



# Social Justice in Catholic Schools: A document to assist reflection on present practice or in the introduction of a new program

Updated February 2019

## Introduction

The [mission](#) of Catholic schools in Queensland is to educate and form students who are challenged to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ, participate critically and authentically in being purposeful, hopeful, joyful and open to dialogue and engagement with wider society.

Pope Francis<sup>1</sup> explains engagement with wider society needs to be an encounter as Jesus did: not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying “what a shame, poor people!”. In doing this, Catholic schools affirm the dignity of the human person<sup>2</sup> and requires people to act justly and to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God<sup>3</sup>.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) promotes an education that produces active and informed citizens who are able to think deeply, able to make sense of the world and work for the common good.

## To act justly

There are four dimensions to acting justly:

1. **commutative justice** or legal justice is about the rights and laws that govern fairness in people’s dealings with one another.
2. **distributive justice apportions the benefits in a community on those whose basic material needs are unmet** and those who have more are expected to bear more of the burden.
3. **Social justice means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter.**<sup>4</sup> Social justice enables commutative and distributive justice to flourish.
4. **Biblical justice** includes not only the righting of wrongs but generosity and social concern, especially toward the poor and vulnerable.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *For a culture of encounter*, Morning Meditation 2016

<sup>2</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church par. 107

<sup>3</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [188]

## Catholic social teaching

Figure 1 outlines ten key principles of Catholic social teaching and describes the way to *bring forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek and protect the good of others.*<sup>5</sup>

*Principles of Catholic Social Teaching are:*

<i>Human Dignity</i>	Every human community, every race and culture is equal in dignity and rights. No person should have their dignity or freedom compromised, nor treated as a commodity or mere recipient of aid. Dignity requires equitable access to quality of life and wellbeing.
<i>Preferential option for the poor</i>	The needs and rights of the poor and marginalised are given special attention in God's eyes. Caring for the poor is everyone's responsibility.
<i>Political and economic rights</i>	All people are obliged to take an active role in the development of socio-economic, political and cultural life and not be passive recipients of other people's decisions.
<i>The common good</i>	Every group in society must take into account the rights and aspirations of other groups, and of the wellbeing of the whole human family.
<i>Subsidiarity</i>	Responsibility and decision making should be kept as close as possible to the people most affected by a decision or policy. Assistance is offered when individuals or groups are unable to accomplish something on their own. Assistance is given in such a way that it fosters freedom and participation.
<i>Solidarity</i>	People are social by nature and can only grow and develop in relationship with others. Solidarity is the capacity to walk with another. It values common prosperity.
<i>Stewardship</i>	We have a responsibility to care for the world's goods as stewards and trustees, and not merely, as consumers. Resources are limited and not to be exploited. Stewardship values collaboration above division, and sustainability above short term gain.
<i>Economic justice</i>	Every economic decision and institution must be judged on whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person. Any economic system is judged by what it does for and to people and by how it permits all to participate in it.
<i>Participation</i>	Participation implies a sense of responsibility to influence people, events and circumstances for the better. The Gospel message outlines the need to act with care and concern for one another, and if necessary, to work to correct the wrongs and injustices done to others. Through participation, people can develop the disposition of empathy. Injustice can be overcome through the application of restorative justice principles and processes. These processes promote, reconcile and rebuild right relationships with God and with one another.
<i>Promotion of peace</i>	Peace is an outcome of justice and is dependent upon right order among people. Peace is not just the absence of war. Peace involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. Peace involves collaboration and binding agreements.

Figure 1

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [178]

## Key principles for schools

This document explores good practice in how social justice is being implemented in Catholic schools in Queensland and encourages schools to “get beyond the barrier of aid, of gifts, of assistance, to reach the realm of justice”<sup>6</sup>. The [OECD Education 2030](#) project has identified the "Transformative Competencies": creating new value; reconciling tensions and dilemmas; and taking responsibility as important for young people. A quality social justice program provides students with the platform to develop these competencies.

When considering social justice in Catholic schools it is important to consider the following:

### 1. A focus on the Gospel

- The Gospel compels us to be involved in justice for all and the need for care and concern for those who do not have access to the most basic opportunities in society.<sup>7</sup>
- A social justice program provides the opportunity to break open scripture and make it relevant to students and staff. The program needs to be experiential, sustainable and provide real experiences for staff, students and parents (and possibly parish).
- A process such as *The Pastoral Circle*<sup>8</sup> will help participants observe, analyse, reflect and act from the perspective of Catholic social tradition outlined above.

### 2. Evidence-based practice

- An audit of the school community’s justice needs as well as those of the wider community will help deliver consistency between internal school practices and procedures and outward-focused justice initiatives.
- The development of programs will also require sensitive, respectful consultation with the receiving community in all decisions and planning of programs. Programs must allow those communities to be the subjects of their own development, not the object of someone else’s idea of how they should be developed.
- Ongoing review, reflection and debriefings are an important part of social justice programs with an evaluation held at school level and with the partner community at its completion.

### 3. Both charity and social justice programs have a purpose.

Although both charity and justice aim to fulfil a need, their approach to that need is different. *Charity* is the traditional Christian word for love expressed through actions that might help people survive a current need and are informed by the common good. Best practice will:

- identify items most needed by the receiving community;
- avoid providing items that could be culturally inappropriate or difficult to dispose of if unwanted;
- purchase goods from the local community where possible to support local businesses. Avoid flooding local markets with free goods or handouts that could put local communities out of work;
- allow community leaders to disperse items appropriately and avoid giving presents directly to children or to some families only.

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<sup>6</sup> Dom Helder Camara, Bishop of Recife, Brazil

<sup>7</sup> Fr Bill O’Shea and Peter Gagen, *At Home with God’s People*, Faith & Life, pp190-191, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Shared Visions, *The Vincent Pallotti Centre* Vol 22, No 1, 2011.

*Social justice programs*, however, seek to:

- remove the causes of human suffering and seek to resolve the root cause of the problem;
- promote positive values and focus on delivering empowerment to people and never treat people as commodities nor as mere recipients of aid;
  
- develop active participation as a member of a global community to stand in solidarity with the poor and marginalised and identify with their situation;
- not only listen to the poor and marginalised but learn from them and learn with them in a relational context and build a shared future.

Warning: Poverty can be described as the lack of power to change one's own situation<sup>9</sup>. Action to overcome poverty can create a shift in power and if not careful, be counterproductive in the long term. It must be stressed that acts of service should never be *to*, nor *for*, but *with*. A useful guide to avoid poverty tourism<sup>10</sup> is to: build healthy relationships; empower; NEVER do for another what they can do for themselves<sup>11</sup>.

#### **4. A whole of school approach to social justice**

- An authentic social justice culture within a Catholic school will reflect the school's mission, its prayer and ritual life and its policies, structures and practices. It enhances Catholic identity and fits in with the religious life of the school.
- It will be integrated into the school's curriculum and not left to the Religious Education program alone. However, there will always be a strong link to the Religious Education curriculum, especially to what happens in the classroom.
- The process will involve Principal's approval, preparation and formation of participants around Catholic social teaching, parent/parish information sessions and commissioning of participants.

#### **5. Service learning**

- A focus on service learning incorporates a diverse range of experiential learning options to cater for the differing needs, contexts and interests of school communities.
- Service learning could involve critical thinking, simulations, inquiry-based learning, experiments, immersion experiences and fieldwork to explore or address real world issues and problems.
- Participants are required to self-reflect and discern personal transformation that has occurred.

#### **6. Community engagement**

Stakeholders need to be consulted and this is made easier if the partners share the same vision and goals. Successful community engagement has the following attributes<sup>12</sup>:

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<sup>9</sup> R Browning, *Beyond Good intentions*, p1.

<sup>10</sup> Br Damien Price, *Transformation not ticking boxes*, p 3.

<sup>11</sup> R Browning, *Beyond Good intentions*, p2.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Howard, Ann Gervasoni, Jude Butcher, *Implementing a University Paradigm for Effective Community Engagement*, 2007

- *Authenticity*: Authentic relationship formation is based on openness and trust and formed at both personal and institutional levels. These relationships require time and ‘nourishment’ to form and develop;
- *Sustainability*: Sustainable partnerships require planning and supportive structures including communication strategies, particularly when partners are separated by distance;
- *Mutuality*: Mutuality implies that together, the communities and the school seek to identify inequalities and injustices, to understand the nature of these, and to explore and implement possible solutions.

## 7. Orphanages

- Schools partnering with a third-party travel provider that offers students the opportunity to engage in visiting and volunteering at an orphanage will need to check if the organisation is trustworthy, transparent and reputable, is the right fit and is child safe.
- Avoid “orphanage tourism” activity where children are promoted or “trafficked” to create a perceived need for donations of money and time. Care for vulnerable children should aim to reintegrate children into their family or community settings where it is safe to do so.
- The [Australian Government](#) discourages any form of short-term, unskilled volunteering in orphanages because:
  1. constant strangers coming in and out of children's lives can be harmful to a child's development;
  2. some orphanages are created to get money from tourists, rather than providing care to children as a last resort;
  3. this can encourage an over-reliance on orphanage care, separate families and may put vulnerable children at greater risk of harm.

## 8. Learning from the experts.

- The mentoring and support offered through Caritas, Catholic Mission and St Vincent de Paul organisations assist in identifying suitable projects, developing appropriate partnerships and guide how to work and build with a community.
- Their experience may be useful in ensuring a sensitivity to power imbalances, earning the respect of host communities, maintaining the safety of participants and being attentive of legal and liability concerns in any resulting immersion experience.

## 9. Good practice is transformative.

- Quality programs invite participants to reflect and build a deeper understanding of their ability to affect positive change in their immediate, respective worlds as a life-long commitment that is not disconnected from everyday behaviour. The *academic experience*<sup>13</sup> (learning goals, conceptual understandings, values explored, and perceptions challenged) has much to offer in effecting change in how the participant sees their world through service *learning*<sup>14</sup>. Formation occurs throughout the program as concepts grow and are integrated into the student’s hopefully expanding Worldview and form an integral part of the debrief at its conclusion.

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<sup>13</sup> Br Damien Price, *Transformation not ticking boxes*, p7

<sup>14</sup> Br Damien Price, *The processes at work in Service Learning*, Conference 2012, p 2.

- Guilt can be experienced by a participant in the early stages of the service experience<sup>15</sup>. Guilt is a natural response to something not being right and can be reflected upon and channelled into a deeper engagement with the participant's worldview, creating a learning experience.
- Students being regularly exhorted to 'make a difference' can feel individually responsible for the world's transformation rather than learning how to *be* with one another in solidarity and being vulnerable – letting go of control, letting go of agenda, and being open to what is<sup>16</sup>. It is not always possible to know how our participation will contribute to the whole but trust if our involvement is done with integrity, it will make a difference. Our achievements are not an indicator of our worth.
- Reunions of past participants can promote additional service, lay missionary vocations and political/economic advocacy.

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<sup>15</sup> Br Damien Price, *The processes at work in Service Learning*, Conference 2012, p 7

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Bachelard, *A Spirituality of Service Learning*, Conference, 2016, p1

## Further Considerations

There are several considerations in applying the nine guiding principles:

- **Catholic ethos.** Even if the project being supported is secular, involvement should be from a Catholic perspective towards a more just world as articulated in the Gospel and the principles of Catholic social teaching outlined above.
- **Experiential participation.** “Fundraising” is the easiest place to start but much more can be accomplished through experiential learning. Students need to feel that this learning is something that is good, raw and engaging. Students need to be challenged but not overwhelmed and careful monitoring through regular debriefs will help measure student’s capacity to cope. Where necessary, further resources and counselling may be needed to further support students.
- **Inclusion.** Key (influential) students from each of their peer groups (justice, sporting, drama etc) need to be invited to participate. As a group they create an interest and passion that attracts other students to be involved.
- **Formation.** It is important to provide training, support and reflection on experiences in the field. Staff need formation from the outset with “champions” identified to progress the social justice agenda. Adequate financial support and release time for staff may need to be provided.

## Examples of Good Practice

The Australian Bishops request that all Catholic schools show support for Caritas, Catholic Mission and St Vincent de Paul Society. Some examples of good practice are:

- Marginalised groups are identified within the school and local community and ways are developed to demonstrate welcome and support.
- Structured immersion experiences for students and staff that provide valuable insight into the lives of others (e.g. street retreats, visiting care facilities).
- [Caritas’ “Just visiting”](#) resources. Caritas Australia has also produced an educational toolkit for teachers with links to the Australian Curriculum. There are resources for students in Lower Primary (Years K-2), Middle Primary (Years 3-4), Upper Primary (Years 5-6) and Secondary classes. There is a booklet of Education Resources for students in Primary Schools that lists the links with the Australian Curriculum as well as a booklet for Secondary Schools.
- [Catholic Mission](#) offers volunteering and emersion opportunities.
- [St Vincent de Paul Society’s Mini Vinnies](#) program and the *High School Conferences* generally involve three components: ‘see’ (education and awareness), ‘think’ (formation and reflection) and ‘do’ (community service and fundraising). ‘See, think, do’ encourages young people to think and talk about their spirituality.
- [Children’s Holiday Camp Program](#) provides Year 11 and 12 students the opportunity to care for a child with special needs over a three-day period. The majority of the camps run in the September and December school holidays.
- [Edmund Rice Camps](#) provide recreational experiences for young people aged 7 - 16 years who may not otherwise have the opportunity.