

**Social Justice Statement 2016–17**

**A PLACE AT THE TABLE**

**SOCIAL JUSTICE IN AN AGEING SOCIETY**

## CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, I present the 2016–2017 Social Justice Statement, *A Place at the Table: Social justice in an ageing society*.

The journey into old age presents both challenges and opportunities for us all. Retirement, changing health and altered living conditions can be confronting for individuals and their families. Our society, too, needs to adjust as it deals with a community with an increasingly higher proportion of older people and comparatively fewer people of working age. However, these changes bring gifts too, and this is the time for families, communities and society as a whole to explore them. In the words of Pope Francis, old age is a vocation, not a time to 'pull in the oars', but 'our societies are not ready, spiritually and morally, to appreciate the true value of this stage of life'.

We are seeing a new vision of ageing, one where many people enter their 60s and 70s in good health and with plenty of skills and energy to offer our communities. Indeed, governments have seen this change and have started calling for people to remain in the workplace beyond the traditional retirement age. For many, that is a realistic expectation; but for it to be realised, governments and employers must recognise the true capacities of older people. They must also acknowledge that not all older people are healthy or well-off.

Old age and frailty will come to us all eventually, and we will need the help and support of others. This is a time when we must see a just society in action. We must challenge the individualism and consumerism of modern society that gives rise to what Pope Francis calls a 'throw-away' culture. Stereotypes of older people as doddering, out of touch or dependent are false and dehumanising. People are not commodities, to be valued only for their productivity or purchasing power. They are human beings in the fullest sense, precious in their own right, possessing a dignity that was given them by God. Furthermore, their wisdom and lived experience are priceless treasures that can enrich our lives.

At this time in Australia, we face a threefold challenge: to work for an inclusive society that brings older people into the heart of the community; to ensure the dignity and care of people who are frail and most vulnerable to neglect or abuse; and to foster solidarity among all generations, recognising the special affinity that exists between young and old.

We must never forget that the older person before us is a spouse, a parent, a brother or sister, a friend, and most importantly, a son or daughter of God. All of us are created in the image and likeness of God, and are called to have our rightful place at the table He has prepared.

With every blessing,

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Bishop of Parramatta  
Chairman, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council

# A PLACE AT THE TABLE

## Social justice in an ageing society

*Just as God asks us to be his means of hearing the cry of the poor, so too he wants us to hear the cry of the elderly. This represents a challenge to families and communities, since 'the Church cannot and does not want to conform to a mentality of impatience, and much less of indifference and contempt, towards old age. We must reawaken the collective sense of gratitude, of appreciation, of hospitality, which makes the elderly feel like a living part of the community. Our elderly are men and women, fathers and mothers, who came before us on our own road, in our own house, in our daily battle for a worthy life'. Indeed, 'how I would like a Church that challenges the throw-away culture by the overflowing joy of a new embrace between young and old!'<sup>1</sup>*

Pope Francis

The ageing of the population has been rightly described as 'the great success story of human development'<sup>2</sup> and 'the most positive development in the last century of human history'.<sup>3</sup>

The number of Australians aged 65 and over will more than double from 3.6 million today to 8.9 million by the middle of the century.<sup>4</sup> Where once retirement was considered a period of rest and declining health, we now speak of 'active ageing' in an 'extended life course' – a transition through the 50s to the 80s, with changing activities and concerns as time goes on.

We should give thanks to God for the grace of a long life and for the prosperous and modern society we live in. We should be grateful for the inheritance we have received from previous generations. Their generosity can be seen, not only in the fruits of their labour and advances in science and technology, but also in the many institutions and policies promoting the common good and assisting people struggling through difficult times.

It can be easy to take these things for granted. We can forget the great challenges faced by earlier generations, which inspired a sense of social justice that cried out 'never again!' to the impacts of economic depressions, world wars, disease and natural disasters.

It is vital that our society continues to support all Australians, especially the most vulnerable. This Social Justice Statement emphasises the role and value of older people in Australian life. We demand that their contribution is never reduced to a mere economic valuation. We call for a higher level of care for older people who are frail and vulnerable. The sanctity and dignity of their lives must be defended against a 'throw-away' culture. And we urge a renewed solidarity among generations young and old – ensuring all are valued and included.

Older Australians are a treasure – ‘a wealth not to be ignored’.<sup>5</sup> We must acknowledge the legacy of our elders as we plan for the future. Will we ensure they find their rightful place at the table? Will we ourselves come to the table on the vital issue of social justice in an ageing society?

## GENUINE PARTICIPATION AND GENEROUS COMMUNITIES

*Old age is a vocation. It is not yet time to ‘pull in the oars’. This period of life is different from those before, there is no doubt; we even have to somewhat ‘invent it ourselves’, because our societies are not ready, spiritually and morally, to appreciate the true value of this stage of life. Indeed, it was once not so normal to have time available; it is much more so today.*<sup>6</sup>

Pope Francis

In Australia, around 75 per cent of men and 85 per cent of women are now reaching retirement age with around 20 years of life ahead of them.<sup>7</sup> They are in relatively good health and with significant opportunities for leisure, family life, social engagement and continued employment.

More than ever before, older Australians are deciding that they have much more to offer by extending their working lives past the retirement age, by mixing work with lifelong learning, caring for family, mentoring younger generations and taking up new pursuits. Potentially, everyone benefits – older people themselves and our nation as a whole.

There is a risk, however, that a society ill-prepared for future demographic change may assess these trends as an economic threat and trigger panic or discord between generations.

The Australian Government’s *2015 Intergenerational Report* has documented a long-term trend: declining numbers of people of working age and growing numbers of people over 65. The report projects rising expenditure on health, aged care and pensions – while economic growth may decline.<sup>8</sup> Australia’s response to these challenges must be economically viable, as well as sharing the costs and benefits of an ageing population fairly between current and future generations.

Unfortunately, some politicians and media commentators portray the cost of these changes as a kind of tax on future generations that will have catastrophic consequences. They say that if we do not cut budget spending now, the burden will fall heavily on our children. Sometimes we hear expressions such as ‘intergenerational theft’, or invidious comparisons between ‘productive workers’ and ‘burdensome retirees’.<sup>9</sup>

Governments are encouraging longer working lives by increasing the retirement age and promoting the retention of older workers and their retraining.<sup>10</sup> We must ensure, however,

that the drive for the longer working life is not simply based on economic considerations. As the Church has clearly stated in United Nations deliberations on the rights of older people:

*Though it is important to reaffirm the right of the elderly to work or to receive relevant skills training, we must be careful that the policies we promote do not play into the same tired narrative that reduces our value as human beings to what we produce, while ignoring our inherent dignity and the countless other ways in which the most vulnerable among us contribute to society's greater good.<sup>11</sup>*

Older Australians have a great contribution to make, but this is dependent on their own capacity as well as the kinds of opportunities provided for participation in the life of the community. Three significant barriers need to be addressed to ensure the benefits of longer working life meet the diverse needs of an ageing population and are shared equitably. The first is related to structural barriers to employment. The second concerns how older Australians who are already disadvantaged are treated. The third concerns an overemphasis on paid employment as the defining feature of participation.

## **Removing barriers to employment for older people**

We must ensure that older generations have access to flexible workplaces and just conditions that will allow them to work or to retire with dignity.

Immediate barriers to the employment of older workers include the lack of workers compensation and restrictions on income protection insurance.<sup>12</sup>

Age discrimination throws up other barriers. Too often we see older people stereotyped as dependent, slow and unproductive. Older workers may be seen as more expensive and not worth the trouble and cost of training. They are most vulnerable to redundancy where organisations are downsizing and restructuring.<sup>13</sup>

A recent national survey found that one-quarter of people aged over 50 experienced some form of discrimination, including being denied employment, promotion or training, and being subjected to derogatory treatment. Many had given up looking for work as a result and those most affected included people on lower incomes and single parents.<sup>14</sup>

Unemployment among older workers involves huge losses for the economy. Australia's Age Discrimination Commissioner believes the cost of losing mature workers amounts to around \$10 billion each year. By comparison, keeping just three per cent more people over 55 in work would gain \$30 billion annually.<sup>15</sup>

These are just the economic costs and benefits. Unemployment has shocking effects on individual self-esteem and family finances. Combating age discrimination in the workforce will require more than raising awareness and appealing to the better nature of employers. It

will need regulation to ensure older workers, particularly the low-paid and industrially weak, have better access to employment that is flexible to their needs, greater job security and the prospect of a decent retirement.

As Church, we are concerned for the God-given dignity of all workers and their families. Workers have a right to secure a decent quality of life and foster personal fulfilment by applying their gifts and talents at work and participating in the human relationships in the workplace.<sup>16</sup>

## Who are the most disadvantaged?

If people spend more years working, we are told, there will be benefits for everyone in the community: increased revenue, lower expenditure and increased personal savings and investment for retirement. We know from experience, however, that those who are marginalised in society and already economically vulnerable are less likely to share in the benefits.

Think of **unemployed older workers**. Traditional industrial sector workers have been hit hard by global competition and restructuring. They continue to be the most vulnerable to radical changes in the economy and technological progress. It is predicted that over the next 15 years around 40 per cent of Australian jobs are likely to be computerised or automated. Routine manual and service jobs are at high risk.<sup>17</sup> Older people often experience long-term unemployment; jobless 60–64-year-olds remain without work for an average of almost two years. Many draw down on retirement savings or spend the years before retirement on the Newstart Allowance or Disability Support Pension.<sup>18</sup> Increased investment in training and employer incentives for people over 50 is particularly important for older men made redundant and for women returning to work after long absences.

**Women with limited retirement savings** are at a particular disadvantage. Many have spent long periods outside the labour force when raising and caring for family members. They are more likely to have employment that offers little opportunity for promotion and is low-paid, casual or part-time. These factors combine to have a serious impact on retirement income. Before the introduction of compulsory superannuation, women's retirement savings were very low. Even today, the typical balance for women is around half that for men.<sup>19</sup> Women can face real difficulty if they have experienced family poverty or marriage breakdown.

**Grandparent carers** are an emerging group who are exposed to hardship. They often play a vital role – and a joyous one – in caring for their grandchildren. But sometimes this involves emotional and financial stress. Some are the principal carers of their grandchildren because parents are unable to care as a result of substance abuse, family violence or relationship breakdowns. A 2004 study found more than 70 per cent of these grandparents were on low or fixed incomes and had to draw on their savings and reduce their hours of work to care for

their grandchildren.<sup>20</sup> Grandparents who regularly provide childcare can also experience a reduction in income and less availability for work.<sup>21</sup>

Lack of affordable housing highlights a looming crisis of **homelessness** for vulnerable groups. While home ownership is high for older Australians, the number still paying off a mortgage or in the private rental market is increasing. They can pay up to five times as much for accommodation as people who own their home outright. It is estimated that within a decade, 420,000 older Australians will be living in low-income rental accommodation. Low-cost rentals are scarce, high rents are difficult to maintain on a fixed income, and often the accommodation is of poor quality with insecure tenure.<sup>22</sup> Older people without their own home are struggling and there has been an increase in the number seeking homelessness services.<sup>23</sup> Tragically, many older single women are experiencing homelessness for the first time in old age.

The overrepresentation of **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples** on almost every indicator of socio-economic disadvantage is an indictment on this society and a real gauge of the failure of the economy to alleviate hardship and ensure inclusive growth. The latest *Closing the Gap* report reveals that Australia is not on track to meet targets of improved Indigenous life expectancy by 2031.<sup>24</sup> Tragically, many Indigenous people are cheated of the extended life that other Australians enjoy. The target to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is also unlikely to be met and, in fact, the gap is widening.<sup>25</sup> Many Indigenous men and women are unlikely to see any of the purported benefits of a longer working life.

These groups represent a significant proportion of the population already struggling and unlikely to reap the benefits of continued employment without the direct intervention of governments. If current inequities are not addressed, the hardship vulnerable people experience will simply follow them into retirement.

## **Participation means more than economic contribution**

If the main reason for encouraging people to stay in employment longer is to reduce payment of pensions and benefits and ‘preserve the economy’, there is a risk that we value people only for their contribution to the economy and regard the elderly in purely utilitarian terms.<sup>26</sup>

Pope Francis has warned of how individuals, families and communities suffer when money displaces the human person as the focus of the economy:

*When money becomes the end and the motive of every activity and of every venture, then the utilitarian perspective and brute logic — which do not respect people — prevail, resulting in the widespread collapse of the values of solidarity and respect for the human being.<sup>27</sup>*

If we are to see the benefits of a longer life span, we need to confront three challenges.

First, as we have seen, we need to eliminate the obstacles older people face in staying in dignified work, applying their talents and accumulating adequate retirement income. We also need to acknowledge that some people are simply unable to keep working. An office worker may be able to remain at work after 60, but it may be unjust to ask this of people whose work life has been one of hard physical labour over decades.

If pensions and benefits are so low they do not prevent people falling into poverty, they will need to be lifted. When jobs for older workers do not materialise, they will have to be created. And where retirement savings are so low they cannot ensure basic standards of living, they must be supplemented.

The second challenge is to appreciate the value of older people's social and economic contribution through volunteering. The *2015 Intergenerational Report* notes that people aged 65 and over are retiring and taking on other activities in their communities at exactly the time in their lives when public spending per person increases.<sup>28</sup> The implication is that leaving the labour force reduces people's contribution to the community and makes them an economic burden.

This ignores the true value of older people's contribution. Far from being a financial burden, they are significant contributors to the nation's social capital and budget bottom line. It is estimated that the informal care provided by volunteers and family members is worth more than \$40 billion each year.<sup>29</sup> It is likely to be much higher. This is an important contribution to our society's wellbeing but is not recognised in economic surveys or acknowledged as part of the Gross Domestic Product.

The final challenge is to put work in its proper place. Extended employment is one way older Australians can benefit the community, but one among many. The United Nations' International Plan of Action adopted in Madrid in 2002 was based on the principle of 'society for all ages'. It advocated wide-ranging roles for older people in society, promoted health and wellbeing and called for supportive environments that encourage older people to participate in policy development.<sup>30</sup>

Compare such a holistic vision with one that sees active and productive ageing only in terms of employment and work-like activities.<sup>31</sup> The final challenge is to ensure that our policies do not see older people simply in terms of productivity and money, but respect them as people who have an influence on the quality of their own lives and the lives of their families and communities.

In many of the Gospel passages, we see the perfect revelation of mercy and justice in Jesus' ministry. He often questioned the wisdom of the day and challenged the materialism and greed that burdened the oppressed.

Jesus offered not unending labour and ‘productivity’ but a life-affirming vision of rest and fulfilment. When challenging the overly restrictive old laws of the Sabbath, he said:

*Come to me all, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls.*

Matthew 11:28–29

Think also of the Gospel account of the old man Simeon, prompted by the Spirit to visit the Temple, who received the child Jesus and blessed God for the salvation that he had seen. His praise was soon joined with that of the 84-year-old Anna, a prophetess who spent her days in the Temple and proclaimed Jesus as the deliverer of God’s people (Luke 2:22–38). We rejoice in the impact this aged prophet and this spirit-filled elder have had upon human history. We also recognise in this Gospel passage the important spiritual role that older people play outside the daily demands of the working week.

Given the growing calls in our society for a longer working life, it is right that we also challenge anything that prevents or restricts the kind of contributions that are so valuable in later life: spiritual fulfilment, rest and leisure, time with family and friends, volunteering with parish and community groups, and being present to share a lifetime’s wisdom with younger generations.

## **DIGNITY AND WELLBEING FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE**

*There was a father, mother and their many children, and a grandfather lived with them. He was quite old, and when he was at table eating soup, he would get everything dirty: his mouth, the serviette ... it was not a pretty sight! One day the father said that, given what was happening to the grandfather, from that day forward he would eat alone. And so he bought a little table, and placed it in the kitchen. And so the grandfather ate alone in the kitchen while the family ate in the dining room. After some days, the father returned home from work and found one of his children playing with wood. He asked him: ‘What are you doing?’ to which the child replied: ‘I am playing carpenter’. ‘And what are you building?’ the father asked. ‘A table for you papa, for when you get old like grandpa’.*

*This story has stayed with me for a lifetime and done me great good. Grandparents are a treasure.<sup>32</sup>*

Pope Francis

How do we treat those in our community who are frail and increasingly dependent? Do we care for them in a way that respects their dignity and maintains them in community life? Do we recognise them as a ‘treasure’, important people who have a rightful place at the table?

More than two-thirds of Australians over 75 are in good health and living in their homes and communities.<sup>33</sup> In part, that is because more community care is available to make it possible for older people to remain at home, maintaining the networks they have developed over many years. We should also remember that 80 per cent of home care for older people comes from relatives, friends and neighbours.<sup>34</sup> This represents a vital economic as well as social and personal contribution from the community.

We have often witnessed a strong filial devotion to the elderly in the extended family networks of Indigenous kinship and in migrant communities that have found a new home in Australia. Their particular respect for the ‘elders’ is something to be protected and serves as a fine example to the broader community.

Having the support of strong family and social networks can promote longer life, greater community engagement and less likelihood of having to move into residential aged care facilities.<sup>35</sup>

But for many people the time comes when they need to leave their homes, and there has been an expansion of the residential aged care sector for people who are ‘frail-aged’. Some elderly people are financially secure, in good health, and comfortably housed. Others are not: they experience levels of isolation and loneliness that have disastrous effects on their health and wellbeing. Those people who are isolated demand our special attention.

## **Addressing social isolation and elder abuse**

In his Apostolic Exhortation ‘On Love in the Family’, Pope Francis alerts us to the emergence of **loneliness** as ‘one symptom of the great poverty of contemporary culture’.<sup>36</sup> This is a major challenge that affects all age groups, but that can have a critical effect on older generations. They may be people in nursing homes and residential care who are rarely visited, or older vulnerable people in ‘dormitory suburbs’ or regional and remote communities lacking adequate community services or social networks.

It is estimated that 20 per cent of older Australians are affected by social isolation.<sup>37</sup> This constitutes a major risk factor for health. One study shows that the lack of supportive social relationships has health effects equivalent to smoking fifteen cigarettes or consuming more than six alcoholic drinks a day. Social isolation is more harmful than not exercising and twice as harmful as obesity.<sup>38</sup>

There are many programs designed to reduce isolation among older people. There are home visits and pastoral care in the hospital and residential care settings, and transport and social

activities aimed at developing community networks and peer support. All of these are vital to maintaining a healthy life and good social connections. Other interventions like support groups, skills development, bereavement support and counselling also help to manage the transitions of later life.

These show how public policies promoting ‘ageing in place’ must be adequately resourced, otherwise they could lead to higher levels of isolation and associated health issues.<sup>39</sup>

We can modify housing, improve transport services and make our towns and cities more amenable and safer places for older people living with disabilities or cognitive impairment. There is something more we must do, however, if older people are to really feel they are valued and able, as Pope Francis would say, to take their place at the table.

We must address the challenge of **ageism**, which stereotypes people as being dependent, incapable or a burden on society. The human dignity of older people is undermined when the wishes of a person are overlooked, their decision-making power is curtailed or their basic rights infringed.

Ageism can be seen when doctors or hospital staff speak over an elderly patient to a son or daughter about treatment and care arrangements. We see it when elderly patients in acute wards are referred to as ‘bed blockers’ and made to feel they are a nuisance or denying care to others.<sup>40</sup> We see it in residents’ fear of reprisals or being asked to leave a facility if they complain about the quality of care they receive.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes community care workers are so overstretched that their frail clients dread their arrival and the prospect of being thrown about as beds are made or they are washed in such a hurry that the care becomes degrading.

Recent public inquiries into **elder abuse** have highlighted the risk of abuse in institutional settings. The Senate Community Affairs Inquiry into abuse against people with disability reported that residential care and aged care residents are ‘particularly vulnerable to violence, abuse and neglect due to their age, frailty and specific disabilities such as dementia’. The report also noted that elder financial abuse is a growing problem in the community.<sup>42</sup>

Elder abuse typically occurs out of sight and is often perpetrated by family members. Frequently it involves emotional abuse and the improper use of the older person’s assets and finances. One study from Victoria found over one-third of clients of a seniors advisory service alleged they had been subject to financial abuse, including theft, coercion, misuse of power of attorney documents and receiving fraudulent bills. A similar proportion reported psychological abuse, including verbal abuse, bullying and threats of harm. Significantly, more than 70 per cent of victims were women. ‘Inheritance impatience’ on the part of sons and daughters seems to be increasingly common.<sup>43</sup>

In our pastoral ministry we have become increasingly aware of the impact of gambling on older Australians. There has been a significant increase in gambling problems among this group<sup>44</sup> and evidence of the gaming industry targeting older people assuming that they have

greater disposable income and time.<sup>45</sup> Gambling can harm older people in another way – where younger people exploit parents or grandparents for money to fund their gambling addiction.

Living alone puts people at particular risk. The Council on the Ageing refers to isolation as ‘the great enabler of abuse’.<sup>46</sup>

Pope Francis has warned of growing levels of isolation in modern society, where ‘those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it’.<sup>47</sup>

In responding to those who are isolated and excluded, we must be guided by the healing ministry of Christ. He never turned his back on the outcast.

Think of the woman suffering incurable haemorrhages (Mark 5:24–34). She pushed through the crowd that was pressing against Jesus, saying to herself, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ And remember the man who was blind, calling for Jesus’ attention (Luke 18:35–43). Everyone ‘sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”’. Both were outcasts, invisible to the crowd and a nuisance when they called for help.

The account of the widow of Nain presents us with a woman who had no future. Her son, her only hope of care in old age, was now dead (Luke 7:11–17). Soon she would be amongst the nameless, the unknown, the burdensome. In restoring the young man, Jesus gave her life, and so reminds us that we must not leave the aged without care and a place in society.

In all this, Jesus’ healing went beyond the physical to recognise the inherent dignity of these invisible and shunned people of God. They were helpless and dependent. But in faith, they sought Jesus’ mercy and he restored them to the heart of the community. Our call to minister to the elderly binds us to service of those who are most at risk of isolation and social exclusion.

## **The need for adequate resources**

Those who are vulnerable to neurological illness, physical degeneration and debilitating fatigue are particularly susceptible to societal pressures dictated by perceived economic imperatives. The provision of social, aged care and healthcare services are increasingly determined by economic imperatives. When cost-benefit analysis becomes the measure of a person’s worth, then the inherent dignity of older people will inevitably be placed at risk.

Adequate resources are essential if we want high-quality services that promote human dignity, integrate people into the community and prevent social isolation, neglect and abuse. The aged care sector has come under significant pressure as the community ages.

Recent reforms allow for more competition in residential and community care and provide opportunities for older people to tailor care to their particular needs and choose their preferred provider. Removing restrictions on accommodation, everyday living and care costs may provide ‘consumers’ with a higher quality of care and ensure the sector is financially sustainable.

However, consumers will have limited choices where funding is inadequate and people do not have the capacity to pay for services. This is a particular challenge in rural and remote communities and among low-income groups.

The marketisation of the aged care sector brings some key challenges – it is not simply a business and older people are not just another market. It is vital that we recognise aged care as an essential community service. There are aspects of this sector that must be addressed as demand for services grows and competition increases.

Some providers of residential aged care make big profits but others struggle to break even or run at a loss. With regard to the provision of home care, the organisation Aged and Community Services Australia has said:

*It is the nature of the home care industry that the few highly profitable niches are actively sought by the ‘for profit’ operators while the bulk of the heavy lifting is done by ACSA’s [non-profit and faith based] members, including the increasingly marginal regional, rural and remote home care.<sup>48</sup>*

The challenges faced by these services are reflected throughout the sector.

Recruiting, supporting and training workers is an enormous challenge. There is a significant shortage of nurses and direct care workers in this field now and it is estimated that an additional 500,000 workers will be required by mid-century.<sup>49</sup> But low standards of pay and conditions make it hard to recruit and keep staff. Community and residential aged care workers can be poorly paid, overworked and may have limited opportunities for career progression.<sup>50</sup>

We cannot allow this sector to become one where low-status workers are stretched to care for low-status clients. Chronic underfunding, a lack of qualified staff and the absence of minimum staff-to-client ratios will inevitably lead to frail aged people being isolated and neglected.

While the emerging policy of ‘consumer directed care’ may deliver improvements in quality of service, concerns remain. If funding for individualised packages of home care does not cover all of a person’s needs, it is poorer clients without funds to purchase additional services who will be disadvantaged. And in residential aged care, there are questions about how the

tailoring of individual care packages can work in settings where staff are already stretched to meet current demands.<sup>51</sup>

Dignity is the primary focus when caring for anyone, old or young. It is a particularly important principle when dealing with high-need clients.

## Protecting people at the end of life

We will all face death, and many of us will require the care of others as our health declines.

This is not something we like to think about. Modern western culture does not handle our mortality well. Consumerism promotes a flawed and deceptive notion of family in which ‘no one grows old, there is no sickness, sorrow or death’.<sup>52</sup> Our society idealises notions of youthfulness and vitality, and so the reality of the journey from an active lifestyle to one of dependence and declining health is often glossed over or denied. Even the laudable notions of ‘active’ and ‘healthy’ ageing may mask the reality of our own death and dying.

If our life is considered as a story – from conception until natural death – it seems that our culture encourages us to leave the final chapter out of the script. The reality of death and dying can be devalued, and so can the very people who are approaching death. Pope Francis has warned of a ‘throw-away’ culture that views people only in terms of their utility and casts them aside if they have no productive value or wealth:

*Not only do they not produce – this culture thinks – but they are a burden: in short, what is the outcome of this kind of thinking? They are thrown away. It’s brutal to see how the elderly are thrown away, it is a brutal thing, it is a sin! ... We want to remove our growing fear of weakness and vulnerability; but by doing so we increase in the elderly the anxiety of being poorly tolerated and neglected.<sup>53</sup>*

No one likes to be a burden. We can lessen the strain on loved ones by making a valid will, for example, or speaking with family, trusted friends and health care professionals about how we would like to be treated in the event of illness. It is important to develop such understandings over years, rather than in isolated conversation or when it is too late for considered thought. The Church in Australia has developed a guide for people considering their future health care and planning ahead. It can be accessed at [Myfuturecare.org.au](http://Myfuturecare.org.au).<sup>54</sup> Unlike advance medical directives, the Church’s approach takes into account the unpredictability of disease and it recognises how patients’ preferences and circumstances change over the course of an illness.<sup>55</sup> No one should ever be pressured to make an advance medical directive.

We affirm the sacredness of each person’s life, the inviolable right to life and the need to defend that right for the most vulnerable. We reassert this right with great concern for those who are terminally ill or those who are frail aged and in physical and mental decline.

At present we are witnessing a public debate about euthanasia and assisted dying – practices that unwittingly or even deliberately violate the most fundamental of human rights, the right to the just preservation of one’s life. Dignity at the end of life is particularly at risk when a person’s worth as a human being is devalued and they are isolated in facilities or their homes.

Pope Francis warns us to be on guard against the great lie that ‘lurks behind certain phrases that so insist on the importance of “quality of life” that they make people think that lives affected by grave illness are not worth living!’<sup>56</sup> ‘Dying with dignity’ is one such insidious phrase. It claims to be an act of compassion for those who are dying, but actually entails the deliberate taking of a person’s life. Missing altogether in this phrase is the deeper human call to dignify those who are dying by accompanying them in their final journey in life.

As a society, we must foster a culture of compassionate care that values and protects people in their final period of life. Palliative care for people who are dying in pain or distress is a tried and tested means of offering such compassionate care. The availability of palliative care needs to be expanded and adequately funded to ensure the dignity of people as they are dying, with support also for carers and family members. Universities offering degrees in medicine and nursing also need to provide adequate formation and training in best practice palliative medicine. The Catholic Church provides around half of all palliative care in Australia and is committed to supporting individuals to live well through the period of illness, successfully managing the physical, psychological and spiritual pain of declining health.<sup>57</sup>

Each and every person is created in the image of God. This is the basis of our worth and dignity. Even in our weakness, our fragility and decline, the image of God still shines in our eyes and we remain his beloved daughters and sons. And for us as Christians, that we are one with Christ draws us to his standard of serving and of valuing the worth and dignity of others: ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’ (Matthew 25:40). When we care for the elderly, we care for Christ. And when we neglect, exclude or seek to ‘throw away’ the elderly, we do this to Christ.

## **A CALL FOR COMMUNITIES OF MERCY AND LOVE**

Jesus the carpenter probably built many tables during his days in the trade, and doubtless would have been at home in any local ‘men’s shed’. Yet in his ministry there was only ever one table: inclusive, open, surprising and challenging. At his table all had a place. There all were welcomed, fed, offered healing and invited to change of heart. Through the simple acts of gathering and talking, eating and drinking, Jesus made manifest the mercy and love of God.

The sacramentality of this shared table is held for us now most strongly in the Eucharist. We gather in the Spirit, savour Christ’s word and eat and drink of his Body and Blood. We are

enveloped by God's mercy and the broad embrace of divine love. The Christian community is built on the Eucharist, and older people have an important place around that table. For them it is a place of prayer and offering, comfort and petition, hope and sacrifice.

The table offers belonging to the local community, a connection to the universal Church, and a sense of the presence of the saints and those who have departed. At the Eucharist longstanding hurts are healed and losses and griefs consoled. The many graces of a life lived are remembered and celebrated in a spirit of thanksgiving.

When we gather with Christ around his table we are in a position to hear what he is calling forth from us, whether from the larger Catholic community, young and old alike.

### **A call to the Catholic community**

Like the broader society, our Catholic communities are growing older. People participating actively in the life of the Church are more likely to be over the age of 60.<sup>58</sup> These members provide a base for the sacramental life of the Church and are the 'glue' that holds our community together. They visit the elderly in their homes, in hospitals, retirement villages and nursing homes. To those generous people we say: you share your ministry with Christ himself, reflecting the mercy and love that was his response to all in need – 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me' (Matthew 25:35–36).

The religious orders, lay associations, charities and dioceses of Australia have worked for nearly two hundred years to establish hospitals, facilities and services for people in their communities and homes. They are inspired and motivated by the ministry of Christ. We acknowledge the dedication and professionalism of the thousands of women and men who work in institutions and services caring for people who are ill and infirm. In every elderly person you serve, may you see the face of Christ, 'who in his human flesh experienced the indifference and solitude to which we often condemn the poorest of the poor'.<sup>59</sup>

Pope Francis challenges us all to change the way we view aged care facilities. Rather than being places where people are hidden away, he says, they should be regarded as the 'lungs of humanity' in our neighbourhoods and parishes. There are many good organisations and groups working to combat loneliness in these settings, but there is still more to be done.

There is a role here for our parishes, schools and local aged care facilities to work together, renewing their efforts to bridge the generations and visit and support older people who may feel isolated or forgotten.

*It is so good to go visit an elderly person! Look at our children: sometimes we see them listless and sad; they go visit an elderly person and become joyful!*<sup>60</sup>

We call on all Catholic communities to consider how they can reach out to older people in facilities and in their homes, for example:

- by providing increased opportunities for participation in the sacramental life of the Church
- by running spiritually and intellectually stimulating courses or initiating life story projects as part of the contribution to the community's history
- by providing a space where young and old can meet and share their skills, experiences and stories.

### **A call to all young people**

We offer a challenge to young people too. It can be a demanding one, but the rewards will be great and they will last you a lifetime. Come to the table to spend a little time with your parents, your uncles, aunts, grandparents. Ask them about their lives, the choices and challenges they faced, their friends, their travels, their schools and working lives. You will hear amazing things – lives of faith, struggles and hardships, great victories and joys, marriages, births and deaths.

The memories these men and women possess are your heritage. The story-telling shows you who you are rather than what you do or how much you possess. You may come to better understand your own place in the narrative – the 'living history' of your family, your neighbourhood and your country.<sup>61</sup>

There can be a special affinity between the younger and older generations. Whereas parents are often engaged in the daily struggle to get food on the table and put a roof over your heads, you and your older relatives have an opportunity to get together and consider important things beyond the day-to-day realities of this world. Pope Francis says:

*Whenever we attempt to read the signs of the times it is helpful to listen to young people and the elderly ... The elderly bring with them memory and the wisdom of experience, which warns us not to foolishly repeat our past mistakes. Young people call us to renewed and expansive hope, for they represent new directions for humanity and open us up to the future ...*<sup>62</sup>

To all young people, we invite you to think about how you can make connections with older members of your families and communities:

- Consider giving up some of your time each week to really engage in conversation with your parents and grandparents.
- Talk to your teachers about inviting older people to be guest speakers or part of your school activities.
- Think about how you can reach out to those who might be feeling lonely by organising a visit to a nursing home or running a special event on Grandparents Day.

## **A call to the elders**

To senior Australians, we ask: what will you bring to the table? How will you embrace the change in your later lives? What do we want to give to our families and communities?

Ageing brings gifts: a centeredness that allows one to rise above the frenetic pace of modern life; a sense of history that reaches far beyond the transience of popular culture or the media's news cycle; the wisdom gained from past mistakes or failures; and a sense of community, which a culture of individualism cannot provide.<sup>63</sup> Time is limited: how will you use it? Your gifts are great: how will you pass them on?

Amongst these gifts is the grace of dependence. Jesus called it up before Peter as he was testing the apostle's ability to lead, noting to the rather stubborn fisherman that there comes a time when it is not possible to put on your own belt and go where you like, but rather 'you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go' (John 21:18). In trying to instruct Peter, Jesus was evoking an experience all too familiar to many, but one that was dismissed as trivial given the elderly were invisible.

The wisdom of age brings with it the ability to be a prophetic witness in society and a force for positive change. Older people will have a considerable political influence in the years to come. The challenge for this older generation is whether it will use this political influence for its own benefit or for the good of society as a whole. The way we shape our community will set an example and the standard for future generations.

So we call on you:

- How will you use your time as a member of the community of Faith? Your spiritual fulfilment is an important part of the legacy and faith you will pass on.
- You have the opportunity to pass on a bequest of healing for past quarrels, an end to disputes, and to relate in love across boundaries of family and society. How will you best use that opportunity?
- You have the wisdom of years that can offer a great deal for the common good. It is important to remain engaged in national debates about the future of our society.

## **A call to our political leaders**

Our society is founded on the contribution of senior Australians. The foresight and generosity of previous generations can be seen in so many institutions of health, welfare, education and industrial relations. They were born out of times when the weak and powerless lacked protection from destitution or exploitation. We must hold on to the best of this inheritance as we face a period of significant social and economic change.

The ageing of the population carries with it key challenges that have social justice implications across all areas of policy and at all levels of government – from taxation and

retirement savings to spending in health and aged care services, from labour market and industrial relations to town planning, transport and housing policies.

Australia needs to plan for the future in a more coordinated way.

We call on our political leaders:

- Ensure the benefits of a longer working life extend to all, in a way that promotes positive ageing and values the non-economic contribution of older people.
- Defend the dignity of older people who are frail and vulnerable, ensuring no policy or public debate ever casts these citizens as a burden or as rivals to younger generations.
- Bring all people to the table to consider a national strategy for positive ageing.

## A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Our pontiff, himself an elderly citizen of God’s world, gently chides us with his story of the two tables, one large for the healthy young, and one to keep the grandparent out of sight. The communal table is infused with ordinary life. It is a reminder of all the meals lovingly made and gratefully consumed, disputes and reconciliations, endless cups of tea, homework and letters written and read.

The image of the one table presages the promise of the ‘feast of rich food’ and wines brought alive in the poetry of the prophet Isaiah (25:6–9). Yet as we all gather at the one table we are invited to recognise the bounty that has already been laid for us to share. In particular the elderly carry these things in their hearts, and join them into our Eucharist.

In Australia we face a threefold challenge when we work to give older Australians their rightful place at the table. We must do all we can to ensure that they continue to participate in the heart of community life. We must protect the frail and vulnerable and respect and celebrate their inherent dignity. Finally, we must all stand in solidarity and ensure that every one of God’s precious people has a place at the table of life.

We lose too much when we obscure or overlook the likes of Simeon and Anna in our midst. Rather we are called to be united in love: all God’s people, from generation to generation, planted in love and built on love (Ephesians 3:14–21). As Paul reminds: ‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another’ (Romans 13:8). None are pushed to the margins or excluded. Our love is expressed as we all share from the one table.

### Notes

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