



# A fairer, more inclusive Australian society

that reflects and supports  
the dignity, equality and  
participation of all people.

## SOCIAL SERVICE LEADER CALLS FOR A NEW ACCORD FOR THE COMMON GOOD

*By Ronald E. Johnson*

Studies on the maldistribution of wealth and opportunity in Australia, over the past two decades at least, confirm that the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer and that the number of Australians living in poverty (now more than 3.3 million) is steadily increasing. It is more important than ever before for Australians to unite to work for social justice and the common good.

The most recent report released in November 2024 by the Poverty and Inequality Partnership between the University of NSW (UNSW) and the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), Material Deprivation in Australia: The Essentials of Life, adds important detail to our accumulated knowledge about the specific nature and extent of the material deprivation impacting our society.

One of the unsurprising key findings in the report is:

People with low incomes and wealth, especially those belonging to eight groups – people relying on JobSeeker Payment, Parenting Payment, Disability Support Pension or Youth Allowance, sole parent families, First Nations peoples, those renting social housing or privately – face a much higher risk of experiencing material deprivation.

Another study released in August 2024 by the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre at Curtin University, revealed that more than 800,000 or 1 in 6 Australian children are now living in poverty.

Such statistics may deliver a jolt. But the point is- what will we do about it? Will we decide that it is all too hard and abandon our fellow Australians living in poverty? Perhaps, looking to our great Catholic leaders from history can illuminate and aid our busy 21st Century minds to discern wise remedies. For example, St. Ambrose (circa 337-397), explained:

“God created the universe in such a manner that all in common might derive their food from it, and that the Earth should also be a property common to all.”

## 1 in 6 Australian children are now living in poverty

It is terrible but pertinent also to consider the example from ancient Rome where, especially if the parents believed they could not afford a child, the child was disposed of. Infanticide would sometimes take place. However, the practice of *expositio* or “exposure” was more common, whereby the child was simply left outside and abandoned to the elements.



Many of these children died due to dehydration or cold, were eaten by animals or were found and kept alive for use as slaves or prostitution. Some were rescued and raised and loved by people who cared, especially Christians. Indeed, it was the influence of Christians that eventually led to the legal prohibition of *expositio* in Rome in 374 AD.

In modern Australia, impoverished children are subject to exposure of a different kind. They are exposed to multidimensional hardship. Their lives are dominated by deprivation, pain, and lost opportunities. They are often inclined to try not to complain.

They are exposed to things such as unaffordable, insecure or unsafe housing, hunger and malnutrition, a lack of clean drinking water, inadequate health care, restricted access to education, family violence, neglect and so on. When some of these children understandably rebel, as Anne Hollonds, the National Children’s Commissioner, has pointed out, devastatingly, they are placed in prisons for juveniles.

Children living in poverty are less likely to be breastfed, play a sport, and to have family holidays away. They are more likely to suffer physical and mental illness, and to die prematurely, including by suicide. Tragically, the list goes on. These problems must not be denied nor dismissed by cynical throwaway lines about the resilience of children.

The situation would be very much worse if not for the vital social services provided by members of Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA). Undermined by serious shortfalls in government funding, CSSA members nevertheless hold fast on the front line, serving the needs of vulnerable families and children.

CSSA members place families and young people into social and affordable housing, help children with school uniforms, equipment and learning, provide support in times of family stress, violence, bereavement, or breakdown. They facilitate foster care, help young people in detention and asylum-seeker families living in cars, they serve meals to the hungry and provide recovery services for families impacted by addiction.

The Book of Matthew, 19:26 states:  
But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Just as expositio was eventually outlawed in the Roman Empire, it is possible that the power of Christianity, or more broadly, the power of love, could lead to action that will bring an end to poverty in Australia. Indeed, during 2024, serious such action began. A powerful new campaign emerged devoted to bringing about legislation to end child poverty in Australia.

The End Child Poverty Campaign was started by Adjunct Professor Tony Pietropiccolo from Centrecare WA and Sarah Quinton from the Valuing Children Initiative and at last count now has the backing of more than 158 community organisations, including CSSA

With support from the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service, CSSA is part of a determined group leading the End Child Poverty Campaign. CSSA Executive Director, Dr Jerry Nockles, recently stated:

“The stark reality of over 800,000 Australian children living in poverty is not just a statistic – it is a moral imperative that demands our immediate attention.

In our efforts to build a consensus around policies that benefit all Australians – or an accord for the Common Good – we must recognise that a stronger welfare safety net is both an economic necessity and a moral imperative.

It is time we come together – government, business, and community – to forge long-term solutions that tackle the complex roots of disadvantage, uphold the dignity of all Australians, and offer genuine hope for a future where every child can thrive.”

Catholic Social Teaching highlights the innate and inalienable dignity of each person. This arises directly from the Christian concept of imago Dei, which means that every person is created in the image of God. Thus, all people are of equal and inestimable worth. Speaking in April 2020, Pope Francis explained:



“We are fashioned from the earth, and fruit of the earth sustains our life. But, as the book of Genesis reminds us, we are not simply “earthly”; we also bear within us the breath of life that comes from God (cf. Gen 2:4-7).”

Recognising the importance of human dignity serves as inspiration for Christians and other people of good will to strive to build a just and compassionate world for all. Pope Francis and other great social reformers have emphasised that in the battle against poverty, love as expressed through charitable works is necessary, but not sufficient. We need to address the structural causes of poverty.

We need to build stronger, more caring communities and, in the spirit of Jubilee 2025, to level out unjust privileges that undermine our equal right to live, prosper and enjoy life, as gifted by God. Writing in *Evangelii Gaudium* in 2013, Pope Francis said:

“The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies.”

With the average price of a house site (land only) in Sydney sitting at \$710,000, the primary factor separating the haves and the have nots in Australia is, of course, home ownership. It is now nearly impossible for a couple both working full time, earning at or below the average wage, to afford to buy a home, raise a family, and to live with dignity. Yet we live in a country of great abundance.

The idea of association in equality is not just a foundation stone of Christian morality and social justice, it is truly the only way to achieve sustainable social and economic progress and prosperity. It is important for Catholics and other people of good will to study and work to accurately identify and peacefully root out unjust privileges that stand in the way of people associating in equality and thereby stand in the way of the common good.

All Australian adults have a moral responsibility to be part of the solution to poverty, especially child poverty. At the very least, for the upcoming Federal Election, we can cast a vote on behalf of impoverished children, for the political party or candidate that we discern has the best plan to end poverty.

Why not write a letter to the candidates in your Federal Electorate and ask them what their plan is to end poverty in Australia, starting with the 800,000 plus children living in poverty?

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