

Australian Catholics ask the Prime Minister to ensure that we really are all in this together

On the 7th of April, 2020, an historic group of Australian Catholic service providers, Religious Orders and Bishops wrote to Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, and applauded him and his government for showing leadership and agency in the face of this global pandemic. The Prime Minister was congratulated for deploying the vast resources of our wealthy nation in an effort to protect all Australians, including the vulnerable and ensure no one is left to deal with this pandemic on their own.

However, the letter raised two groups of people that remain on the margins of our community and vulnerable to both the predations of the Covid 19 virus and the despair that comes with such vulnerability.

In the first group there are more than 1.5 million temporary visa holders in the Australian community. Many thousands are members of our congregations: they pray in our pews, work in our restaurants, farms, factories, aged care homes, supermarkets, and NGOs, study in our schools and universities, and live in our neighbourhoods.

They are losing their jobs but have no access to any form of financial safety net, to Medicare, to temporary shelter, and to fundamental support services such as free legal advice. Support from overseas family members may also be affected. Most cannot return home at this time.

Within this population, some are in an even more precarious situation: trafficked people and victims of modern slavery, people seeking asylum, and women on temporary visas experiencing domestic violence. For them, the impacts of COVID-19 and the exclusions from government support sit atop an already dangerous and exclusionary reality.

There are also people seeking asylum and refugees living in the community supported by volunteers who provide meal assistance through food banks and vouchers. At present the number of volunteers has significantly dropped due to social distancing requirements and yet there remains an urgent need for stocking food banks. We are already seeing all kinds of public health and economic impacts: a surge in homelessness, and destitution, including people without food on their tables; a concomitant growth in people who find they cannot meet social distancing and self-isolation requirements; and an increase of already sick individuals without Medicare who are unable to seek timely health care.

The second group includes the people who came seeking Australia's protection and who are currently being held in hotels and detention centres across Australia. This group have no choice about whether they take the vitally needed steps in maintaining physical distance and hand and coughing hygiene. Despite having committed no crime, they are being held in detention where social distancing is impossible and they are vulnerable with guards and service providers coming and going. We join with the Australian Society for Infection Disease and the Australian College of Infection Prevention to urge the Morrison-government to release asylum seekers and refugees from detention.

To this end, we ask that everyone in the Australian community who is in hardship as a result of the COVID19 pandemic, including people seeking protection, be given temporary access to a financial safety net, Medicare, and adequate shelter if they are homeless.

Christians across Australia, including Catholics, have consistently shown concern for the welfare and lives of people who are on the margins. As Catholic leaders, we do the same.

We ask the Federal Government to remember its responsibility for ensuring safety and human rights of everyone residing within its jurisdiction, even temporarily. In the same way, we hope that foreign governments will be mindful of the needs of Australians stranded abroad at this time.

Australia cannot afford to leave some of the most vulnerable people in our community behind. COVID-19 makes us all as vulnerable as the most vulnerable person in Australia. Our support and generosity should extend to everyone in Australia who is in need of it at this critical moment.

None of us have ever experienced what we are going through today. It is a health crisis and becoming an economic crisis, but we must not let it become a crisis for our shared humanity. We must widen the circle of protection and care to include every person in Australia. Our health demands that as does our humanity.

List of Signatories

Fr. Peter Smith, Justice and Peace Promoter, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

Most Reverend Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv DD STL, Chair of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) Commission for Social Justice – Mission and Service, Bishop of Parramatta

Most Reverend Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ, Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Adelaide and Bishop of Port Pirie

Most Reverend Bishop Charles Gauci DD, Bishop of Darwin

Most Reverend Bishop Terence John Gerard Brady, Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney

Brother Peter Carroll FMS, President of Catholic Religious Australia (CRA); Provincial, Marist Brothers Province of Australia; Leader, Association of St. Marcellin Champagnat

Very Reverend Fr. Brian McCoy SJ, Provincial, Jesuit Province of Australia

Very Reverend Peter Jones OSA, Prior Provincial, Order of St. Augustine, Province of Australasia

Sr. Alice Foley OCD, Congregational Leader, Carmelite Nuns of Australia

Sr. Clare Nolan RSC, Congregational Leader, Sisters of Charity, Australia

Sr. Eveline Crotty, Institute Leader, Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and PNG

Sr. Jan Barnett rsj, Josephite Justice Coordinator, Josephite Justice Network of Australia

Sr. Louise McKeogh FMA, Provincial, Salesian Sisters, South Pacific Region

Sr. Mary-Louise Petro, Congregational Leader, Sisters of Mercy Parramatta

Sr. Monica Cavanagh rsj, Congregational Leader, Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart

Sr. Monica Walsh, Province Leader, Sisters of the Good Sheperd, Australia-Aotearoa/New Zealand

Sr. Patty Fawkner SGS, Provincial Leader, Sisters of the Good Samaritan, Australia

Sr. Stancea Vichie mss, Congregational Leader, Missionary Sisters of Service, Australia

Fr. Tom McDonough CP, Provincial Superior, Passionist Brothers of Australia

Fr. Brian Lucas, National Director, Catholic Mission

John Ferguson, Director, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Office for Social Justice

Dr. Cristina Lledo Gomez, Chair, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC)

Kirsty Robertson, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Caritas Australia

Toby Hall, Group Chief Executive Officer, St. Vincent's Health Australia

Carolina Gottardo, Director, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia; Co-Chair, Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA)

Julie Edwards, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Jesuit Social Services; Co-Chair, Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA)

Claire Victory, National President, St. Vincent De Paul Society National Council of Australia

Louise Miller Frost, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), St. Vincent De Paul Society (SA)

Jack de Groot, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), St. Vincent De Paul Society (NSW)

Joshua Lourensz, Executive Director, Catholic Social Services Victoria (CSSV)

Maurizio Vespa, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), St. Francis Social Services and the House of Welcome

Sr. Brigid Arthur csb, Founder and Coordinator, Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project (BASP)

Patrice Moriarty, Social Justice Coordinator, Catholic Diocese of Parramatta

Brian Lawrence, Chairperson, Australian Cardijn Institute

Helen Forde, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Jesuit Mission

Phil Glendenning, Director, Edmund Rice Centre (ERC)

Richard Haddock, Chair, Mary Aikenhead Ministries

Fergus Fitzsimons, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Centacare New England NorthWest, The Social Services Agency of the Catholic Diocese of Armidale

Rebecca Bromhead, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Marist Solidarity Australia

Dr. Frank Malloy, National Director, Marist Schools Australia

Peter Loughnane, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Catholic Care – Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains

Mark Phillips, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Catholic Care – Sydney

John Lochowiak, Chairperson, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC)

Sr Louise Cleary csb, President, Australian Catholic Religious against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH)

Sr Brigitte Sipa, Regional Leader, Sisters of St Joseph Centre West Region

Sr Mary Clare Holland OP, Prioress, Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and the Solomon Islands

Cath Garner, Group Director, Cabrini Outreach

Sue Williams, Chief Executive Officer, Cabrini Health