer presented a vision of society that called people to a new and greater communion with each other.

The answer suggested that it is in this communion and NOT in rigorous compliance to the religious rules of the day, that people would discover the true identity of their loving and creator God.

Two thousand years later, in many ways, we find ourselves facing the same question, "Who is my neighbor?"

Still we struggle to respond to our neighbours in a way that brings us into closer communion with them.

As Catholic Social Services Australia celebrates its 50th year I'd like to draw on the wisdom of our founders, Monsignor McCosker.

Together with Fr Eric Perkins, who later became Bishop Perkins, Monsignor McCosker believed Catholic welfare was about inclusion; he believed it was about critical analysis of government agendas rather than simple compliance to them; and about professionalism in welfare rather than well meaning benevolence and passive, dependant charity.

His obituary in *The Australian* in 1996 declared he was devoted to those people who were mostly unable to help themselves.

Although he was awarded the OBE, worldly honours did not change him. He is rumoured to have said that OBE stood for 'other buggers' efforts'.

McCosker 's vision and determination led to the development of services like Meals on Wheels, Foster Care, Adoption Practice, the State Councils of Social Services and Marriage Counselling as part of Matrimonial and Family Law and Child Endowment.

In the 1930s and 40s, during the Depression and the Second World War, Catholic welfare in Australia was mostly provided by the dedicated men and women in religious orders and an emerging network of lay organisations.

Amongst its leaders were the first professional social workers, including Norma Parker and Constance Moffatt, women ahead of their time, applying academic

rigor and professionalism to their mission of service. They sought to support families and keep children with parents wherever possible, rather than consigning those children to institutions.

In Australia, the Church has been a leader, providing services in direct response to the unmet needs of the community.

Whilst the churches can't claim to have a monopoly over morality, they do have a very significant tradition of having wrestled with some of the key human social and life questions. Questions such as: under what conditions can war be justified? When does life begin and end?

The Church's contemplation of these questions over the ages has left a valuable legacy as we contemplate the questions of our own age.

Catholic social services in Australia are underpinned by a rich body of systematic thought on social issues, drawn from Gospel values. This is what we call 'Catholic Social Teaching'.

Catholic agencies today take their place in this long tradition.

That teaching articulates the Church's traditions of social service and advocacy.

It is this tradition that puts forward the principle of 'preferential option for the poor', one which underpins our approach to service development and social policy research.

In their statement – *Economic Justice for All* – the Bishops of the United States described the principle of preferential option for the poor in the following terms:

The prime purpose of this special commitment to the poor is to enable them to become active participants in the life of society. It is to enable all persons to share in, and contribute to the common good.

The 'option for the poor', therefore, is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons.

Economic Justice for All # 88

This 'option for the poor' is not simply a charitable response to a perceived need in the people we serve.

Rather it is a response to a fault or failing in the community as a whole – fault that is revealed by the condition of people who are poor and marginalised.

Such a response remains crucial to Christian identity.

Most recently, the new Pope, Benedict the 16th, confirmed the centrality of social service to the life and mission of the Church in his first Encyclical – *God is Love*. I quote:

...love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to the Church as the ministry of the Sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.

But service is only a part of the social welfare ministry of the Church.

Benedict went on to describe how the work of service undertaken by the church is linked to the development of a more just society.

He clearly articulates that Church and State have distinct roles that should not to be confused.

He is adamant that the role of social services must not be to impose religion on people who do not share faith.

But he is equally clear that service alone does not achieve the goals of the broader ministry of welfare. He states:

This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place: it has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just.

One of the tasks of Catholic Social Services Australia and its members is to bring order to the experience of service delivery, to promote a more just society – to help purify reason and to contribute here and now to the acknowledgement and attainment of what is just.

Any advocacy that we undertake is not focused on improving conditions for our member agencies in the same way that a professional association or industry group fights for its members – though this is something we do from time to time.

Rather, our advocacy is motivated by the story of the Good Samaritan and based on a social vision that upholds and protects the dignity of every individual.

Importantly, this is not a task that we undertake in a partisan way.

The presence today of representatives from the Liberal Party, the National Party, the Labour Party, the Democrats and the Greens indicates the determination of Catholic Social Services Australia to pursue the objective of a more just society with like minded people.

While a division would not be required to vote on the question of our need to pursue a more just society, our thinking and strategies on how best to achieve this would most likely vary considerably.

Even within the most united parties, political process can, at times, reveal different points of view.

So too Catholics in politics can be expected to have different views on a wide range of social issues. But when looking at social issues, most will draw on the rich background of Catholic Social Teaching.

Catholics are well represented in all sides of politics.

And Catholics are also overrepresented in the public service.

Maybe that rich tradition of Catholic social thought has motivated many to pursue a vocation that allows them to serve the community and to influence public life.

But it's also worth noting as prison chaplain, that in my observation Catholics are also overrepresented in that population too!

As a group who has come together in this place I should explain who we are.

Catholic Social Services Australia comprises 61 member organisations providing some 500 services to over a million Australians each year.

In your various electorates you will be familiar with our local agencies as "Centacares" or "MercyCares" or "BoysTowns" or "McKillops" or a range of other names.

Catholic Social Services Australia members have sites rural, regional and metropolitan areas in every electorate in the country.

Federal Government programs contribute in the order of ten to twenty per cent of the funding used by our members to provide services.

Catholic Social Services Australia is the Catholic Church's peak national body for these social services.

It advises the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Australian Council of Leaders of Religious Institutes on social policy issues and importantly enters the public discourse on their behalf and with their support.

In this sense Catholic Social Services Australia is the official Catholic Church voice on issues of social policy and welfare.

Services provided by our members include aged care, community care, disability services, drug and alcohol services, employment and vocational programs, family relationship services, housing, mental health, residential care and youth programs.

Catholic Social Services Australia does not exist to provide social services exclusively to Catholics. Rather it is the Church's service and mission to the common good, and outreach to all people who are in need.

Governments, and through them communities, benefit at all levels from the involvement of the Church sector.

We gather volunteers, we raise independent funding, we mobilise Church property and assets, we nurture a workforce with skills built up over decades and we engage all these resources and pass these on in order to maximise the services provided to the community in partnership with government.

Most importantly, we are close to the people we serve.

Every day our agencies work with very vulnerable and marginalised people.

Close to the ground, our workers know what works, they know what doesn't. They know what could be done better.

Our workers are not highly paid, and they often work in conditions that would not be tolerated in other workplaces.

But when Catholic Social Services Australia talks of human suffering, it is upon the shoulders of these workers that the tears are shed.

It is our reflection on this experience and the weight of Catholic Social Teaching that we bring to the policy table and through which we seek to influence social policy.

We enjoy dialogue with many of you – both here in Parliament House and in your electorates.

Sometimes that dialogue is public, but often it is simply people talking – talking to local members, backbench committees, ministers and shadows. Talking, and trying to build a more just society.

So what does the collective experience of Catholic Social Services Australia say of current priorities and how do we best express them in today's world?

We would once have gathered our experience of service delivery and talked about the notion of 'the common good' and 'preferential option for the poor'. There would have been little contest, but this is no longer the case.

Today, social aspirations are more often about the individual than the common good.

'Competition' is identified as a stronger and more relevant motivation than 'altruism'.

'Mutual obligation' is more commonly about demands on individuals, rather than an expectation that the community will provide opportunities for its struggling members.

I don't have time this morning to list the full gamut of recommendations, suggestions, and innovations that our work gives rise to.

I would, however, like to briefly identify a few priority areas where we would see great opportunities for action.

The first is social inequity.

As a nation Australia has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth over the last decade.

But as a nation we have not been able to overcome the poverty experienced by many people in our community – Indigenous Australians, chronically mentally ill people and homeless people – to name a few.

Yesterday marked the commencement of National Anti Poverty Week.

Later this morning in the public theatre here in Parliament House, Fr Peter Norden will explore the link between location and disadvantage in Australia – and it is all too real.

Our macro-economic successes as a nation are undermined by our failures at a micro level. We have citizens in this country who will wait years for assistance with their dental care, who will attend schools with run-down facilities, who will sleep rough, and who will die young because our unprecedented growth, increased incomes and buoyant budget surpluses have left them relatively untouched.

From our point of view the 'welfare system' must provide two things.

Firstly, it must provide an adequate safety net for individuals who, like the man in the Good Samaritan story, have fallen on bad times.

The prevailing wisdom might once have been: 'there but for the grace of God go I'.

But in a harsher, more individualistic age such as ours it is more likely to be expressed as: 'If only you would try harder I wouldn't have to help you'.

Even though it's an unpopular argument Catholic Social Services Australia we assert that the safety net continues to be an entitlement and a right that should be afforded to individuals by virtue of their humanity, not as a gift from society.

The second expectation that we have of the welfare system is that it provides incentives and support to allow people to break out of the poverty cycles that we know can span generations.

The interaction between our current taxation system and welfare system has the effect of providing a safety net, but also of creating poverty traps.

Some people in the lowest income brackets pay higher effective marginal rates of taxation than those in the highest income brackets.

This makes their transition from welfare dependence to independence a more challenging task than it should be, and consequently holds back economic growth that the nation might otherwise enjoy.

Tax and welfare reform is a substantial task, but it's a worthy challenge that will lead to lasting improvements in the quality of people's lives.

Such reforms will need a commitment beyond electoral cycles and party politics.

A further major priority of Catholic Social Services Australia is families.

It will be no surprise that families enjoy a high priority on our social policy platform. The reason for this priority is captured in the Holy See's Charter of the Rights of the Family:

The rights of the person...have a fundamental social dimension which finds an innate and vital expression in the family;... the family constitutes, much more than a mere juridical, social and economic unit, a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society.

Too many families are stretched to breaking point by competing demands for time and energy. Continued high rates of family breakdown are testament to this pressure.

Our response to families must be two fold.

Firstly, we must create the economic circumstances that ensure that families have greater time for each other, allowing parents to spend less time at work.

Secondly we must create the social circumstances that provide families with greater support. Just as we build the necessary physical infrastructure into modern residential developments, we must also create and support a new social infrastructure to connect members of the community to each other.

Churches, community centres, schools, childcare centres, sporting and cultural clubs and associations are all resources for the support of families. We must value and nurture them.

A further area of concern to Catholic Social Services Australia is mental health.

Mental illness directly affects not only thousands of Australians, but also the families of those who are ill and the community around them.

This is a particular concern for community based agencies such as our own members as we find services overwhelmed with people who should be in specific mental health services, but for whom there is no place.

For too many who do not make it into appropriate care, homelessness and prison are the next option.

Australia's jails are filled with people who would once have been placed in institutional mental healthcare. They are treated not as patients, but as prisoners.

Delivering on the recent promises of the CoAG agreements in relation to mental health services, and turning good intentions into effective community based services on the ground, is the challenge of the coming years.

While each of the issues discussed – mental health, family support, welfare reform and social equity – are all major concerns, Catholic Social Services Australia is aware that the consequences of these issues, especially with the drought, are at least twice as harsh in many rural and remote areas and even harsher again in Indigenous communities.

If we are to address, in an effective way, the concerns that we've outlined, Catholic Social Services Australia calls for a new partnership between Church and community services and governments.

There's great potential to resolve these many concerns through the rediscovery of the notion of a partnership.

We do not need a State which regulates and controls every aspect of our lives, but a State which acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the lived experience of communion with people in need.

Community agencies are not simply out-sourced providers of government programs but partners who are able to use government funding to achieve the ends that are consistent with their mission and with Government policy objectives.

Two thousand years after the Good Samaritan story not much has changed. People are still willing to turn a blind eye to those in need.

Like the Gospel and the vision of many who care, Catholic Social Services Australia wishes to promote a society where we all take responsibility for people in need.

Catholic Social Services Australia doesn't underestimate the difficulty of this task, but we look forward to a genuine partnership and continued dialogue with governments of all persuasions and policy makers in creating a genuinely fairer and better world for all to enjoy.

Thank you.