



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Social Justice – Mission and Service

Bishops renew call for fair wages for Australian families

Media Release

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The Fair Work Act has “failed to provide an adequate wages safety net for low-paid workers with family responsibilities” or “alleviate the poverty and disadvantage suffered by them and their families”, a Catholic Church delegation has told the Fair Work Commission today.

John Fernon SC and Brian Lawrence this afternoon appeared before the Expert Panel of the Fair Work Commission, saying advocacy on behalf of low-income families is needed “because their interests have not been sufficiently protected by the decisions in the annual wage reviews”.

Mr Fernon told the panel that the provision in the Fair Work Act for a safety net of fair minimum wages requires that the Commission fix a minimum wage that provides a decent living for the low-paid and their families.

Mr Lawrence told the panel that decisions over a 20-year period have seen the relative value of the minimum wage fall significantly.

“As a result of the decisions over the past two decades, what was an adequate wage to support working families in 1997 is now only enough for a single person without family responsibilities,” he said.

Mr Lawrence, one of the Church’s advocates for Australian workers over that period, told the panel the minimum wage situation is now “in crisis”.

“We seek the alleviation of poverty and disadvantage among working families by progressive steps towards a living wage and a decent standard of living for low-paid working families,” he said.

He also proposed “the progressive adjustment of wage rates set for award classifications so that they reflect a fair level of remuneration for the skills and responsibilities of the workers covered by those classifications”.

The Catholic Church has made submissions on the minimum wage since 2003 with a focus on low-paid workers and their families, arguing for a decent standard of living for wage-dependent families.

The oral submission today drew upon the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference’s written submission in March 2019.

In that submission, the Church called for the minimum wage to be increased from \$719.20 per week to \$760 per week, making the minimum wage \$20 per hour. It called for award wages to be increased by \$31 per week and 3.7 per cent for wages above \$837.40 per week.

Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv, chair of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice – Mission and Service, said the needs of workers struggling to earn a living wage should be a priority for all Australians.

“At this time in the electoral cycle especially, it is important that the Church speak up on behalf of those who are trying to support their families, but are increasingly finding it difficult to do so because of the unwillingness of politicians and the Fair Work Commission to adequately address this critical issue,” Bishop Long said.