

**Speech in response 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

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Your Eminence, My Lords, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we gather today on the traditional Eora land of the Gadigal people.

It is an honour to be invited to address you here today.

I would like to start by thanking the Bishops for a statement that empowers young people, and those young at heart, to work together in our Church and broader communities to, as Mahatma Gandhi once said, ‘Be the change we wish to see in the world’.

This statement itself is both a challenge and a thanksgiving.

On one hand it echoes the challenge that Pope Benedict presented to the youth of the world when he spent time with us here in Sydney for WYD just over a year ago:

What will you leave to the next generation? ... What legacy will you leave to young people yet to come? What difference will you make?

These are huge and scary questions, but they are vitally important.

In the book of James we hear that ‘faith without works is dead’. We have each been given this miracle of life and blessed with great gifts from the Holy Spirit. But if we don’t immerse ourselves in this life, if we don’t open ourselves to the reality of the

world around us and engage with it, we miss the point and our faith, indeed our life, cannot reach the depth, richness and fullness that God intended.

The Holy Father's challenge, and that of this Social Justice Sunday Statement from our Australian Bishops, pushes us

- to connect with the world around us on a deeper level
- to engage with the issues that bring pain, suffering and injustice into our world and
- to share the love, joy and hope that our Catholic faith provides, with those in need.

However, the statement also acknowledges and affirms the work that young people are already doing to share God's love through active and purposeful engagement with the world around us.

- It gives thanks for the students who give their time to volunteer on Vinnies night patrol soup vans.
- It acknowledges the Young Christian Workers who advocate for the rights of their colleagues in the workplace.
- It recognises the youthful spirit of those who volunteer with agencies such as Palms, Catholic Mission and Caritas to try and improve the lives of those living in countries with less resources than our blessed great Southern Land.

At the heart of this statement and indeed at the heart of the notion of justice, is an implicit recognition of the value of each person as a child of God. This does a number of things:

- It makes us all equal in the eyes of God, which encourages humility in how we view ourselves in the world.
- It also relates us as brothers and sisters in a human family, which challenges us to look out for each other and act in solidarity with one another.
- Lastly, it reflects within us the very presence of God himself, which means that each one of us holds a dignity that no-one can take away.

Mass brings us into Communion with God and with the Church but it also brings us into Communion with each other. One of my favourite parts of the Mass is the Sign of Peace. In a moment we are going to offer each other a sign of peace, be it hello, a handshake, a smile, or simply saying the word peace.

As we share this with one another for a second time this morning, let us be really present in this incredible ritual.

- Do we look each other in the eye when we shake hands?
- Do we acknowledge the other person in humility and solidarity?
- Do we only acknowledge those who we accept easily and who don't confront us to much? Do we think of those not present with us?
- Do we recognise in each other the very presence of God?

- What message are we sending and what do we really mean when we say ‘Peace be with you’?

Let’s turn to one another now and offer a sign of peace.

Through this simple gesture each one of us present has just affirmed for each other that

- we are equal in the eyes of God,
- that we walk together in solidarity and
- that we are God present to each other.

Walking together in solidarity? What does that mean? I can think of no better way to explain this than to repeat the words of Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists from Queensland in the 1970s:

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us join hands and work together.

I also want to expand a little further on the concept of being God present to each other.

I first got involved in the St Vincent de Paul Society, or Vinnies, in high school. At first my main involvement in Vinnies was to collect cans at school for the winter appeal and volunteer with the local Buddies Day program, which offers kids from disadvantaged backgrounds a fun day out with positive young adult role models.

As I became more and more involved in the Vinnies Youth programs, I came to learn about the essence of what the organisation is about. At its core, Vinnies is about seeing Christ in the face of those whom we assist and also reflecting the unconditional love and hope of God back to them in their time of need. One of my favourite quotes from Vinnies patron, St Vincent de Paul himself is ‘When you leave your prayers to serve the poor, you leave God for God’.

The statement that we are launching here together this morning is an affirmation of the passion that young people in the Church have to put their faith into action. That is, to find God not only in prayer, but also in the ways in which we engage with the world that God has entrusted into our care.

We need to do this in concrete ways that don’t just soothe the pain of present hurt, but also prevent future injustice. The 20 year old founder of Vinnies, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, explained this using the parable of the good Samaritan:

Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is the role of justice to prevent the attack.

I have been blessed to witness young people from around the world responding to the theme of this statement; being God’s witnesses and living in a way that builds peace and promotes justice.

I've visited homes that hang under the bridges of Manila with young seminarians who regularly spend their nights here in solidarity with these families. It is not the food that the seminarians bring, but rather the friendship and companionship that offer the most comfort.

I've been humbled by the warm welcome of a community in the invasion settlement of San Francisco in Guayaquil, Ecuador. A friend of mine who is a priest from Canberra, Fr Frank Jones, is running a mission there and I stayed for a few weeks to 'volunteer'. I had the best of intentions, and I suppose that counts for something, but the young parishioners of that little parish taught me more about embracing the gifts that God has given us and standing together as equals fighting for the cause of justice, than I could ever have hoped to bring them through my volunteering.

I've met young lawyers in Madrid, Spain, who volunteer their time and skills to advocate for South American immigrants who arrive with nothing and need assistance and above all, compassion.

I recently spent 6 months working for the St Vincent de Paul Society in South Africa, helping to establish Vinnies Youth programs in Johannesburg. The inspiration of young people who often had as little as those they were assisting has had a huge impact on me.

There is a group of young people who support a Vinnies Conference in the township of Soweto. Some of you may be familiar with Soweto, which is one of the largest townships in South Africa. It was the base from which students lit the fire of advocacy that saw the downfall of the Apartheid government in 1994 and the rise of Nelson Mandela as the country's President.

One of my favourite quotes from Mandela is this:

Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is a protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life.

This group is only able to afford to deliver food parcels to the families they assist approximately once every 6 to 8 weeks. And yet each week they visit. They give their time, their love, their hope and their friendship and yet if you were to ask them, they would concentrate on explaining the hope, love and friendship that they receive from those they visit. For me, these young people and those they assist are definitely the agents of hope and peace that the Bishops Statement and their own leader, Nelson Mandela, call for.

It's not just in exotic places overseas that we find young people contributing to the cause of justice. Every week in Australia young people

- run sports teams for children from families experiencing hardship
- offer food and friendship on soup vans
- provide tutoring for children whose first language is not English
- fundraise through schools for kids growing up in developing countries

- visit people experiencing the poverty of loneliness in nursing homes, hospitals and detention centres
- and much, much more

I return to the Holy Father's challenge, *What legacy will you leave to young people yet to come? ... What difference will you make?* I know that the young people whose stories I've just shared a little of are already building a legacy they can be proud of.

But what about those of us gathered today? What legacy will *we* leave? What legacy will *you* leave?

In St Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us:

I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you made me welcome, naked and you clothed me, sick and in prison and you came to see me. As long as you did this to one of the least of my brothers, you did this to me.

How can we take the messages of this reading and this Social Justice Statement and live them in our lives?

What are the injustices in our country? In our local communities?

As young, and young at heart, Australians, what response does this require of us? How do we meet the responsibilities of working for justice and embodying the message of the Gospel in everything we do?

Let us take strength from the examples already set for us by members of our communities.

Let us live up to the Holy Father's request that 'Australians always remain young in spirit and young in hope'.

And, let us embrace the challenges put to us this Social Justice Sunday and work in solidarity together as witnesses of God's love and creators of a just world.

I'd like to leave you with one of my favourite prayers, the Franciscan Benediction;

*May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain to joy.*

*And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make
a difference in this world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.*

Thank you.