



Justice News

Newsletter of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee

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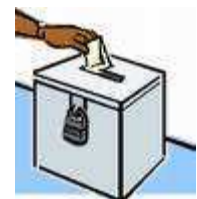
August 2010

Bringing a Christian perspective to Election issues

This edition of **Justice News** appears just before the 2010 federal election. Christians may well ask why they should be thinking about political issues in terms of their faith. After all, Jesus said on such things, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's'; and when asked by Pilate whether he was a king, he replied yes, but 'my kingdom is not of this world'. However, he never ceased to preach the Kingdom of God, and to urge those who would listen to prepare for it. And preparation meant, he said, re-organising human societies to give the first place to the last: the downtrodden, the poor, the prisoners, the sick, the blind, and those without hope. What is really important for Christians is not who enjoys the worldly glory of Prime Ministership and government, but what they are going to do for these groups singled out by Jesus. Christians then cannot ignore the contending parties' plans for these groups if they win power.



One might argue that the most downtrodden group in Australian society today is asylum seekers arriving by boat. It is understandable that ordinary citizens may be a little alarmed by arrivals so different from the orderly kind we are used to. But Christians are capable of thinking more deeply about the issue than this initial gut reaction. The fact is that these people are doing no more than exercising their right under international law to seek protection from persecution in their own countries. And more than 90% of them in fact win their cases for recognition as refugees. What then have we to fear? None of these people has attempted armed invasion; all are screened rigorously for security risks and diseases; and many former refugees are now making big contributions to Australian life. Moreover, refugees make up such a tiny proportion of our annual immigration intake that they make no difference to any population problem we might have. Our fears of asylum seekers are groundless then, so Christians must face the question of whether they are obliged to see in these people the Holy Family fleeing into Egypt.



Now that, for the moment at least, the global financial crisis has passed Australia, the major political parties are pressurising one another to reduce their spending promises. Government spending, they agree, produces budget deficits which have to be financed by government borrowing which in turn puts pressure on interest rates as governments compete with business for loan funds. There is a grain of truth in this but there is also a lot of self-interest. Governments have the alternative of slowing tax cuts and removing unnecessary concessions or blatant rorts to balance their budgets. By doing so they would be able to also finance the desperately needed public housing, and health and education reforms they say they favour. Jesus' poor are in danger of being forgotten in the cause of 'fiscal rectitude': the 'right' of the governing party to brag that it balanced the budget.

Jesus also taught us to 'seek first the kingdom of God...'. But the dynamism that drives capitalism is the seeking of wealth, and the seeking of wealth has occurred at the cost of catastrophic damage to the environment. Unless we take measures now to limit that damage, God's creation will have been irreparably violated by human attempts to establish dominion over it. Christians cannot avoid therefore the obligation of assessing the commitment of all parties to tackling climate change. 'Render to Caesar then the things that are Caesar's' but in doing so demand of the political parties a commitment to protect Jesus' poor and his Father's creation.

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Preventing Violence against Women

A challenge for faith communities

On 7 April 2010 the National Survey on Community Attitudes To Violence Against Women was launched and as a community we are challenged by its findings.

The survey was first conducted in 1995 and provides an opportunity to measure changes in attitudes in that time.

To start with the heartening news that since 1995 more people agree that physical and sexual assault, and threats, constitute domestic violence (between 97 and 98 percent in 2010 compared with between 91 and 97 percent in 1995).

There have also been positive shifts in peoples' understanding that domestic violence is a crime, that it is a serious issue and a majority believed that women are more likely than men to suffer physical harm. That's the good news!

On the other hand there are some results that challenge us a community. Of great concern was the fact that 22 percent of respondents believe that domestic violence is perpetrated equally by both men and women. The 2004 VicHealth report into the impact of violence on women's health identified that intimate partner violence is the greatest preventable cause of death and disability for Victorian women aged 15-44 years. In this case the evidence and the community belief are completely out of step with each other.

There were also alarming numbers of people prepared to excuse violence against women in situations if the violent person 'truly regrets' what they have done (22 percent of the general community), or if it results from people 'getting so angry that they temporarily lose control' (18 percent). Almost half of all respondents (49 percent) believed that women going through custody battles often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence.

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The question for communities is how we begin to address these attitudes. The State and Federal Governments have both released plans in 2009 to reduce violence against women. The State Plan, 'A Right to Respect' identifies a number of settings for changing cultures that support violence against women. One of those settings is Faith Communities. The report can be found online at www.women.vic.gov.au

The work of preventing violence against women is supported at an international level by the United Nations. In March 2008 the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said "Violence against women and girls continues unabated in every continent, country and culture. It takes a devastating toll on women's lives, on their families, and on society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence – yet the reality is that too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned."



So what can individuals and faith communities do about the issue? As individuals we can become informed and reject violence-supporting attitudes, we can join the White Ribbon Day campaign www.whiteribbonday.com, we can support events such as Reclaim the Night or we can raise the issue in relevant forums for discussion. A number of faith communities have established Prevention of Violence programs such as the Darebin City Council 'Northern Interfaith Respectful Relationships Project' which has lead to the development of a 'Declaration against Family Violence'.

In coming months the City of Greater Geelong in conjunction with G21 and the Prevention of Violence Against Women working group will launch a regional Accord calling for an end to violence against women.

Lisa Armstrong-Rowe



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Violence in Australia: A message of peace

2010 Social Justice Sunday Statement

In the **2010 Social Justice Sunday Statement**, the Catholic bishops of Australia address the anger and violence in our society, and the effects on individuals, families and the community as a whole.

The Statement, ***Violence in Australia: A message of peace***, considers how the Christian values of forgiveness and reconciliation lead to peace and non-violent ways of addressing conflict and divisions. The call to be peacemakers can be especially challenging when so much of our culture encourages aggressive attitudes, convinces us of the need to succeed at all costs, or fosters the desire for revenge.



Australia is essentially a peaceful country, with strong traditions of fairness and justice, but there are also deep roots of violence in our story: the dispossession of the Aboriginal peoples, the violence of our convict history, and the strand of racism that has been directed at immigrants at different stages of our history.

The Bishops draw on the Gospels, social teachings of the Church and examples of individuals and groups working for peace in the Australian context. They highlight the role we all share in making a difference for peace as individuals, as a community and as a nation. They also make clear how radical and central are Jesus' teachings about peacemaking in the Gospel, how discipleship of Jesus leads naturally to a desire to make peace, and how his power working in us makes that desire a reality. At the centre of the story of Jesus is the terrible violence he endured and his triumph over it in his resurrection. As followers of Christ crucified and risen, we are called to go into the world and to bring a peace that the world alone cannot give.

Peace and peace-building go beyond simply the absence of conflict. They are positive, constructive ways of living that require constant nurturing, and reflect the sacredness that is in the deepest part of our being. The 2010 Social Justice Sunday Statement gives practical suggestions and poses important questions that will help individuals, parishes and groups as they consider their part in bringing the peace of Christ to our world.

Social Justice Sunday is 26 September

*Copies of the **Social Justice Statement** will be available through parishes to coincide with **Social Justice Sunday**.
For further details about the Statement, visit the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council website
(www.acsjc.org.au) or call (02) 8306 3499*

THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

At the very heart of ministry

To teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message, since this doctrine points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society and situates daily work and struggles for justice in the context of bearing witness to Christ the Saviour.

This is not a marginal interest or activity, or one that is tacked on to the Church's mission, rather it is at the very heart of the Church's ministry of service.

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

GEELONG NO INTEREST LOAN SCHEME

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Public Housing – A matter of Social Justice

The issue of public housing has recently been canvassed from a number of different viewpoints

In December 2003 the Victorian Government launched a major housing policy aimed at increasing the supply of affordable housing. Transferring ownership of properties from the Department of Human Services to Housing Associations was a fundamental strategy aimed at expanding the supply of social housing.

A Victorian Auditor-General's report has found, however, that equity of access to this housing is not assured. The current requirements about access do not protect against inequitable tenant selection. This is due to the tension between the financial viability of the Housing Associations and the social goals of fairly allocating social housing to those on low incomes.

Added to the problem of obtaining public housing is the number of instances locally of residents attempting to prevent the development of housing for low-income people within their communities. Expressions of concern about drug addicts and what has been termed in letters to local media as 'feral people' moving into their areas have at times been cloaked with concerns about lack of facilities or the cost of land purchased (taxpayers not getting value for their dollar by land being purchased in established areas rather than in cheaper fringe areas).

The stigma of public housing tenants is not assisted by the media coverage of drug dealing and anti-social behaviour in some public housing areas that then draws attention to a small group out of the larger group of residents who are attempting to live normal family lives despite often run down housing, limited incomes and a lack of good community facilities.

Access to good permanent housing controls other aspects of peoples' lives - financial stability, stable schooling for their children and being able to be part of a neighbourhood where relationships can be built and developed.

The question then for those who view good housing as a social justice issue (and both State and Federal governments hold to this belief), is how long should individuals and families wait to have stable housing (current waiting lists are over six years). When will the people waiting for housing and those living in public housing be seen as ordinary residents with all the rights and expectations of any other resident without the stigma so often associated with public housing areas?

A socially just society would view access to good housing for low-income citizens as a major responsibility of government, even if it means a change in other government financial assistance to homeowners and private landlords.

Elsie Teer

Justice News

Justice News is a publication of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee, and is authorised and published by the Committee's co-ordinator, Kevin Yelverton, c/- St Mary's Parish Office, 150 Yarra Street, Geelong 3220 (kbyelverton@bigpond.com).

The Committee welcomes letters and comments in response to items published in Justice News. All letters and comments are placed before the Committee and will be replied to wherever possible. The Committee can be contacted via its coordinator, Kevin Yelverton.

Earlier issues of **Justice News** and further information about the Social Justice Committee are available on the website of the Justice Unit of the Archdiocese of Melbourne at <http://www.ccjdp.org/geelongdeanery.htm>

