

Australian Catholics ask the Prime Minister to ensure that we really are all in this together

On the 7th of April, 2020, an historic group of Australian Catholics service providers, Religious Orders and Bishops wrote to Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, and applauded him and his government for showing leadership and agency in the face of this global pandemic. The Prime Minister was congratulated for deploying the vast resources of our wealthy nation in an effort to protect all Australians, including the vulnerable and ensure no one is left to deal with this pandemic on their own.

However, the letter raised concerns for two groups of people that remain on the margins of our community and vulnerable to both the predations of the Covid 19 virus and the despair that comes with such vulnerability.

In the first group there are more than 1.5 million temporary visa holders in the Australian community. Many thousands are members of our congregations: they pray in our pews, work in our restaurants, farms, factories, aged care homes, supermarkets, and NGOs, study in our schools and universities, and live in our neighbourhoods.

They are losing their jobs but have no access to any form of financial safety net, to Medicare, to temporary shelter, and to fundamental support services such as free legal advice. Support from overseas family members may also be affected. Most cannot return home at this time.

Within this population, some are in an even more precarious situation: trafficked people and victims of modern slavery, people seeking asylum, and women on temporary visas experiencing domestic violence. For them, the impacts of COVID-19 and the exclusions from government support sit atop an already dangerous and exclusionary reality.

There are also people seeking asylum and refugees living in the community supported by volunteers who provide meal assistance through food banks and vouchers. At present the number of volunteers has significantly dropped due to social distancing requirements and yet there remains an urgent need for stocking food banks. We are already seeing all kinds of public health and economic impacts: a surge in homelessness, and destitution, including people without food on their tables; a concomitant growth in people who find they cannot meet social distancing and self-isolation requirements; and an increase of already sick individuals without Medicare who are unable to seek timely health care.

The second group includes the people who came seeking Australia's protection and who are currently being held in hotels and detention centres across Australia. This group have no choice about whether they take the vitally needed steps in maintaining physical distance and hand and coughing hygiene. Despite having committed no crime, they are being held in detention where social distancing is impossible and they are vulnerable with guards and service providers coming and going. We join with the Australian Society for Infection Disease and the Australian College of Infection Prevention to urge the Morrison-government to release asylum seekers and refugees from detention.

To this end, we ask that everyone in the Australian community who is in hardship as a result of the COVID19 pandemic, including people seeking protection, be given temporary access to a financial safety net, Medicare, and adequate shelter if they are homeless.

Christians across Australia, including Catholics, have consistently shown concern for the welfare and lives of people who are on the margins. As Catholic leaders, we do the same.

We ask the Federal Government to remember its responsibility for ensuring safety and human rights of everyone residing within its jurisdiction, even temporarily. In the same way, we hope that foreign governments will be mindful of the needs of Australians stranded abroad at this time.

Australia cannot afford to leave some of the most vulnerable people in our community behind. COVID-19 makes us all as vulnerable as the most vulnerable person in Australia. Our support and generosity should extend to everyone in Australia who is in need of it at this critical moment.

None of us have ever experienced what we are going through today. It is a health crisis and becoming an economic crisis, but we must not let it become a crisis for our shared humanity. We must widen the circle of protection and care to include every person in Australia. Our health demands that as does our humanity.

List of Signatories

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Most Reverend Bishop Charles Gauci DD, Bishop of Darwin

Most Reverend Bishop Terence John Gerard Brady, Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney

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