

**Speech at the Launch of the
Australian Catholic Bishops'**

Social Justice Sunday Statement 2009

*And You Will Be My Witnesses
Young people and justice*

Given by

MOST REV. ANTHONY C FISHER OP DD VG

Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney.

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The Australian Bishops make lots of statements. Not as many as some bishops' conferences around the world, but plenty of words nonetheless. Social Justice is their most common topic by far: there is an official annual social justice statement, as well as statements on particular issues from various Bishops' Commissions and agencies. All of these teachings are, of course, directed to Catholics of every age and state of life, and even to people beyond our Catholic community. Rarely are these documents directed first and foremost to young people.

However, young people have been very much in the forefront our minds these past few years due to World Youth Day 2008. As many as half a million of them turned out for some of those activities and perhaps one billion looked on through television and the internet. In between the 'big events' such as the Masses, Vigil and Stations, the pilgrims attended daily catechesis where they discussed what it means to be a Spirit-filled witness to Jesus Christ in our world today. They also took part in the hundreds of Youth Festival activities, including concerts, exhibitions, film and debates on questions of justice, ecology, homelessness, Indigenous issues and peace-making. Many were inspired by the presence of the relics and the story of that young champion of Catholic social action, Blessed Pier-Giorgio Frassati. And they brought their experience, thought and passion for building a better world with them to prayer as they wept through the Stations of the Cross or knelt in silent adoration before their Eucharistic Lord at the Vigil of Light.

The Holy Father was very aware that some segments of our youth are far away from the Church and other institutions and so were unlikely to attend WYD in big numbers. So he asked us to bring together a small group of young people struggling with homelessness, substance dependency or marginalisation by being Indigenous, refugees or victims of crime. He wanted to hear from them and share some time with

them. He did this after the wonderful Stations of the Cross which had already spoken so loudly about Christ's closeness to people who suffer. This meeting with disadvantaged youth was a moving testimony to what Cardinal Pell described at the Opening Mass: the call to all young people, but especially those searching or suffering in any way, into the love of Christ and his Church.

There are so many stories I have heard and could tell, and millions more that I will only hear in the next life, of how the Journey of the World Youth Day Cross, Icon and Indigenous Message Stick, the Act1v8 programme of pastoral preparation, the faith-in-action-packed week itself and the year we have had since, changed the lives of many young people and influenced those of us who looked on. As bishops we thought that experience must be the starting point for our 2009 Social Justice Statement *And You Will Be My Witnesses: Young people and justice*. In this document we say to the young Australians who organised and participated in World Youth Day

how inspired we are to see the Holy Spirit at work in your lives and in the life of the Church in Australia. In the lead-up to the great gathering and in many of the events of that week in Sydney, we witnessed your passion and commitment to issues of social justice and your concern for your sisters and brothers in Australia and overseas who endure the burdens of poverty, war, exploitation and persecution. We are impressed by your enthusiasm to play your part in the mission of the Church in the modern world.

Notice that the Bishops commend not just the good works that the young people do for social justice, but what it is that inspires them to do so. Catholics and other Christians have no monopoly on compassion for the needy, on hunger for justice and peace of earth or thirst for the integral development of peoples. Many people of other religions and none share those concerns and we are privileged often to work together with them in projects of 'practical ecumenism'. What makes Catholic action for justice different is, the Bishops observe, that we see

the Holy Spirit at work within you and in the life of the Church: as Teacher, offering wisdom, guidance and truth; as Companion, strengthening our hope and encouraging our efforts in justice; and as [the] Advocate [as Jesus called Him], speaking in concert with the young and on behalf of the marginalised.

So it is that in this Social Justice Sunday Statement, the Bishops of Australia reflect on the role of the Spirit in the lives of all believers. We draw on the wisdom that our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, offered during those days he spent with us. We acknowledge the voice of young people who are concerned with issues of justice – many of whom were active participants in World Youth Day itself. And we declare ourselves as sharing 'the aspirations that young people hold, in faith, for the future.'

At his welcome at Barangaroo Pope Benedict recalled how at Pentecost ordinary, mostly young, disciples

were filled with the Holy Spirit. At that extraordinary moment, which gave birth to the Church, the confusion and fear that had gripped Christ's disciples were transformed into a vigorous conviction and sense of purpose ... They were transfixed by the truth of Christ's Gospel and inspired to proclaim it

fearlessly ... They set forth, bearing witness to the greatest story ever [told]: that God has become one of us, that the divine has entered human history in order to transform it, and that we are called to immerse ourselves in Christ's saving love which triumphs over evil and death.'

That call to be a new generation of witnesses to the greatest story ever told was made to particular people in particular contexts. The Pope noted and delighted in the wonders of the natural and human environments in which we live, not least that harbour on which he entered Sydney. Yet he recognised that we face some serious ecological challenges. So, too, 'the social environment – the habitat we fashion for ourselves – has its scars'. As a result 'in our personal lives and in our communities, we can encounter a poison which threatens to corrode what is good, reshape who we are, and distort the purpose for which we have been created.'

It is to that beautiful yet confused world that the Pope and now the Australian Bishops send our young people as witnesses to Christ. Reflecting on the dignity of every human being as an image of God, the Holy Father charged them to have particular concern for God's little ones:

Do we recognise that the innate dignity of every individual rests on his or her deepest identity – as image of the Creator – and therefore that human rights are universal? ... We are led to reflect on what place the poor and elderly, immigrants and the voiceless, have in our societies. How can it be that domestic violence torments so many mothers and children? How can it be that the most wondrous and sacred human space – the womb – has become a place of unutterable violence?

Such ugliness on the moral landscape could easily make us despondent, but Pope Benedict was optimistic because he knows that deep down everyone craves for more and better. As he concluded his opening address he insisted:

Our world has grown weary of greed, exploitation and division, of the tedium of false idols and piecemeal responses, and the pain of false promises. Our hearts and minds are yearning for a vision of life where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion. This is the work of the Holy Spirit! This is the hope held out by the Gospel!

What must young people do, to be true witnesses to Christ and his Gospel? The Pope suggested – and the Bishops take this up in their statement – the tried and true formula of see-judge-and-act, all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. At the Evening Vigil the Pope called the young people to

Be watchful! Listen! Through the dissonance and division of our world, can you hear the concordant voice of humanity? From the forlorn child in a Darfur camp, or a troubled teenager, or an anxious parent in any suburb, or perhaps even now from the depth of your own heart, there emerges the same human cry for recognition, for belonging, for unity. Who satisfies that essential human yearning to be one, to be immersed in communion, to be built up, to be led to truth? The Holy Spirit!

And You Will Be My Witnesses: Young people and justice is a meditation upon these rich texts from WYD08 and upon the experience of our young pilgrims. It also offers some practical pointers on how we might take those themes forward in the project of the new evangelization. 'Faith grows through action for justice, and young people, when they work for justice, lead others to faith in Jesus Christ,' the Bishops say. 'Their witness is inspiring, and their willingness to reflect deeply on the meaning of injustice and the causes of oppression encourages others to examine their lives and values, inspiring women and men to turn to Christ.'

The statement addresses some particular issues: giving Indigenous youth a voice; securing employment for young workers; addressing mental health issues for young people (including depression and substance abuse); ensuring environments for our young people safe from violence and abuse; addressing the values disorientation caused by family breakdown and the consumer economy; and some broader national and international concerns such as the millennium development goals, ecological issues and asylum seekers. There are plenty of challenges out there, but far from being overwhelmed by them, the Bishops of Australia are more convinced than ever that our young people, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and ready, willing and able to take them on. They will be the bearers of the cross and ambassadors of faith, justice and hope, of charity in truth, in the decades ahead.

This optimism is not just pie in the sky: there is already some hard evidence supporting it. In recent research conducted by academics from this Australian Catholic University and Monash University called *Pilgrims' Progress 2008* thousands of pilgrims were surveyed before, during and after WYD08. The researchers found that many returnee pilgrims report a deep conversion; others, growing closer to Jesus Christ and his Church; others, increased confidence in their Catholic identity. Many reported a desire to engage in new kinds of service of the Church and community. All around our country there are stories of renewed engagement of young people in many corners of the Church's life, including in service to the needy and works for justice, development, ecology and peace.

World Youth Day was a wonderful time for this city and nation. We all know that we must do what we can to build upon the spirit of youth, the spirit of friendship, the spirit of joy and faith that filled our streets for those days. This Social Justice Statement for 2009 captures important aspects of that spirit and gives us pointers for the years ahead. It is a beautiful and inspiring statement, which I commend to all of you and all those whom you might influence to study and respond to it. I also thank its drafters and illustrators, the ACSJC and its collaborators, for bringing it to us. It will be a great resource for our schools, university and young adult groups.

In conclusion: in his wonderful homily for the final Mass of WYD08, Pope Benedict posed a series of questions to those present which the Bishops of Australia now echo and amplify in this statement. As we hear them again, we do so confident that our young people have an inspiring Gospel programme by which they can respond:

Dear young people, What will you leave to the next generation? Are you building your lives on firm foundations...? Are you living your lives in a way that opens up space for the Spirit in the midst of a world that wants to forget

God...? How are you using the gifts you have been given, the power which the Holy Spirit is even now prepared to release within you? What difference will you make?