



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops launch major statement on social media

Media Release

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Australia's Catholic bishops will today launch a major statement on digital communications, calling on all levels of society to overcome the hatred, division and exploitation that occurs online.

This year's Social Justice Statement, *Making it Real: Genuine human encounter in our digital world*, will be launched in Sydney by Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv, chairman of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice – Mission and Service.

The launch precedes Social Justice Sunday, which the Church in Australia celebrates on September 29.

In the statement, the bishops say governments, businesses and the broader community need to be more proactive in defending the dignity of people. They say everyone must work together to make the digital world a place of genuine human encounter.

The document invites people to reflect on how the internet has changed communication, work, education and business – and how people can contribute towards a more harmonious digital world.

Writing in the statement's foreword, Bishop Delegate for Social Justice, Bishop Terence Brady, said that while the digital world enabled people to be more connected than ever before, it could also be a place of manipulation, exploitation and violence.

"This calls us to active citizenship because, at their heart, these problems are not technological, but rather moral," Bishop Brady said.

"We can choose how we behave online, and we can collectively shape the online world, building a more just and loving online neighbourhood.

"It is 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."

The statement notes that Pope Francis has often spoken of the great potential for "genuine human encounter" in the digital space, but he has also warned of elements of the online world that are harmful: information overload, social isolation, marginalisation of the vulnerable, consumerism and "fake news".

The bishops acknowledge the many benefits of technology, but also lament a growing digital divide. Almost 1.8 million Australian households are not connected to the internet, leading to significant disadvantages.

“As essential services continue to shift online, digital inclusion becomes mandatory for basic participation in society. It should therefore be considered a human right,” Bishop Brady states.

Among the groups that are missing out are people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people in rural and remote areas.

And where internet access is readily available, other serious challenges emerge.

“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,” the bishops’ statement says.

“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.

“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.”

The Statement and associated resources can be downloaded at:
www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au