

2025•2026  
SOCIAL JUSTICE  
STATEMENT

# Signs of Hope on the Edge

Serving  
homeless  
people with  
mental  
ill-health







#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How does Pope Francis' call to be "builders of hope" resonate with your personal or communal faith practice?

In what ways might we be tempted to "walk by and not notice" those on the margins in our daily lives?

## Foreword


*In the last few years, Australians have been living through a cost-of-living crisis. The cost of many goods and services has increased dramatically - including housing mortgages and rent.*

Many have struggled to cope under the pressure; and one of the worrying results of this crisis is an increasing number of Australians finding themselves relying on friends or family giving them a roof over their head or, even worse, sleeping on the streets.

Homelessness services are not able to offer help to everyone who is in this predicament. Without this help, more and more Australians are being pushed to the edge of society. It is a lonely and frightening place to be.

It is even worse for those who are not only homeless but also living with serious mental ill-health. Not only are there not enough resources to assist people living in homelessness who need help, but mental health services are not able to help everyone who needs support.

This year's Social Justice Statement, *Signs of Hope on the Edge: Serving People Living in Homelessness and Mental Ill-Health*, provides a picture of what life is like for people living in homelessness and mental ill-health and the difficulty in providing adequate support for them.



The statement urges every Christian to offer service, as Jesus did, to our sisters and brothers created in the image of God.

Many Australians find it embarrassing, uncomfortable or even confronting to see homeless people on the streets; but we encourage all who are baptised to, instead, offer loving friendship to people on the edge of society. Instead of walking by and not noticing the plight of our neighbours, pay attention to them and their plight, listen to their stories, and serve them with the love we learn from Jesus.

In this Jubilee Year, Pope Francis reminded us, as Christians, of our “fundamental vocation to be, in the footsteps of Christ, messengers and builders of hope.”

We appeal to all Christians to join us in going to the edge of society to befriend our fellow Australians who are living on the streets, who are often struggling with serious mental ill-health, to be signs of hope, to be the good news that God’s unfailing love embraces everyone.

⊕ ***Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, SDB***

PRESIDENT, AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE





# People on the Edge

*While Jewish law sought to protect and care for blind people and others with a disability, in Jesus' day, lepers and people with a disability such as blind people were treated as social outcasts. Their condition was often viewed as a punishment for sin. They were commonly found on the edges of towns begging for money.*<sup>1</sup>

Mark's Gospel tells the story of Jesus' encounter with a blind man named Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46 – 52). Bartimaeus was begging for money at the edges of the town of Jericho. Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho with a crowd of followers when Bartimaeus, who had heard that Jesus was leaving the town, called out to him: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." People in the crowd with Jesus told him to be quiet. They did not seem to notice his needs, but Jesus did. Jesus told them to bring Bartimaeus to him. He asked the blind man what he wanted from him. Bartimaeus replied: "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus healed Bartimaeus and he joined Jesus' followers.

Today, blind people are not treated in the same way as they were in Jesus' time. Certainly, some blind people face discrimination and struggle to participate



fully in society, but many live full lives with Government, community and family support. However, homeless people find themselves on the edge of society. Many of them also live with significant mental ill-health. Some cannot find or afford stable housing and rely on friends offering them a bed. Others live and sleep under bridges, in parks and on the streets. It is very common to see the tents of people living in homelessness springing up in public places all over Australia. Their presence makes many people feel very uncomfortable. When they ask for money, many ignore their request and walk on by. For some, it would be better if homeless people remained silent. They would prefer it if they were moved on from the streets. It is an attitude very much like Jesus' followers' attitude when Bartimaeus sought Jesus' attention. Many of us either do not really see or understand the immense needs of people living in homelessness or feel so burdened by the stress of daily life that giving time to them would be too much of a challenge.

# Stories from the Edge

*Our encounter with Jesus and each other in the Eucharist shapes and forms us both as individuals and as communities of faith. In the same way that Bartimaeus' encounter with Jesus radically transformed his life, we, too, are invited by Jesus to accept the transformation he offers us. That will lead to a very different relationship with those who struggle to live dignified lives in our community, including homeless people with mental ill-health.*

Pope Francis encouraged us to embrace a culture of encounter as we seek to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. In the preparation of the Social Justice Statement, we, too, emphasise the importance of encounter as an essential element in our efforts to carry out our mission today.

## *Michael's Story*

**In the course of our ministry, we Bishops have spoken directly with homeless people who struggle with their mental health. One of them is Michael. Michael lives in Tasmania. He lived on the streets for a number of years**

**and has struggled with severe depression. With the help of the Society of St Vincent de Paul's supported accommodation facility, Bethlehem House, Michael is, now, turning his life around. We have invited Michael to tell his story in his own words:**

"Three years ago, my oldest boy, Nicky, was killed while he was riding a motorcycle at high speed in Melbourne. Nicky's death turned my life upside down. I struggled with my mental health and turned to drugs to cope."

"My family couldn't cope with my drug abuse, and I landed up on the streets. I slept wherever I could find a place. It was tough, scary and very lonely."

"My depression got so bad that I tried to kill myself twice. I hung myself, but the police cut me down in time. Another time, I was going to jump off the Tasman Bridge, but the police pulled me back before I could do it."

"That is how I got into Beth House. My life has turned around since I came to Beth House in 2024."

"They have helped me by arranging regular psychologist meetings and drug counselling. I am now totally drug free."

"I have taken art classes, and I am now doing a portrait of my son, Nicky. I could not have done that three years ago."

"I have also learned to cook and a few of us make dinner for everyone each Sunday night."

"My days are very active now. I have a part-time job at MONA. I organise regular evening walks for people living here. We also play lawn bowls and compete in an indoor cricket competition. I like to sing too, and I have started belting out a few tunes."

"In the bad years, I built up a debt to Homes Tasmania for unpaid rent. Beth House helped me to set up a debt re-payment agreement. I'm looking forward to paying it off so I can move into a two-bedroom home of my own. I know I have more job opportunities waiting for me when the MONA job finishes. So, I know I will be able to cope financially"

"Life is fun again. I want to be with my kids and grandkids again. The boys and I are looking forward to going camping soon. I have hope in my life again. I wake up every morning with a smile on my face. My daughter says that I am shining!"

### *"Sally's" Story*

**Fr Peter Day, who worked with the Queanbeyan community, to open HOME, a place where people with mental ill-health and at risk of homelessness live, offered this story of a woman's struggle to be treated as a human being and not just a mental illness, which we have been given permission to share.**

"That damned schizophrenia. That damned Black Dog. I just want to be normal. It's not a big ask, surely? That damned mental illness... away from me, away..."

"Wouldn't wish this disease on my worst enemy. It squeezes the life out of you, makes you feel like an outsider, outside the game of life that 'normal' people seem to play so well."

"Gosh, once it even cajoled me to live in my car... and I obliged."

'Sally' is not doing so well. The normalcy she craves has left and gone away. There's now a chasm between her and the game of life. The

Black Dog (depression) has caught up with her. Not surprising, mind you! It's been chasing her for 20 odd years.

She got tired. She couldn't run anymore. Nothing left! So, up to the emergency department doors she went.

"Doctor, nurse, anyone? I can't run anymore. The Black Dog's too fast, too strong. I'm worn out, just want to be normal."

They heard her - sort of. Into a tiny room she was sent to wait - to wait to be seen by someone, someone with expertise, someone who 'gets it'.

"Someone who truly notices. gosh, someone I can see and smell and connect with, please."

It was a pretty long wait, not because the psychiatrist and other mental health professionals were too busy that night, but because there weren't any on deck.

That's the norm these days. The local mental health system has adopted a new model of care. It's a crisis-centred approach, reactive rather than preventative.

It's more a nine to five system too, a lot less expensive — not that money has anything to do with the cutbacks. This is a 'better model', they say.

The wait is over for our friend. Into another room she goes to be greeted by a big television screen beaming in the face of a distant expert. There will be no human contact with mental health professionals this night, no connection, no noticing.

It's a shame, really, because this isn't a fair reflection of the many local mental health teams stationed on the ground. They are

often a compassionate, committed group of professionals. However, like the talented busker who has been tossed an extra 12 balls to juggle in the middle of his act, things get dropped.

We are asking too much from too few — and it's people, not balls, that are being dropped. The consultation with the TV screen expert is underway. It's not easy conversing with a screen when you are desperately ill, isolated and alone. Perhaps, the expert also finds it hard. She also cares, no doubt. It's just that the system is slowly but surely stripping itself of its humanity. It seems to be a common theme these days - screens and things and AI replacing people.

'Why don't you talk to your GP?' says the TV expert whose eyes look tired and distracted.

Don't tell the GPs that. They're sick of being used as default psychiatrists cum 'case workers' for the mental health system. As if they haven't got enough on their plates. More and more, their clinics are awash with people set adrift by an overwhelmed and poorly designed system.

Many believe awareness around mental health is at an all-time high. It probably is, but things on the ground remain dire despite the heroics of some being forced to juggle more and more.

Sally's TV screen consultation is over. Exhausted, she walks back home on her own. It's midnight.

More phone calls the following day. This is serious. She's still not doing so well.

Thankfully, members of the local mental health team take up the baton, ever prepared to take it that extra mile. Things are starting

to happen; but Sally also happens to be well connected, that is, she is surrounded by people who can navigate the system. Too many others can't.

The mental health landscape in this nation is in severe drought. It is a system short on love and humanity, in need of a coordinated, person-centred vision.

As the Federal Mental Health Commission said in its national review *Contributing Lives, Thriving Communities*: "It is clear the mental health system has fundamental structural shortcomings. This same conclusion has been reached by numerous other independent and governmental reviews."

"Stigma persists. People have a poor experience of care. The system doesn't prioritise people's needs, it responds too late, is fragmented, and does not see the whole person."

Sally is still not doing so well. She says she needs patience and time and people. She says love works too. She also says it's important to be treated as a human being rather than an illness.

### *Carol's Story*

**Mission Australia tells this story of a woman who unexpectedly found herself living in homelessness at 67. <sup>2</sup>**

Carol remembers the plans she shared with her late husband. They were supposed to retire together and plant a veggie patch filled with cherry tomatoes, carrots and their favourite flowers.



Sadly, her life took an unexpected turn when her beloved husband, Tom, passed away. After his death, Carol struggled to afford the mortgage on her own.

The death of her husband left Carol with no options; she was evicted from her home and became homeless.

Carol put her name down on the list for public housing, something she never imagined she would have to do. Without a place to stay she sought work as a hospital cleaner to make ends meet and managed to find a small room above a local pub.

With only a single bed, drawer and a coffee table, the small room was a huge contrast to the warm and loving home she once shared with her late husband.

One week at the pub quickly turned into months and what was meant to be a short-term solution was starting to feel permanent. Each night as she tried to sleep through the loud sounds from the pub downstairs, she felt lost, completely alone and was losing hope.

Thankfully, Mission Australia connected with Carol and provided her with the help she needed. They helped her with everyday tasks like managing overdue bills and guided Carol through the complex and overwhelming housing system to ensure she was placed on a priority list.

Most importantly, they listened to Carol and supported her through a difficult and lonely period of her life.

Many older people like Carol are at risk of homelessness. One in seven people living in homelessness in Australia is over 55. Older people can find themselves homeless because of financial instability as in Carol's case. It can

also be triggered by elder abuse or disability and illness, including mental ill-health.

## *The Hello-Lovely-Man*

**Luis was the gentlest of men: quiet, humble; and set alight by a warm, welcoming face.**

He was bereft of words, hardly spoke at all. Perhaps upwards of ninety percent of his communication centered on two simple greetings: "Hello, lovely man" or "Hello, lovely lady."

He loved to walk the streets, shyly taking in the surrounds, winking at the birds and generally delighting in the simple things. That he walked as slowly as any man ever has – literally 500 meters an hour! – gave him plenty of time to take things in.

He also loved to sit, to just be – doing even that very slowly. Any bench would do. Motionless, he'd watch unobtrusively for hours on end as his fellow citizens rushed-by to their next appointment, oblivious to the Hello- Lovely-Man – and to the birds and trees and sky.

But none of this is as romantic as it sounds. Luis, too, would have loved to have been able to rush to an appointment, or two, or three; but it's not easy to live and move at pace while carrying a heavy cross – in Luis's case, enduring mental illness and its associated crown of loneliness.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Which of the personal stories (Michael, Sally, Carol, Luis) impacted you the most, and why?

What do these stories teach us about the importance of human connection and community?

How might your parish, school, or family embody a "culture of encounter" as Pope Francis encouraged?



# Some facts about homelessness

## A GROWING PROBLEM

*In 2022-23, 273,600 people were assisted by homelessness services. Around one-third of these had a mental health issue. Around one-quarter were single parents.*

Almost 40% of people who have slept on the streets at some time had a mental health issue. This is much higher than in the general population. <sup>3</sup>

Since 2011, the rate and proportion of homeless people with a mental health issue has increased each year.

The twin crises of housing availability and family and domestic violence are the main reasons for those with mental ill-health seeking assistance from homelessness services.

A survey of homelessness agencies in September 2024 showed that many of them have had to suspend services and were not able to help many of the people who approached them. <sup>4</sup> Many agencies struggle to provide emergency accommodation to families with young children and to unaccompanied young people. <sup>5</sup>

In the ten years to 2022, 12,500 people who asked for help at a homelessness service died. The rate of deaths has increased over that decade. Suicide and accidental poisoning are the leading causes of death in this group of homeless people. <sup>6</sup>

## HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health issues can both contribute to the risk of experiencing homelessness and develop in response to experiencing homelessness. <sup>7</sup>

Access to housing is recognised as a vital contributor to a person's well-being including their physical and mental health.

Many people are just one life event away from housing stress – losing a job, falling ill, becoming a carer, ending a relationship, being on a temporary visa or experiencing family and domestic violence.

Too often, many homeless people with undiagnosed mental health conditions 'fly under the radar' and end up falling between the service gaps.

Evidence suggests that it is very difficult for a person to access mental health services unless they are in an acute crisis. People often find themselves being told they are not unwell enough to be admitted to hospital, yet too unwell to be admitted to other facilities. <sup>8</sup>

## HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE

In 2023, about 40,000 young Australians sought homelessness support. Alarmingly, nearly half are turned away from crisis

accommodation services due to a severe lack of resources and space. This issue is especially concerning for younger individuals, who often lack access to youth-appropriate shelters. This is particularly so for those aged 12 to 15 years. Without these services, many are left to navigate the harsh reality of homelessness alone, without adequate protection or support.<sup>9</sup>

Cost-of-living pressures and increasing rents, family and domestic violence, mental health issues and drug abuse particularly contribute to the rising rates of youth homelessness.

Studies consistently identify mental ill-health as a significant risk factor for youth homelessness. Psychosocial health issues are estimated to contribute to up to one-third of young people's experiences of homelessness. The severity of a young person's mental health condition greatly increases their risk of homelessness.<sup>10</sup>

The effects of homelessness on young people are profound, impacting every aspect of their lives. Homelessness is not just about the absence of shelter—it disrupts health, education, mental well-being, and future opportunities, leaving young people vulnerable to lifelong consequences.

Homeless youth are at significantly higher risk for developing mental health disorders. They are four to five times more likely to experience conditions like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse than young people living in stable housing. The constant stress of not knowing where they will sleep or whether they will have access to food or hygiene can trigger or worsen existing mental health issues.<sup>11</sup>

In some cases, the psychological burden becomes so overwhelming that homeless

young people turn to self-harming and suicide. In the last year, Melbourne City Mission indicated that more than half of the young homeless people seeking their support reported self-harming, thoughts of suicide or attempted suicide.<sup>12</sup>

## THE NEED FOR URGENT ACTION

The growing crisis of homelessness in Australia demands immediate and sustained action. The health, educational, and economic consequences of homelessness are profound, and the longer homeless people are left without support, the more difficult it becomes for them to rebuild their lives. The impact of homelessness is not just a crisis for the individuals affected—it's a crisis for society as a whole.

Many reports on the problem have been produced by universities, Parliamentary committees and peak organisations like Homelessness Australia. Key recommendations for action arising from these reports are: <sup>13 14 15</sup>

- A significant increase in supported accommodation places and affordable housing.
- Recruit and retain a larger mental health workforce.
- Integrate mental health services with housing and homelessness support.
- Increase funding to ensure no one is turned away by homelessness services.
- Fund specialised healthcare services for homeless people.



- Develop a national strategy to prevent people becoming homeless after leaving hospitals, mental health facilities, and prisons and detention centres.
- Enhance tenancy protections, including limiting “no grounds” evictions.
- Provide tenancy support services for people with mental illness in both social and private housing.
- Increase access to financial security measures, such as the Disability Support Pension.
- Raise the rate of income support payments such as Job Seeker so that people do not have to make choices between paying rent or other essential services.

Such measures will go a long way to addressing the growing homelessness and mental health problem Australia faces. Greater investment in supported accommodation reduces hospitalisation rates by over 70%, length of hospital stays by 75%, and demand for community mental health services by 74%. <sup>16</sup> Addressing housing and mental health together improves stability and long-term recovery for homeless people. Housing First models are also proven to lower rates of homelessness and provide cost-effective solutions for individuals with severe mental ill-health. <sup>17</sup>

2022-2023

273,600

people received assistance from homelessness services

2022-2023

12,500

people who asked for help at a homelessness service died

---

*Since 2011, the rate and proportion of homeless people with a mental health issue has increased each year.*

---

2023

40,000

young Australians sought homelessness support



# Responding as Christians

*There are many in the Church in Australia who are reaching out to homeless people, including those with mental ill-health to help them to make a difference in their lives.*

The Society of St Vincent de Paul has many initiatives in every State. Michael, who shared his story in this statement, is being supported by the Society's team in one of its many initiatives, Bethlehem House in Hobart. St John of God Healthcare's social outreach service also have some wonderful initiatives

such as Horizon House which supports young people facing homelessness and Casa Venegas offering support and secure housing to adults living with mental ill-health who are at risk of homelessness. In Queanbeyan, Fr Peter Day brought community members together to open HOME, an initiative based on a simple Christ-centred vision which seeks to create a safe and loving home for people with chronic mental ill-health who struggle to live independently or are at risk of homelessness.

## THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERY CHRISTIAN

As good as these initiatives are, we who are baptised and given the sacred responsibility of carrying out the mission entrusted to us by Jesus are all called to reach out to those on the edges of society, like homeless people, and offer them loving care. We cannot leave it all to the "professionals".

At every Eucharist we are sent out to live the Gospel. Christ, the Bread of Life, feeds us and, in turn, we offer his nourishment and healing to the beggars we encounter on the streets.

The credibility and authenticity of our commitment to follow Jesus hinges not just on our willingness to humbly wash the battered and bruised feet of our world, but to enter into relationship with those whose feet we wash.

"The people on the edges have much to teach us," said Pope Francis. "In their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelised by them. The new evangelisation is an invitation to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends,

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

In what ways is your faith community already responding to the needs of people on the margins?

How do you interpret the statement that "we are not professional services... we are Christians"?

How is your community's celebration of the Eucharist connected to the invitation to serve the poor around you?



to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.”<sup>18</sup>

This is why the crucifix is both beautiful and dangerous. When we hang it on the walls of our many schools and institutions and around our necks, we are saying: “Christ, who became poor for the poor, shapes what we do.” We are not professional services, doers of good, altruists or humanists. We are Christians!

Our devotion to Jesus stirs in us a devotion to those on the edges of society whom he loves. St John Chrysostom said that:

“The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognise Christ in the poorest, his brethren: ‘You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognise your brother...’”<sup>19</sup>

A church that professes Jesus to be its first love must hasten to the edges and befriend the poorest and learn from them. This is our most natural habitat because it is His.

A church that professes Jesus’ leadership as its cornerstone must humbly kneel at the foot of humanity and serve it. This is our most natural disposition because it is His.

As Pope Francis counseled, “No one must say that they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas. This is an excuse commonly heard in academic, business or professional, and even ecclesial circles... none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice: “Spiritual conversion, the intensity of the love of God and neighbour, zeal for justice and peace, the Gospel meaning

of the poor and of poverty, are required of everyone.”<sup>20</sup>

Our concern for the poor is shaped by Jesus’ example. It must be characterised by noticing our sisters and brothers and their plight, knowing and understanding them, and serving them.

## Noticing

*You looked with love upon me  
And deep within, your eyes imprinted grace;  
This mercy set me free,  
Held in your love’s embrace,  
To lift my eyes adoring to your face.*

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

**“It has been said that a person is enlightened, not when they get an idea, but when someone notices them. A person is enlightened when another loves them.”<sup>21</sup>**

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

When was a time someone noticed you in a way that made a lasting difference?

What does it mean to “notice with love” in a busy and distracted world?

Who in your daily life might be longing to be noticed?

---



---



---

Love notices. The Gospels too have eyes - eyes that notice and penetrate and transform. This contrasts with our usual way of looking – that is, with art gallery eyes that passively wander from person to person, from exhibit to exhibit, leaving what they see unchanged. Iain Matthew said: “Christianity is an effect, the effect of a God who is constantly gazing at us, whose eyes anticipate, radiate, penetrate and elicit beauty.”<sup>22</sup>

Sadly, passive art gallery looking is what is most commonly directed at those sitting by the roadside longing to be noticed.

## *Knowing*

**We are good at knowing about - and writing about - people overwhelmed by poverty and mental illness, but we are not so good at knowing them, at knowing their names.**

Like Sally, the woman in Fr. Peter Day’s story, there are thousands of people in the community, too many of whom remain unknown and cut off from the mainstream; and beneath this anonymity and isolation, beneath the rags, the grime, the odd behaviour, the loneliness, and the illness, lies a name, a story, a human being crying out: “Am I somebody? Do I have a place?”

These questions result from what we might call relational poverty - an entrenched isolation in which there is minimal and, oftentimes, no meaningful human contact. Among people with enduring mental illness, for instance, this is an all too pervasive reality, one that leaves the very sick fending for themselves on the streets, in refuges, jails, and public housing estates.

It is the poverty of the lonely, broken heart. And it can be quite devastating in its effects. When people are overwhelmed by relational poverty their capacity to engage, to find work, to get better, and to live with dignity is significantly diminished, sometimes even extinguished.

Much of our collective approach to welfare and homelessness is underpinned by impersonal charity which tends to focus on relieving material poverty – that is, through the provision of low-cost housing, welfare benefits, soup kitchens, refuges, second-hand clothing bins, anonymous cash donations and vouchers. This has its place and, at times, is essential. But generally, it has little, if any, impact on addressing relational poverty. More often than not, our impersonal charity merely helps people survive and exist. Lives are not transformed.

In relation to accommodation, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the common approach tends to be reactive and superficial – an overnight of care that has little long-term impact. This tends to address “houselessness”, physical needs, rather than homelessness and relational needs. Thus, nothing really changes for those who are lonely, isolated and very sick. More often than not, we just re-cycle homelessness.

Further, too much of the public and policy conversation is centred on clinical care. Thus, people become objectified as an illness to be treated, rather than a human being with an illness. And while getting the clinical medication mix right is essential, there is another conversation we need to have, the one about love and friendship.



A culture of materialism and consumerism is so pervasive in our world today. Life seems to revolve around getting more and more material things for ourselves. We can become very busy trying to keep up with the demands of a fast paced and competitive society. It can mean that we don't have time to slow down and focus on the non-material things that really matter and which truly enrich our lives. We don't have time for each other, to listen to young people's hopes and dreams, to give older people some time or to care for those who get left behind or left out. We can become very superficial and indifferent to the plight of others. It can be a very lonely world for some.

In the midst of this harsh world, there are still glimmers of hope. We often see this best in times of great difficulty. Natural disasters can cause immense devastation, but they can also bring out the best in people. Many of us whose homes sustained serious damage during a flood or bushfire found they were not alone in their time of trial. Neighbours and community members were there to rescue them, to help them clean up, to find somewhere to live and to rebuild their lives. It was the same at the height of the COVID pandemic. People looked out for each other. In so many neighbourhoods, groups of locals banded together to make sure everyone who was isolated in their homes had food, medication and other basic necessities. The worst of times can bring out the best in people, but we shouldn't just see it in extraordinary circumstances. Love of our neighbours is the foundation for a good society, but it isn't always easy to see.

This is why the Christmas event is so profound. An event in which the eternal pattern of Truth and Love manifested as a tiny, vulnerable, and utterly dependent infant, the Christ.

It is this nameless One, this silenced One, who gives voice to the longings of those of us who cannot compete in a world that says: "Keep up or else!"

Beneath the din of unrelenting superficiality, the child persists in whispering gently: "I am with you, lying at your feet, longing to be loved and cuddled and fed."

It is a whisper that alerts us to the beauty and majesty of our humanity; exhorting us to delight in each other, especially the Hello-Lovely-People like Luis who cannot keep-up.

Everyone has a name. Everyone has a story. That includes all those who live with the loneliness of homelessness and mental ill-health. The heart that is at one with Jesus' heart yearns to know the names and stories of those who know the loneliness of the street.

#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What is the difference between knowing about someone and truly knowing them?

How does our approach to helping others change when we know their name and their story?

What are some practical ways to reduce "relational poverty" in your school, parish, or neighborhood?

---

---

---

---

---



#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Why is service to the poor considered essential to the Gospel and not optional?

What does Pope Francis mean by a Church that is “bruised, hurting and dirty”?

What does authentic service look like in your life or community? What could make it more relational?

## Serving

*“Do you want to honour the body of Christ? Do not allow it to be despised in its members, that is, in the poor who lack clothes to cover themselves. Do not honour him here in the church with rich fabrics, while outside you neglect him when he is suffering from cold and naked. The one who said, “this is my body”, confirming the fact with his word, also said, “you saw me hungry and you did not feed me” and, “whenever you failed to do these things to one of the least of these, you failed to do it to me”.<sup>23</sup>*

ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

**“Prayer and comfortable living are incompatible,” according to St Teresa of Avila. We could add that a comfortable Church cannot preach the Joy of the Gospel with authenticity. Following Jesus means being with those who are poor, lonely and rejected.**

Accompanying them can be difficult and uncomfortable. As Pope Francis said:

“I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”<sup>24</sup>

“God,” said Pope Francis, “shows the poor his first mercy.”<sup>25</sup>

This first mercy is well known to each of us. The Bible abounds with evidence of this:

- No, when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. (Luke 14:13)



- James and Cephas and John ... offered their right hands to Barnabas and me as a sign of partnership ... They asked nothing more than we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do. (Galatians 2:9-10).

We cannot dismiss this prioritisation of those who are on the edge of society as either a noble sentiment or a concern reserved for a handful of Christians.

As Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “Love for widows and orphans, for prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to the [Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.” <sup>26</sup>

Caring for those who are poor can cause us great discomfort, but we are called by Jesus to follow in his footsteps.

St Paul reminds us what following Jesus means:

“Jesus, being in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” (Philippians 2:5-7)

Jesus was born poor and stayed poor. His commitment to those on the edge of society established the prime example of Christian leadership - to serve from a place of humility and vulnerability, a place that too many of us have been loath to visit.

More and more of us are facing increasing stress because of rising rental or mortgage costs. A growing number of us are also

experiencing mental ill-health and mental health services are not coping well with the increasing demand for their help. <sup>27</sup> In this climate, it is much easier for us to relate to the struggles faced by people living in homelessness and mental ill-health.

Paul reminds us that we who are blessed with God’s comfort in all our afflictions are able to offer comfort, in turn, to those in need:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

As we are comforted and sustained by God’s love, so, too, we offer God’s generous love to those in need.

Our love for those who are poor brings them to the center of the Church’s life. Our care for them is not self-centered. It does not seek to be noticed or praised. It places the interests of our sisters and brothers at the center, not our own. That means that their hopes and desires are important to us and we work with them to make life better for them. We learn and gain from walking with them as much as they learn and gain from journeying with us.

People who live in homelessness and mental ill-health are our guests of honour. They deserve much more than crumbs from our table or spare coins. Serving them means offering to accompany them on their journey towards a healthy life, physically, mentally, socially and economically. That is what was offered to Michael at Bethlehem House.

## *Pilgrims of Hope*

**For us, as Christians, our faith and the love we share go hand in hand with our hope in God's promises. In declaring that 2025 would be a Holy Year of Jubilee, Pope Francis encouraged us to be signs of hope for many people who are excluded and marginalised in society, including people who are homeless.**

Christian hope is grounded in the memory that Jesus' death on the cross was not the end. His rising from the dead ensures that we will not fall into despair as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They could only believe that Jesus' death on the cross was the end – until Jesus opened their eyes and gave them hope again. (Luke 24:13 - 35)

Our hope sustains us in our commitment to accompany people who are homeless and who live with mental ill-health on their journey towards a better life. We know that transformation is possible if love is present.

Our hope is grounded in our sure knowledge of God's love. That love, which we seek to proclaim through our lives, does not privilege

those who are closest to us at the expense of those on the edge of society. Our love for homeless people with mental ill-health must be as generous and as faithful as our love for our own family.

"Christians know very well that it is by affirming the infinite dignity of all that our own identity as persons and as communities reaches its maturity..." <sup>28</sup>

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How does hope shape our ability to respond to social justice challenges?

What would it mean for you personally to become a "pilgrim of hope" in your community?

How might engaging with people on the margins deepen your own spiritual journey?

---

---

---

## *What to Do?*

**We encourage all the baptised to find ways to engage with people living in homelessness wherever they are in your locality.**

In many places across the country, there are opportunities to volunteer with homelessness services run by Church and community groups. Volunteering to work a regular shift on one of the many street vans operated by

various Church organisations and schools is an excellent way to encounter people living on the streets, to listen to their stories, and to befriend them.

Rosies and Vinnies run street van ministries in many places around Australia. They offer volunteers training to ensure that they are prepared for this ministry.



## *Signs of Hope on the Edge*

support for the increasing number of people living in homelessness and mental ill-health.

At the end of this statement, we provide a list of some of the Church and community homelessness and mental health services you may wish to approach to obtain more information or support.

Above all else, we encourage you to notice homeless people in your community, to take every chance you can to listen to their story and understand what their life is like and what they hope for, and to truly serve them with love and humility. You may find it difficult to volunteer at a local service or on a street van, but you may be able to stop and listen to people on the street who approach you. They are our guests of honour. So, it is more than appropriate to offer them some food and a cup of coffee. Keep an eye out for them when you pass through the same location. You may be able to strike up a relationship with them which is enriched by a regular coffee break and conversation.

In John's Gospel, Jesus tells us "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2) Together with our homeless sisters and brothers, we are all pilgrims of hope. We are on a journey together towards the day when we will all live in happiness in the Father's house. There will be no more suffering, no more exclusion, and no more loneliness. When we challenge the superficiality and indifference which prevails in society and seek to serve those who are homeless and mentally ill with love and respect, we offer a powerful sign of hope that this day will come.

Your parish or school community may be daunted by the challenges and may also find it difficult to engage with various community services. It may be useful for you to contact your local Council and ask for help to locate appropriate homelessness and mental health services which you can approach to get advice and training for interested members of your community.

We encourage Catholic primary and secondary schools, universities and seminaries to build on the work already being done to offer opportunities for comprehensive and ongoing mental health awareness.

Reach out to other local church and faith communities to find out what they are doing to support people living in homelessness and mental ill-health. We need to work together to address such a huge and complex concern.

You might also consider supporting the work of Church and community organisations which advocate for better policies which will improve



# Church *and* Community **Homelessness** *and* **Mental** **Health** Services



## **CATHOLIC SOCIAL SERVICES AUSTRALIA**

*Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA) advocates for the Church's social service ministry. It is the peak body for Catholic social service providers.*

*CSSA is committed to advocating for compassionate socio-economic policies that uplift the lives of vulnerable people in our society. The organisation is the conduit for enduring social change.*

➤ <https://cssa.org.au/our-members/about-our-members/>



## **CATHOLIC CARE**

*CatholicCare organisations operate across Australia, providing a wide range of social services, including support for individuals, families, and communities, particularly in the areas of aged care, disability services, family and youth support, and homelessness. These services are offered by various CatholicCare agencies across different states and territories, aligned with specific Archdioceses and dioceses.*

➤ Search for "CatholicCare" on Google





**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc. *good works*

### ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

*The St. Vincent de Paul Society helps people by providing housing and accommodation options in each state and territory. These include short-term crisis accommodation, transitional housing, medium to longer-term community housing, accessible housing for people living with disability and specialist homelessness services.*

➤ <https://www.vinnies.org.au/national-council/advocacy/housing-and-homelessness>



**Catholic Health Australia**

### CATHOLIC HEALTH AUSTRALIA

*Relevant member organisations of Catholic Health Australia (CHA). CHA is the peak advocacy body representing the largest non-government group of health, aged and community care services in Australia, advocating for an equitable, compassionate, best practice and secure health and aged care sector. A list of CHA member organisations can be found on the Catholic Health Australia website.*

➤ <https://cha.org.au/>



**ST JOHN OF GOD**  
Horizon House

### ST. JOHN OF GOD ACCORD HORIZON HOUSE

*Horizon House empowers and supports young people at risk of homelessness to build the life they want by providing a safe and stable home. Young people can find themselves at risk of homelessness for many reasons. When they do, Horizon House is ready with a safe home and the space and support they need to build the life they want. More than a roof over their head, the Horizon House team works with young people to understand who they are and what they want to do.*

➤ <https://www.sjog.org.au/our-services/community-and-youth-services/st-john-of-god-horizon-house>



**marymead**

### MARYMEAD (CATHOLIC CARE)

*Finding affordable, suitable accommodation in Canberra can be hard at the best of times, particularly if you are a young person. The Youth Housing Support Service (YHSS) provides outreach to young people aged 15-25 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the ACT. You can be teamed up with one of our Youth Housing Specialists who can help you to gain and/or sustain safe, appropriate and affordable accommodation and tenancies.*

➤ <https://mccg.org.au/services/youth-housing-support-service/>

## OTHER COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS



### HOMELESSNESS AUSTRALIA

*Homelessness Australia is the national peak body for homelessness in Australia, which provides systemic advocacy for the homelessness sector and work to strengthen the impact of homelessness services. Homelessness Australia works with a large network of organisations and people with lived experience to provide a unified voice when it comes to preventing and responding to homelessness.*

➤ <https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/homelessness-services/>



### MISSION AUSTRALIA

*Mission Australia is a national Christian charity motivated by a shared vision of an Australia where everyone has a safe home and can thrive.*

*Mission Australia collaborates with people experiencing homelessness or disadvantage to tackle the root causes of their challenges through providing access to safe, affordable homes and innovative, evidence-based support services. The organisation delivers homelessness crisis and prevention services, provide social and affordable housing, assist struggling families and children, address mental health issues, fight substance dependencies, and support people with disability.*

➤ <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/ending-homelessness>



### THE SALVATION ARMY

*The Salvation Army is one of the largest providers of homelessness services across the country. It provides services to adults, and families with accompanying children. Its services include accommodation, case management, assertive outreach support, financial assistance, together with connection and referral to other specialist services. The Salvation Army's philosophy is that every person is afforded dignity, respect and quality of service and that no one should be without a safe, affordable and secure home. =*

➤ <https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/about-us/our-services/homelessness-services/>



### MENTAL HEALTH AUSTRALIA

*For over 25 years, Mental Health Australia has advocated for mental health reform, and it continues to drive policy changes and proactively put mental health on the agenda.*

➤ <https://mhaustralia.org/>



# Endnotes

- 1 Gottheil, Richard and Eisenstein, Judah David, *The Blind in Law and Literature, The Jewish Encyclopedia*, <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3374-blind-the-in-law-and-literature#:~:text=To%20counteract%20the%20prevailing%20notion,14>).
- 2 <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/stories/safe-homes/carol-67-homeless-and-alone#page-content>
- 3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). Updated 6 August 2024, *Specialist homelessness services client pathways: analysis insights: SHS: Rough sleeping clients in 2016–18*. Accessed at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shs-rough-sleeping-clients-in-2016-18>
- 4 Impact Economics and Policy. November 2024. *Call Unanswered. Unmet Demand for Specialist Homelessness Services*. Accessed at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61e32e62c8c8337e6fd7a1e6/t/673aab6f53d6dc3619da93ec/1731898248545/Call+Unanswered+Final.pdf>
- 5 *ibid*
- 6 AIHW. 27 November 2024. *Specialist Homelessness Services: feature analysis. Cited in Homelessness crisis claiming more lives at a younger age – Homelessness Australia*. Accessed at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-feature-analysis/contents/about>
- 7 Flatau P, Lester L, Seivwright A, Teal R, Dobrovic J, Vallesi S, Hartley C and Callis Z., 2022. *Ending Homelessness in Australia: an evidence and policy deep dive- external site opens in new window. Centre for Social Impact*. Accessed at: <https://apo.org.au/node/315326>.
- 8 *ibid.*, para 3.188-3.,189.
- 9 Father Chris Riley's Youth off the streets. Accessed at: <https://youthoffthestreets.com.au/>
- 10 Embleton L, Lee H, Gunn J, Ayuku D, Braitstein P. *Causes of Child and Youth Homelessness in Developed and Developing Countries: A Systematic Review and Metaanalysis*. JAMA Pediatr. 2016;170(5):435-44.
- 11 *A Welcome Home – Youth Homelessness and Mental Health*. Orygen 2020
- 12 Morgan, R., Dobson, D., Moore, S., Brown, V., Simondson, K. et al, *Home in Mind: Improving Mental Health for Young People Experiencing Homelessness – Policy Report 1*, Melbourne City Mission and Origin, Melbourne, 2025.
- 13 Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System 2021, *Final Report – Summary and recommendations*. Accessed at: [https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-01/RCVMHS\\_FinalReport\\_ExecSummary\\_Accessible.pdf](https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-01/RCVMHS_FinalReport_ExecSummary_Accessible.pdf)
- 14 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, *Inquiry into homelessness in Australia 2021, Final report*. Accessed at: [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024522/toc\\_pdf/Finalreport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024522/toc_pdf/Finalreport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)
- 15 Australian Council of Social Service, *Poverty in Australia 2020*, *Poverty-in-Australia-2020\_Part-1\_Overview.pdf*. Accessed at: [https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Poverty-in-Australia-2020\\_Part-1\\_Overview.pdf](https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Poverty-in-Australia-2020_Part-1_Overview.pdf)
- 16 McDermott S, Bruce J, Muir K, Ramia I, Fisher KR, Bullen J. *Reducing hospitalisation among people living with severe mental illness*. Aust Health Rev. 2016 Apr;40(2):124-128. doi: 10.1071/AH15073. PMID: 26342998.
- 17 *ibid*
- 18 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 198
- 19 St. John Chrysostom, Hom. in I Cor. 27, 4: PG 61, 229-230 quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1397.
- 20 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 201
- 21 Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God*, p.120
- 22 *ibid*
- 23 St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 50, 3
- 24 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 49
- 25 *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 198
- 26 *Deus Caritas Est*, No.22
- 27 Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System 2021, *Final Report – Summary and recommendations*. Accessed at: [https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-01/RCVMHS\\_FinalReport\\_ExecSummary\\_Accessible.pdf](https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-01/RCVMHS_FinalReport_ExecSummary_Accessible.pdf)
- 28 Pope Francis, *Letter to US Bishops*





#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians who have walked upon and cared for this land for thousands of years. We acknowledge the continued deep spiritual attachment and relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to this country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation

#### CONTRIBUTORS

The **Australian Catholic Bishops Conference** thanks those who contributed to the preparation of this statement including Rose Beynon, Fr Peter Day, Neal Murphy, Robina Bradley, Andrea Cullen, Peter Arndt, Harrison Pocknee.

Editors: Peter Arndt, Greg Baynie & Paul Osborne

Typesetting and layout design: Harrison Pocknee, Ryan Macalandag

Images: Photographs by Ryan Macalandag for ACBC Media & Communications; Stock images from Bigstockphotos.com



**AUSTRALIAN  
CATHOLIC BISHOPS  
CONFERENCE**

© Australian Catholic Bishops Conference 2025.  
This work is openly licenced via CC BY 4.0

ISBN (Print): 978-0-909246-31-0

ISBN (Digital): 978-0-909246-32-7

An electronic version of this Statement is available on the **Australian Catholic Bishops Conference** and **Australian Catholic Social Justice Council** websites:

➤ [catholic.au](https://catholic.au)

➤ [socialjustice.catholic.org.au](https://socialjustice.catholic.org.au)