

CONFIDENTIAL

EMBARGOED: 6.00 am Tuesday 3 September 2019

**2019–2020 Social Justice Statement  
of the  
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference**

**MAKING IT REAL  
Genuine Human Encounter in Our Digital World**

Attached is a confidential text-only version of the Australian Catholic Bishops' 2019–2020 Social Justice Statement for the information of Catholic print media in Australia.

This Statement is embargoed until Tuesday 3 September 2019 – the date of its launch. Social Justice Sunday is celebrated this year on Sunday 29 September.

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJ) and the Office for Social Justice invites Catholic media outlets to provide coverage of this important Statement in their publications but asks that this coverage occurs following the launch of the Statement on Tuesday 3 September and particularly for the weekend of Social Justice Sunday on 29 September.

A brief summary of the Social Justice Statement can be found at the ACSJC website:  
<https://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/files/Order-forms/2019/SJS%20Summary%202019.pdf>

Please ensure the Statement is not copied or distributed in any way.

Your coverage of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Social Justice Statement would be very much appreciated.

You are most welcome to join us at the national launch which will take place at 9.00 for 9.30 am on Tuesday 3 September at The Auditorium, Mary MacKillop Place, 11 Mount Street, North Sydney.

Please RSVP on (02) 8306 3499.

Yours in Christ

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

## **Social Justice Statement 2019–20**

### **MAKING IT REAL**

#### **GENUINE HUMAN ENCOUNTER IN OUR DIGITAL WORLD**

## Foreword

For those of us who are not ‘digital natives’, finding our way around the wide range of contemporary digital platforms can be challenging. Fear of falling victim to hoaxes, fake news, privacy breaches – or just wasting time scrolling endlessly through social media feeds – can hold us back. Some of us find it difficult to learn new technologies, and appreciate the help of younger people who know how to make use of them. Listening to people in parishes, I hear that often it is the desire to keep in touch with far flung family and friends that draws us to engage with social media. Our parishes, schools and other Catholic organisations have been quick to embrace the positive possibilities for communication and connection, and Pope Francis himself encourages us to ‘boldly become citizens of the digital world’.

People of all generations hunger for friendship and genuine human encounter because we are made for community. Our digital world enables us to be more connected than ever before, but sadly it can also be a place of manipulation, exploitation and violence. This too calls us to active citizenship because, at their heart, these problems are not technological, but rather moral. We can choose how we behave online, and we can collectively shape the online world, building a more just and loving online neighbourhood.

For example, as more and more essential services such as banking move online, we need to act together as a community to ensure digital inclusion so that our neighbours are not left by the side of the digital highway. It is also becoming increasingly clear that digital platforms require wise governance and that international cooperation is required to achieve this. The common good requires intervention rather than leaving digital platforms to govern themselves.

In this Social Justice Statement, the Australian Bishops invite you to reflect on how the internet has changed the way we communicate, work, learn, and do business – and how we can contribute towards a more just and loving digital world. We are called to ‘make real’ the love of God in the lives of our neighbours – both offline and on. I commend this Statement and the care of our digital world to you.

Most Rev. Terence J Brady DD  
Delegate for Social Justice  
Bishops Commission for Social Justice – Mission and Service

## Making It Real

### Genuine human encounter in our digital world

Anxious Lawyer  
Today 12:36pm

Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

What is written in the Law? What is your reading of it?

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.

You have answered right, do this and life is yours.

Luke 10:25-28

The lawyer's challenge sounds a lot like some of the online discussions that take place on Facebook or Twitter. Often the aim is to undercut an opponent, to win an argument or gain the approval of those who are gathered online. It seems the lawyer was more interested in tripping Jesus up in the presence of the disciples than he was in the subject of eternal life. Jesus goes to the heart of the matter, drawing the lawyer to the great commandment to love our God and our neighbour.

'And who is my neighbour?' the lawyer asks. Jesus makes his answer real in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is not the priest or the Levite who come to the aid of the man dying at the side of the road. They pass by. It is the Samaritan who breaks down all divisions and tends to the wounded man and sees him back to health.

Jesus  
Today 12:45pm

Which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the bandits' hands?

The one who showed pity towards him.

Go, and do the same yourself.

Luke 10:36-37

Jesus does not give a long list of rules and regulations, or a customised etiquette for how we should behave towards one another. He calls us first to something deeper – a way of living and a presence in this world that brings God's love to each and every person we meet.

The hallmark of our discipleship can be seen in how we make that love real in our relationships, how we serve our most vulnerable sisters and brothers, and how we break down divisions that undermine human dignity and the solidarity of our communities.

Where do we encounter our neighbour? Increasingly it is online.

This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Wide Web. The Web gave us access to the internet and revolutionised the way we communicate, work and learn, do business, seek entertainment and socialise. It is hard to believe that MySpace was launched a little over 15 years ago, with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and others following.

Half of the world's population is now online. Over 4.3 billion people are using the internet and 3.5 billion are social media users. Here in Australia, connectivity has also grown rapidly, with over 20 million people on the internet and 18 million using social media.<sup>1</sup>

The internet and social networking platforms encompass so many aspects of our lives that it is virtually impossible to imagine a world that isn't online.

#### **Did You Know?**

- \*every day, over one million people worldwide are coming online for the first time
- \*the world's average internet user spends over six and a half hours online each day
- \*the top three websites visited are Google, YouTube and Facebook
- \*on average, social media users spend over two hours on social media platforms each day
- \*Facebook has 2.3 billion active user accounts; YouTube, 1.9 billion; WhatsApp, 1.5 billion; Instagram, 1 billion
- \*five billion people use mobile phones<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis has often spoken of the great potential for 'genuine human encounter' in this space:

*Good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity ... Media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances. The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.<sup>3</sup>*

He has also warned of those elements of our digital world that are harmful – information overload; social isolation; marginalisation of the vulnerable; consumerism and fake news.

*Whenever communication is primarily aimed at promoting consumption or manipulating others, we are dealing with a form of violent aggression like that suffered by the man in the parable, who was beaten by the robbers and left abandoned by the side of the road ... It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highway, simply 'connected'; connections need to grow into true encounters.<sup>4</sup>*

A vital step to realising this encounter is to ask ourselves what kind of 'digital highway' we are on. Just as we would not accept a highway built of rubble, that leads us nowhere we want to go, so too we cannot accept a digital world designed to exploit our weaknesses and bring out the worst in people. It is clear that digital platforms are built to make a profit. But where they operate to maximise profit by undermining human dignity and the common good, we must question their structure, ownership and goals.

Every social media user, community, and political or corporate leader is called to do more to build online neighbourhoods ordered towards genuine human encounter.

And every member of the Church has a distinct role to play. Pope Francis is calling us to ‘boldly become citizens of the digital world’, with the image of the Good Samaritan as our inspiration. We are called not only to love our neighbour, but to bring the love of God to the new global neighbourhood.

## Love Your Neighbour

*The digital world is a public square, a meeting place where we can either encourage or demean one another, engage in meaningful discussion or unfair attacks ... Access to digital networks entails a responsibility for our neighbour whom we do not see but who is nonetheless real and has a dignity which must be respected ... The encounter between communication and mercy will be fruitful to the degree that it generates a closeness which cares, comforts, heals, accompanies and celebrates.*<sup>5</sup> (Pope Francis)

Within twelve hours of its 2016 launch, the Pope’s Instagram account amassed one million followers. That was record time but it still pales next to the 18 million who follow him on Twitter. Pope Francis has strongly advocated for the Church to embrace digital media as spaces for dialogue, evangelisation, and authentic community.<sup>6</sup>

Here in Australia, the Church is also embracing the digital transformation. An increasing number of bishops and religious leaders have a regular social media presence. And there is a proliferation of Catholic blogs, videos and online publications. We are finding ways to harness the possibilities for evangelisation and online formation, especially for young people.

There is a role here for the Church to accompany this generation of ‘digital natives’ as they grapple with how to use and manage the online world in healthy, life-giving ways.<sup>7</sup> Young people also show us the many ways social media can be harnessed.

There are immense benefits for humanity: staying connected with family and friends – sometimes over vast distances; meeting people from diverse cultures and geographies; educational and economic opportunities for previously excluded groups; and greater participation in political life.<sup>8</sup> Digital platforms have a role to call communities to action in the face of natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and human rights abuses.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, for all its present and potential use for good, the ‘web can be a place of loneliness, manipulation, exploitation and violence’.<sup>10</sup>

### **HUMAN DIGNITY**

*The essential question is whether the current information system is contributing to the betterment of the human person; that is, does it make people more spiritually mature, more aware of the dignity of their humanity, more responsible or more open to others, in particular to the neediest and the weakest.*<sup>11</sup>

The new digital media cannot be a place where anything goes. They cannot be seen as neutral or ‘unaffected by any moral considerations’.<sup>12</sup> Whenever we engage online we ought to be seeking both to create and to receive an authentic culture of encounter; an encounter that never loses sight of the human dignity in ourselves and those seemingly anonymous people on the other side of our screens.

We all share a responsibility to hold ourselves and the platforms we use to this standard.

## A culture of isolation and objectification

Far too often, the digital world has become a place of hatred. Digital technologies, especially social media, provide a perfect platform for a range of behaviours that are offensive to human dignity.

One of these includes the widespread sexual objectification, exploitation and trafficking of women and children and the related production and dissemination of pornography.<sup>13</sup> Recent studies have shown that three quarters of young Australian women have experienced online harassment. For over 40 per cent, the abuse was misogynistic, and for 20 per cent it included threats of sexual and physical violence.<sup>14</sup>

The data is not much better for teenagers and children. Fifteen per cent of teens are approached by strangers online each day and as many as 14 per cent of households with children are exposed to inappropriate material.<sup>15</sup>

The proliferation of pornography online is a serious concern. There is more likelihood of children being exposed to it at a younger age due to the high number of pornographic websites and young people's high levels of internet use. The use of pornography has a host of serious consequences, such as poor mental health and earlier, riskier and aggressive sexual behaviour. It impedes the maturation of the individual's sexual identity and damages relationships, marriages and families.

Access to such a highly sexualised world, one very often based on violence and humiliation, is reshaping how we understand intimacy and respectful relationships. Fundamentally, human dignity is undermined where the person is reduced to an object for trade and sexual gratification.<sup>16</sup>

Cyberbullying reveals another way in which digital technology is used without regard for human dignity. During the recent Synod on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment, participants from around the world raised this concern.

*Often, young people tend to separate their behaviour into online and offline environments ... Online relationships can become inhuman. Digital spaces blind us to the vulnerability of another human being and impede our self-reflection.*<sup>17</sup>

Bullying in Australian schools costs the economy \$2.3 billion a year, but the more frightening statistic is that over 20 per cent of Australians aged under 18 have experienced online bullying. Tragically, the relentlessness of cyberbullying is sometimes so extreme that it drives victims to suicide.<sup>18</sup>

*I was sent loads of horrible messages on several social media accounts, sent death threats with people telling me to kill myself. I also received phone calls and text messages attacking me. Furthermore, they were standing outside my house being abusive and saying horrible things to me. Fake accounts were made using my name to be horrible to others and to me.  
(A young woman, 13, bullied)<sup>19</sup>*

Even without the bullying and its devastating effects, an overreliance or even addiction to social media is having harmful effects and contributing to poorer mental health. ‘Fear of missing out’ (FOMO), ‘compare and despair’, and ‘Facebook depression’ are now common terms.

A recent psychological study has shown, for the first time, a causal link between the use of social media and lower rates of wellbeing. It examined Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram and found that, along with the displacement of real offline relationships, high levels of social comparison on these platforms contributed significantly to feelings of isolation and depression. Limiting time online to 30 minutes a day reduced the symptoms dramatically.<sup>20</sup>

While the digital platforms themselves have significant responsibility in addressing all of these areas where the dignity of the person is undermined, we each remain responsible for our online choices. We can either ‘grow in sympathy and compassion or become isolated in a narcissistic, self-referential world of stimuli with near-narcotic effects’.<sup>21</sup>

When we don’t choose to see the real people, our neighbours whom God calls us to love, who live on the other side of our posts, tweets and photos, we risk accepting not just bad behaviour but a culture of isolation with real-world consequences for our most vulnerable.

## **The great digital divide**

Just as digital technology has transformed the way we interact interpersonally, it is also revolutionising the way we interact with the state and some essential services.

Digital or ‘e-government’ services have become increasingly commonplace over the last decade. They have made it simpler and more convenient for many of us to access support from the state and community sector. However, the gains in technology have not been shared equitably. Various kinds of exclusion from the digital world have resulted in a ‘digital divide’ which is compounding the real-world marginalisation of too many people.

This divide means not being able to access, afford or effectively use digital technologies. Nationally, digital inclusion improved from 2014 to 2018 with a steady increase in internet access and devices so that we are now more connected than ever. However, almost 1.8 million Australian households are still not connected. The fact that the number of people using the internet has not grown over recent years suggests that digital inclusion is concentrating, not expanding.<sup>22</sup>

Those who most need access are missing out. Age, income, geography, cultural background, and having a disability are just some of the factors behind this divide. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, both in urban and rural areas face lower rates of digital inclusion. Older people face higher rates of exclusion than the young, largely driven by differences in digital abilities. Many low income families and people who are long-term unemployed are without the technology that is now essential for accessing basic services and finding work.<sup>23</sup>

Access to the internet is particularly important when people are in crisis; when they are most vulnerable to hardship and their personal security is at risk. Those experiencing homelessness or families fleeing domestic violence need technology capable of connecting with essential and emergency services.

*The phone card is important because being in a position where life can get pretty tough, I just thought that in the event of an emergency I could give my friend a call or my family a call. It's just having that safety net.  
(A young man who is homeless)<sup>24</sup>*

It is clear that social divisions are being replicated online. More worryingly, as essential services continue to shift online, digital inclusion becomes mandatory for basic participation in society. It should therefore be considered a human right.<sup>25</sup> This is especially important in the context of e-government, where the welfare of the most vulnerable is at stake.

Because online services usually have improved efficiencies for government, face-to-face services are shrinking. This not only forces more interaction online, but reduces previously relational services. It is unlikely that interpersonal services for people with multiple and complex needs is best delivered digitally.

### **COMMON GOOD**

*The common good therefore involves all members of society, no one is exempt from cooperating, according to each one's possibilities, in attaining it and developing it. The common good must be served in its fullness, not according to reductionist visions that are subordinated by certain people to their own advantage ... it requires the constant ability and effort to seek the good of others as though it were one's own good.<sup>26</sup>*

It is tempting to think that the digital divide can be solved with only technical solutions. But digital exclusion is primarily a moral and social problem. It requires us to ask how much we value the poor and marginalised and whether we want a community built for the common good in which we recognise and love each other as neighbours.

Just as in our social media interactions and behaviours, the fundamental question is whether we will choose to use digital technology to make faceless, nameless and soulless the human beings on the other side of our devices or whether we will choose to authentically encounter and honour their humanity, and our own.

This requires entering into relationship with each other and not turning away from suffering and injustice by consenting to a digital world built on anonymity and denial of our humanity. Any technical solutions will only ever be as good as the culture and values we decide they are going to serve.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis recognises the important role of young people entering the virtual world 'as if setting foot on an undiscovered global continent'. They have a vital role to bridge the 'real' and the 'virtual'.

*Young people today are the first to have to effect this synthesis between what is personal, what is distinctive to their respective cultures, and what is global. This means they must find ways to pass from virtual contact to good and healthy communication.<sup>27</sup>*

The child who is bullied, the woman who is objectified, the poor who are denied resources and opportunities the majority take for granted – they are waiting for the neighbourliness that bridges the divide; the friendship of the Good Samaritan made real in this virtual world.

## Love Your Neighbourhood

*If the Internet represents an extraordinary possibility of access to knowledge, it is also true that it has proven to be one of the areas most exposed to disinformation and to the conscious and targeted distortion of facts and interpersonal relationships, which are often used to discredit. We need to recognise how social networks, on the one hand, help us to better connect, rediscover, and assist one another, but on the other, lend themselves to the manipulation of personal data, aimed at obtaining political or economic advantages, without due respect for the person and his or her rights.*<sup>28</sup> (Pope Francis)

As a Church we speak out strongly against the epidemics of cyberbullying, pornography and sexting, and rightly so. However, interpersonal relationships are not the only space where our attention is needed. We must look at the structures of the platforms themselves.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus introduces us not only to the two central characters. As it is in all stories, he speaks of the context; the road travelled, the powerful who walk by without assisting, and the resources and institutions that could make real change for people who are in need. We need to think about how we love our neighbour *and* how our love can shape the structures, processes and institutions of our online neighbourhood.

The digital landscape has the capability not only to reach, but to transform the lives of billions of users around the world. This technology has been heralded as a tool for democratisation and the common good.

From the Arab Spring to the #MeToo movement, digital communication has challenged tyrants and provided a platform for solidarity and human rights. More and more we are a global village where the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of people around the world can become real to us.

The Church is no stranger to the changing means of communications, as seen by the advent of Vatican Radio in 1931; one of the first radio stations ever to broadcast. Much like Vatican Radio, the Church is using this new digital space to preach the Good News and strive for justice and peace.

Unfortunately, ideologies antithetical to these values are able to use this space with the same efficiency. A lack of understanding of what the platforms we are engaged in are, at their core, has most users believing they are partaking in a free and neutral technology meant to serve as a social network. While these spaces do connect us in ways that were unimaginable a mere 25 years ago, they are not free or neutral.<sup>29</sup>

We are living in a time where millions of Australians are handing over their most intimate details to advertising brokers with little understanding of how this information is used. In those areas where the technology has reduced people's personal lives to data that is traded for profit or power, we cannot say that this is a space for an integral development that recognises the God-given dignity of each person beyond a mere economic valuation.

## INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

*In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life – political, economic and cultural – must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity... guaranteeing the common good and fostering integral human development: love ‘makes one see in neighbour another self’.*<sup>30</sup>

### Profit put before people

Most of us do not question the platforms we are on or why we are receiving the product for free. They are seen as essential services provided by regulated entities that are to be trusted to act ethically. Perhaps this is why as few as six per cent of Australians read all the privacy policies or terms of use of the online services they sign up to.<sup>31</sup> There is a reason these products are free and reasons why they need to be questioned.

Put simply, if you are not paying for the product, you *are* the product.

The core business of social media platforms is to sell advertising and maximise profits. With massive amounts of our data in the hands of advertisers or political campaigners, equipped with behavioural science modelling, we can be directly targeted and influenced in ways previously unthinkable.

*Facebook’s business model involves having people go to the site for social interaction, only to be quietly subjected to an enormous level of surveillance. The results of that surveillance are used to fuel a sophisticated and opaque system for narrowly targeting advertisements... by profiling us and then selling our attention to advertisers, political actors and others. These are Facebook’s true customers, whom it works hard to please.*

(Professor Zeynep Tufekci, Techno-sociologist)<sup>32</sup>

Advertising is big business. Last year, 2.8 billion people purchased consumer goods online with a total sales revenue of US\$1.79 trillion.<sup>33</sup> The top ten digital firms have dominated online advertising over the past two decades. Google and Facebook together have taken almost 75 per cent of total US digital advertising of around \$60 billion per annum.<sup>34</sup> Here in Australia, of the \$8 billion spent on online advertising in 2017 over half went to Google and Facebook.<sup>35</sup>

This is a time of ‘information asymmetry’. The corporate entities holding our data have swaths of information on individuals while the general population knows very little about those holding their data or their motives.<sup>36</sup> It is hard to talk about integral human development when our most meaningful experiences, relationships, hopes and fears are monitored and traded to commercial advertisers or political campaigners.

In order to maximise attention to these advertisers, users must be engaged. The longer we are on the platform the more advertising revenue is generated. However, we must ask; to what lengths are these corporations willing to go to maintain engagement, and how far is too far?

When we search for information on platforms such as YouTube, we choose the subject and topic. However, we do not choose what is recommended for us to view next. These related videos are chosen by algorithms designed to ensure we remain on the platform generating

revenue. Everything that is clicked, liked, shared, purchased or commented upon is recorded as ‘signals’ of consumer preference. This enables the platforms and their clients to target products and ideas to users.<sup>37</sup>

The goal of the recommendation process is to promote content based on popularity, not truth.

*Popularity and the degree to which information provokes outrage, confirmation bias, or engagement are increasingly important in driving its spread. The speed and scale at which content ‘goes viral’ grows exponentially, regardless of whether or not the information it contains is true.*

(Philip Howard & Samantha Bradshaw – Social media and internet scholars)<sup>38</sup>

This is what researchers have dubbed ‘computational propaganda’, a factor in online radicalisation. It is about more than just seeing things that are not true.

## Undermining solidarity and democracy

Pushing users to more extreme positions and promoting fake news and conspiracy theories sells. But this is at odds with human solidarity. We are called to stand as one human family regardless of our differences. How can we build online communities rooted in the principle of solidarity when the platforms themselves promote content that ‘grasps people’s attention by appealing to stereotypes and common social prejudices, and exploiting instantaneous emotions like anxiety, contempt, anger and frustration’?<sup>39</sup>

### **SOLIDARITY**

*Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity.*<sup>40</sup>

In this virtual neighbourhood it is important to encounter our neighbours through authentic communications. In order for us as Church to follow the authentic path in this space, we will need to know if we are communicating with a person on the other side of the screen, not a computer program.

Our digital community is falling prey to automated programs designed to interact with us while behaving like a human. In broad strokes these programs are known as bots. When they are created as a means of amplifying digital misinformation they become a real threat to democracies. Twitter bots played a role in the tweeting and retweeting of falsehoods and misinformation during the 2016 US election.<sup>41</sup>

In an industry that is facing a growing backlash over the real impact of disinformation, electoral interference and data misuse, it is apparent to many that social media networks need some form of governmental accountability. Unfortunately, some nation states are doing the opposite and either ceding more of their responsibilities to tech monopolies or failing to adequately protect their information systems from malicious cyber activity.<sup>42</sup>

These tech companies are responsible to their shareholders, first and foremost. This does not mean they cannot be good corporate citizens. Without accountability, however, we cannot

expect that they will work for the common good. Should we rely on trust when the common good is in conflict with corporate profits?

- Children and teens are particularly sensitive to the dopamine cravings social media and mobile devices offer.<sup>43</sup> Who is responsible to bring this to the attention of the consumer and parents?
- When a major platform allows the likes of Cambridge Analytica to mine the data of 87 million accounts to influence an election, we cannot be sure our own data and democracy are secure.<sup>44</sup>
- And, when a white supremacist walks into a Christchurch Mosque and broadcasts on social media the killing of 50 of our Muslim brothers and sisters, it becomes clearer that these platforms need to be held to account.<sup>45</sup>

It would be easy to read the criticism of these platforms and their scope with a defeatist lens; however, we are people of hope.

This technology is nascent. Like many new technologies or scientific findings it takes time for us to educate ourselves and mobilise to take action. We need only look to the regulatory actions we have taken in the past 50 years for examples of how our human solidarity has made the world a better place. Cigarettes now have warning labels, cars now have seatbelts, the ozone layer is healing. These changes were brought about by concerted efforts and acts of solidarity, and we are thankful for that.

Our society is now asking questions about how we use the technology. Schools are implementing education programmes, legislators are questioning what regulatory controls need to be placed on digital platforms and even the industry is questioning its own responsibility. A global IT company has established the first ever Office of Ethical and Humane Use of Technology.<sup>46</sup> Increasingly we are seeing governments, markets and civil society recognise the deleterious effects abuse of the online world can have and the initiatives required to ameliorate the harm.

This is our digital common home, and the principles we find in Catholic Social Teaching and the words of Pope Francis can help guide us to a more just digital space.

## A Call to Action

*I would like to encourage everyone to engage in constructive forms of communication that reject prejudice towards others and foster a culture of encounter, helping all of us to view the world around us with realism and trust.*<sup>47</sup> (Pope Francis)

We are called not just to be inhabitants of this new digital world, but active citizens shaping it. We all have a role to play in rejecting hatred, divisions and falsehoods. More than this, we have a duty to foster a neighbourhood that promotes all of the human attributes and social values that lend themselves to genuine human encounter – love, understanding, beauty, goodness, truth and trustworthiness, joy and hope.<sup>48</sup>

## **The call to every user**

### ***Make your online presence one of dignity and respect.***

Always remember that each person we communicate with on social media is a real person – made in the image and likeness of God. Be careful not to access or post anything that is demeaning, inappropriate or exploitative. Do not be dismissive, judgemental or aggressive in your conversation.

As one social media author advocates: ‘Tweet others as you would wish to be tweeted’.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Be present to others in the real and virtual worlds.***

The speed and brevity of communication on the platforms can be open to misinterpretation and a superficiality that makes others feel that they have not been truly heard or accepted. Similarly, excessive time spent on social media can deprive families and friends of your ‘real’ presence in their lives.

Limit the time you spend on devices. A ‘digital detox’ is important for your health and wellbeing. Times of abstinence and reflection fit well with the Seasons of Lent and Advent.

### ***Take care of yourself and others online.***

Unfortunately, cyberbullying, trolling and the objectification of others is not an uncommon experience. We cannot stand by when another is denigrated or threatened. We can call out bad behaviour and stand by the victim. This can require diplomacy. Be mindful that sometimes abusive behaviour is so irrational and unrelenting, the best option is to disengage.

Discuss experiences of cyberbullying with your family, friends or school. Report abuse and access helpful information from the eSafety Commissioner ([esafety.gov.au](http://esafety.gov.au)).

## **The call on communities**

### ***Every community should promote digital literacy.***

Digital technologies are so prevalent and increasingly necessary in our day to day lives. People of all ages need the know-how to access and navigate the online world. They need information on the operation of platforms and how personal data is used. Education is key to being aware of the great possibilities but also the pitfalls. Apathy or resignation to the current state of play is not an option.

Through greater awareness, ‘we will employ technology wisely rather than letting ourselves be dominated by it.’<sup>50</sup>

### ***We cannot leave our sisters and brothers behind.***

Too many vulnerable Australians remain offline and without the means to access essential services and opportunities. They are excluded because of problems of affordability, gaps in access, or low digital literacy.

There is a role for governments to guarantee internet access, technological devices and user skills as a basic human right. Interpersonal support must remain where access is difficult or technology cannot meet complex human need.

***The local community is a place to make the virtual real.***

Social media platforms are venues not just for socialising, but for raising awareness of local issues, becoming politically engaged, and harnessing the power of crowdsourcing. This engagement can be limited where it does not cross over to the physical community. Advocacy for justice can be reduced to e-petitions, and civic affairs to mere ‘clicktivism’.<sup>51</sup>

Pope Francis is encouraging young people to ‘find ways to pass from virtual contact to good and healthy communication’.<sup>52</sup> Local government, churches and community groups have a vital role in offering a physical space where the online community is made welcome and supported face-to-face.

**The call on political and industrial leaders**

***We must protect the personal data of citizens.***

There is a growing awareness that personal data is subject to corporate surveillance and misuse. Research shows nine out of ten Australians using platforms want to know with whom their information is being shared. They want the platforms to be open about how they use data and to have the ability to opt out of having certain information collected.

We can join the growing call for regulation of platform data gathering which increases notification and consumer consent requirements, with external audits and penalties for breaches of privacy.<sup>53</sup>

***We call for transparency and accountability in all online systems.***

Governments around the world need to be much more coordinated in working with tech corporations. Civil society and user organisations also need to have a role in the governance of the internet and platforms, ensuring basic standards are not undermined by the drive for profit and market domination.

Major corporations need to open their algorithms, data governance and business models to the communities in which they operate.<sup>54</sup>

***Truth and trustworthiness must be guaranteed.***

Honesty and trust are fundamental to the operation of our social, economic and political institutions. Half-truths, lies and slander gone viral can harm the solidarity of a people, particularly during important periods like election campaigns.

Our right to truthful information and trustworthy broadcasting requires greater regulation of digital platforms, with sanctions for the spread of fake, divisive and offensive content. Governments have a responsibility to support robust and independent journalism, particularly through the public broadcaster.<sup>55</sup>

Action at all these levels – by users, communities and leaders in industry and government – is needed to infuse the digital world with a realism and trust that allows for genuine human encounter.
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## The Call to Us as Church

*Genuine* relationships are based on truth and develop over time. They are not fleeting or characterised by falsehood or discord. Relationships that are truly *human* recognise the dignity of the other, made in the image and likeness of God. They foster an integral development beyond immediate wants and needs to build up the person socially, culturally and spiritually. True *encounter* makes real the love of God in the life of our neighbour. There can be nothing that isolates or divides.

We live in an increasingly ‘private’ world, which mitigates against human interaction in the real world. Entertainment, travel and even our working lives are becoming more isolating. Why go to the theatre when a movie can be streamed at home? Why go out to a restaurant when a myriad of choices can be delivered with the click of a mouse? Technology allows us to work across cyber space without the need for face-to-face contact. Even when forced out of our private cars onto public transport, the power of the device allows us to cocoon ourselves from fellow travellers.

There is a risk that our cities, towns and suburbs are moving from being communities to a collection of individuals.

Our Church has an important role to play in building the city of God in reality and online.

*Keeping the doors of our churches open also means keeping them open in the digital environment so that people, whatever their situation in life, can enter, and so that the Gospel can go out to reach everyone. We are called to show that the Church is the home of all.<sup>56</sup>*

God’s encounter with creation is incarnational; primarily in the person of Jesus. Jesus, the God who became man gathered children in his arms, touched and healed the leper, the blind, the sick and the broken.

This incarnational presence continues sacramentally in the Church as we gather to hear God’s Word and receive the Eucharist. We are anointed with oil, sprinkled with water and have ashes deposited on our foreheads. Even the best of digital encounters cannot replace the Real Presence of Christ, given and received sacramentally, or the real presence of human encounter.

We have highlighted the areas of the online world where the vulnerable are bullied, people are excluded, profits are put before people and misinformation undermines the solidarity of communities. Here lies a key challenge for the people of God. It is in these areas that we are called to draw near and reach out to those who are devalued and distressed.

Now more than ever we have the opportunity to be Samaritans to a robbed and beaten world. We have the ability to connect with others in ways never dreamed of and to use that ability to bandage the wounded, lift them up and lead them to a safe place in both the online and real world.

Jesus’ response to the lawyer – ‘Go, and do the same’ – are the words he speaks to us today.

As a community of faith, let us make real the love of God in our virtual world.

***A prayer from Pope Francis***<sup>57</sup>

*Lord, make us instruments of your peace.*

*Help us to recognise the evil latent in a communication that does not build communion.*

*Help us to remove the venom from our judgements.*

*Help us to speak about others as our brothers and sisters.*

*You are faithful and trustworthy; may our words be seeds of goodness for the world:*

*where there is shouting, let us practise listening;*

*where there is confusion, let us inspire harmony;*

*where there is ambiguity, let us bring clarity;*

*where there is exclusion, let us offer solidarity;*

*where there is sensationalism, let us use sobriety;*

*where there is superficiality, let us raise real questions;*

*where there is prejudice, let us awaken trust;*

*where there is hostility, let us bring respect;*

*where there is falsehood, let us bring truth.*

*Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Communication and Mercy: A Fruitful Encounter*, Message for the 50th World Communications Day, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016.

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<sup>11</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, n.415.

<sup>12</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Encyclical Letter On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009, n.73.

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