

# the Record

Autumn/  
Winter 2019



St Vincent de Paul Society  
*good works*

THE COST OF  
EDUCATION

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YOUNG PEOPLE  
FEEL FULL EFFECT  
OF ECONOMIC  
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I DON'T WANT SLAVES  
WORKING FOR ME

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**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
*good works*

The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

This logo represents the hand of Christ that blesses the cup, the hand of love that offers the cup, and the hand of suffering that receives the cup.

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National Council of Australia  
PO Box 243, Deakin West, ACT, 2600

Contact: Donna Scheerlinck  
Phone: 02 6202 1200  
Email: admin@svdp.org.au  
Web: vinnies.org.au  
Editor: Rebecca Comini

**The Record** is overseen by an editorial committee.

Advertising: Donna Scheerlinck  
Phone: 02 6202 1200  
Email: admin@svdp.org.au

Design: Damon Carr  
Ramesh Weeraratne  
Design & Print Office  
Catholic Archdiocese  
of Melbourne

Phone: 03 9926 5759

Printing: Doran Printing  
46 Industrial Drive,  
Braeside, Victoria, 3195

Phone: 03 9587 4333  
Email: sales@doran.com.au  
Web: www.doran.com.au

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# A never-ending journey of renewal and action

BY GRAHAM WEST

**M**y term as the National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia drew to a close in March.

It was wonderful news for the Society that we had three outstanding Vincentians who nominated for the position. The names and vision statements of the nominees were circulated throughout our membership so that they could consider who they would like to see in the role. The National Council has elected South Australian Claire Victory to the position and I offer her my congratulations.

Recently I have been reflecting on the achievements of our National Council during my four-year term as President.

The work of the National Council can at times be difficult; trying to balance the needs of the many areas we serve while at the same time looking toward the future. Throughout this work, all Councillors bring their unique gifts to the table in a spirit of solidarity. As such, the achievements of the National Council belong to all who have served on it and supported it and therefore belong to all members of the Society and our companions.

There will always be more work to do, things left undone, things to improve, but it is also easy to lose sight of some of the things we have achieved. Key among these many achievements was the first National Congress in 60 years, which was held in Adelaide in 2017. Almost 200 Vincentians gathered together from across the country to work towards formulating new ideas and ensuring our charism continues in



*Graham West at the National Congress 2017.*

service. Over the past 18 months, the National Council has drawn on the insights gained from Congress to develop new ways to put our calling into practice for the benefit of all.

The National Congress was only one step in the never-ending journey of renewal and action that our founder called us to. At my election, I said that I believed that the big challenge for the future was how we ensure the dynamism of our membership and ensure that our Society gives new hope, ways of service, and ways of care to future generations. This challenge remains.

In addition to renewing and

revitalising the organisation from within, we have faced challenges from new forms of poverty and inequality. In response, the Society has continued to be a leading voice for social justice and change. We have commented on matters that impact those we serve. We have met with decision makers, with government ministers and officials, and we have issued media releases on topics of concern. We have prepared policy submissions and researched various issues relating to poverty, housing and homelessness, asylum-seekers and refugees, unemployment,

*continued on page 4 ►*

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inequality and social injustice. Through our public advocacy via multiple platforms we have tried to encourage broader community debate on the type of society we want, focusing attention on the structural causes of poverty and exclusion and advocating for economic and social policy that addresses these causes.

Despite all of this excellent work, poverty persists and the inequalities in our country continue to widen. While Australia is a prosperous country, nearly one in five children lives in poverty. And the fact that we still have well over 100,000 Australians sleeping rough on the streets or in their cars or relying on the generosity of friends to let them

sleep on their couch is indicative of how much still needs to be done to ensure that everyone in our community has somewhere to call home.

The role of National President is a challenging but wonderful one. You are exposed to the best of the Society, responding to changes and events while trying to steer a path for the future.

I remember the former National President, Tony Thornton OBE, telling me that the last year of his role was the hardest. It's a time of change, and of knowing that you no longer have the time to make significant changes, and a time where many Council members change over.

While challenges remain, I end my tenure as President assured that our members, volunteers and employees will continue to respond with hope and love to those living in poverty, working for a society in which everyone is valued. The Society is full of wonderful, passionate people, who because of their passion are both hopeful for the future and focused on a better present. It is a movement that has changed the world and will continue to do so, adapting and evolving as new challenges emerge while at the same time striving to be faithful to its founders. ♦

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Graham West is outgoing National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

## Experienced chief executive appointed to head the National Council

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council has welcomed Toby oConnor as its new Chief Executive Officer.

Announcing Mr oConnor's appointment in March, National Council President Claire Victory said: 'The National Council is delighted to welcome Toby to the St Vincent de Paul Society and believes he is ideally experienced to lead our organisation through its next exciting phase.

'Toby's skills, experience and leadership will build on the Society's strong history of achieving positive change for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.'



*Toby oConnor.*

For more than 35 years Mr oConnor has demonstrated a commitment to achieving socially just outcomes for Australians excluded from fully participating in the life of their local community.

He brings extensive leadership, governance and management experience to the role, working in executive roles in the private, government and not-for-profit sectors at both federal and state levels.

'It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that I accept the role of CEO and I look forward to working with the members, volunteers and staff contributing positively to the lives of the most marginalised and vulnerable members of our community,' Mr oConnor said. ♦

# New President elected to lead the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council

Claire Victory has been elected as the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council's new National President and Warwick Fulton as the Society's new Deputy President.

Ms Victory is a solicitor who has been working in private practice for a small Adelaide firm since 2008. She joined the Society at the age of 10 and brings 25 years of experience serving and supporting the Society in various roles, including extensive involvement in Vinnies Youth programs and eight years on National Council.

Ms Victory has the honour of several firsts for this position. She is the first female ever elected to the role in Australia; she is the first South Australian to fill this role; and she is the youngest President of the Society in the 165 years it has existed in this country.

In her new role, Ms Victory said she looked forward to continuing and strengthening the Society's work towards building a more just and compassionate society.

'In a context of persistent poverty and new forms of inequality, I look



*Claire Victory.*

forward to supporting the Society in its role as a leading voice for social justice and change,' Ms Victory said.

'A key challenge for the future of our organisation is ensuring the dynamism of our membership so that we can continue to respond with hope and love to those bearing the brunt of poverty and inequality.

'A priority for the new council will be reviewing governance across the Society—everything from training, formation and succession planning for our members in conferences to looking at legal structures and

reporting standards for councils. We need to ensure that we are operating in the most effective way possible while retaining our mission at the heart of all we do.

'We want members across Australia to feel informed, supported and empowered to continue doing good works in new and creative ways, and through evolving conference and program structures, in order to best meet the needs of our companions and our community.'

Ms Victory succeeds Graham West as President and officially commenced in the role on 22 March.

'On behalf of all of our members, I would like to personally thank Graham West for the dedication and commitment he has demonstrated in his role over the past four years,' she said.

'Graham's experience and enthusiasm in guiding the Society have been a significant positive force and I look forward to continuing this.'

Ms Victory will lead the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia for the next four years. ♦

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## Society urges Morrison Government to tackle unfinished business

National Council President Claire Victory congratulated Prime Minister Scott Morrison after the Coalition Government was re-elected on 18 May.

'We look forward to working with his re-elected government to build a fairer and more just nation,' Ms Victory said.

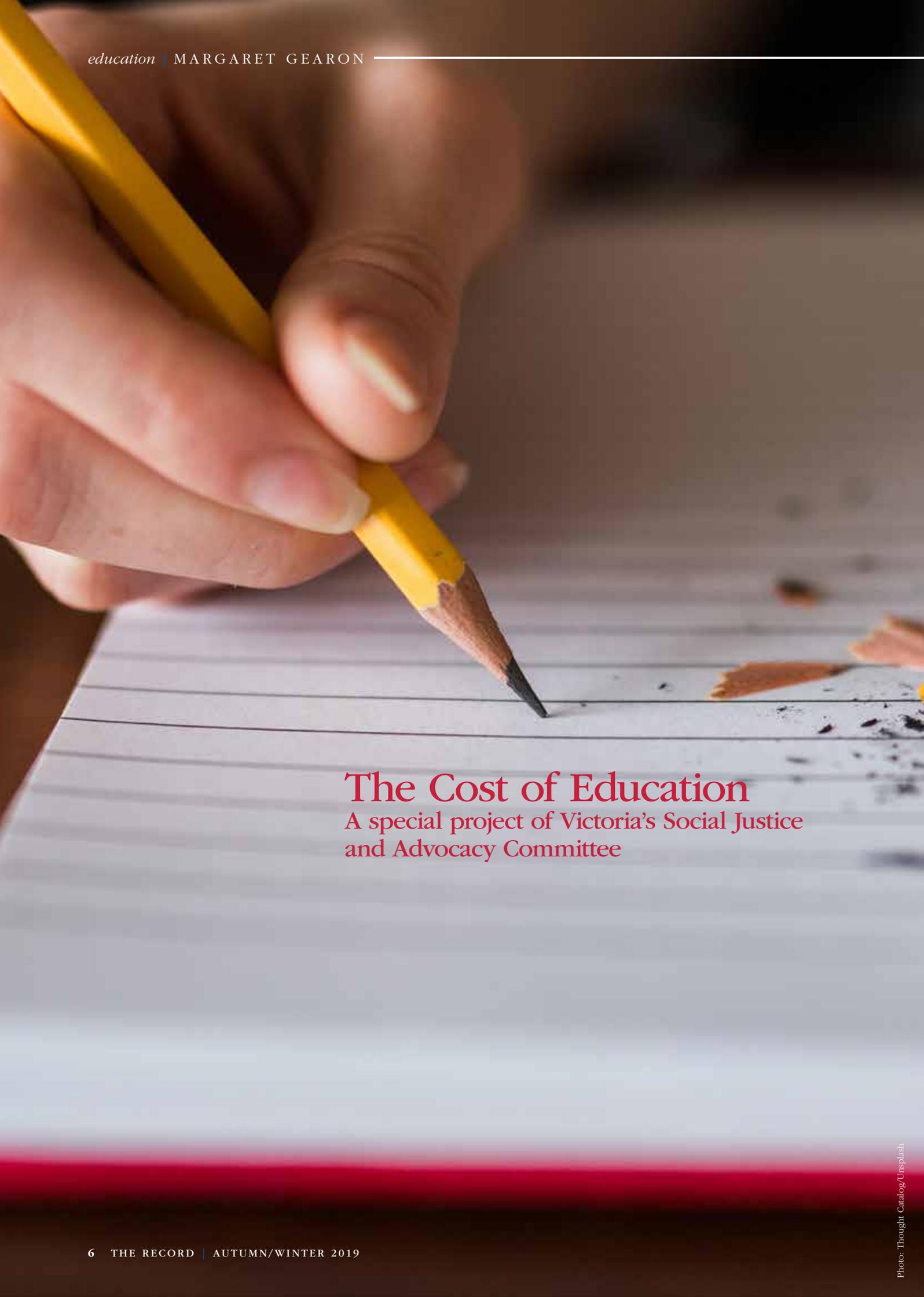
'The government and the country face major challenges, with three million Australians living in poverty and hundreds of thousands of

Australians struggling to find an affordable home. Our experience tells us that individuals and families who are out of work or underemployed are struggling to make ends meet.'

Ms Victory highlighted the Society's commitment to some unfinished business. 'In the lead up to the federal election there was unprecedented community and business support to raise the rate of Newstart. The Society will continue to push for an increase to these

payments. As well, we will work with the Coalition Government to develop new policy responses to tackle Australia's housing affordability crisis, including the development of an approach to address the ongoing huge shortfall in social and affordable housing.

'The St Vincent de Paul Society is committed to working with the re-elected federal government to deliver a country where our economic success is shared by everyone.' ♦



# The Cost of Education

A special project of Victoria's Social Justice  
and Advocacy Committee

*The rising costs of education are putting financial pressure on vulnerable families. The Society in Victoria is addressing these needs at a local level and advocating for the state and federal governments to recognise the true cost of education, writes Margaret Gearon.*

**E**ducation is recognised as an important pathway for overcoming social and economic disadvantage, and for enabling young people to move out of the poverty cycle created or caused by lack of access to an adequate income.

Access to education and training is essential for entry into stable employment. It is the responsibility of the school system to ensure that all students are prepared and able to create a future of self-sufficiency and non-reliance on government benefits.

Anything that prevents a family from maintaining a child in school needs to be investigated and, where possible, addressed. Whether it is the inability to pay school fees, the provision of required uniforms or books, or the inability to afford excursion/camp costs, all these compound the underlying issues and can contribute to a family's financial stress. Children are also affected through the lack of schooling essentials that can potentially lead to a child's lack of willingness to attend school regularly.

Through the work of conference members and the central office call centre, the St Vincent de Paul Society in

Victoria became acutely aware of the increasing costs (direct and indirect) associated with providing educational resources to the families they assist. As a result, Victoria's Social Justice & Advocacy Committee has prioritised the research in this vital area and since August 2017, has presented six-monthly reports tracking the growing need of educational assistance being requested.

The data collected indicate that Victorian families often rely on the local conference or region's help to pay for uniforms, books and technology requirements. Over the past three years, these costs have increased dramatically and families—especially those on Newstart or Disability Pension Allowance, as well as a new group of asylum-seeker and refugee families—are struggling to keep up with the demands of the costs of schooling. The Victorian Department of Education and Training's website now provides information for school principals and parents about access to assistance from State School Relief for uniforms and shoes, how to apply for the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, and what to do if a family is struggling financially with school fees. Although this information addresses some of the issues which the Society raised with the Education Minister in 2018, it does not cover the full extent of costs that disadvantaged families are expected to deal with.

A couple of examples are provided here to illustrate where conferences and regions have responded to requests for education assistance.

In a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne with a very high

percentage of refugee and migrant families, the local conference has been supporting the family of a refugee who is awaiting a liver transplant. After appealing to the former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, the wife and children were allowed to come to Australia on short-term visas. The children needed to attend school, so with the help of the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project, the eldest child was, enrolled in a local Catholic girls school. Her uniform and equipment needs were met by the Society. Her younger brothers were provided with a tutor for home schooling while negotiations were made to have them placed in a school without having to pay international student fees.

Similarly, in Gippsland, a Burmese family who had come to Australia and applied for a family reunion visa was provided with a tutor for the child of lower secondary school age and twins of primary school age. Recently, the Society paid \$6000 for the twins to be enrolled in a local government primary school and the older child is being supported by the Smith Family to attend the local secondary school.

These exceptional results to enable asylum-seekers' children to be educated come from the advocacy conducted by local conference members and the Social Justice & Advocacy Committee.

A final example from a conference demonstrates the power of the Society's work at a local level. In seeking stories from conferences around assistance for education

*continued on page 8 ►*

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expenses, one conference in the South-Eastern Central Council provided this heart-warming story.

A high achieving secondary school student from a single-parent family had her heart set on attending an international space agency camp. Through her part-time job, the teenager was able to save enough to cover the return airfare and camp fees. Unfortunately, her mother's car broke down and they both needed this to transport them to school and jobs. So, the young student took the money from her savings and gave this to her mum for the car repairs and rent arrears. When the mother called the local conference to ask for assistance with the daughter's regular school expenses, the

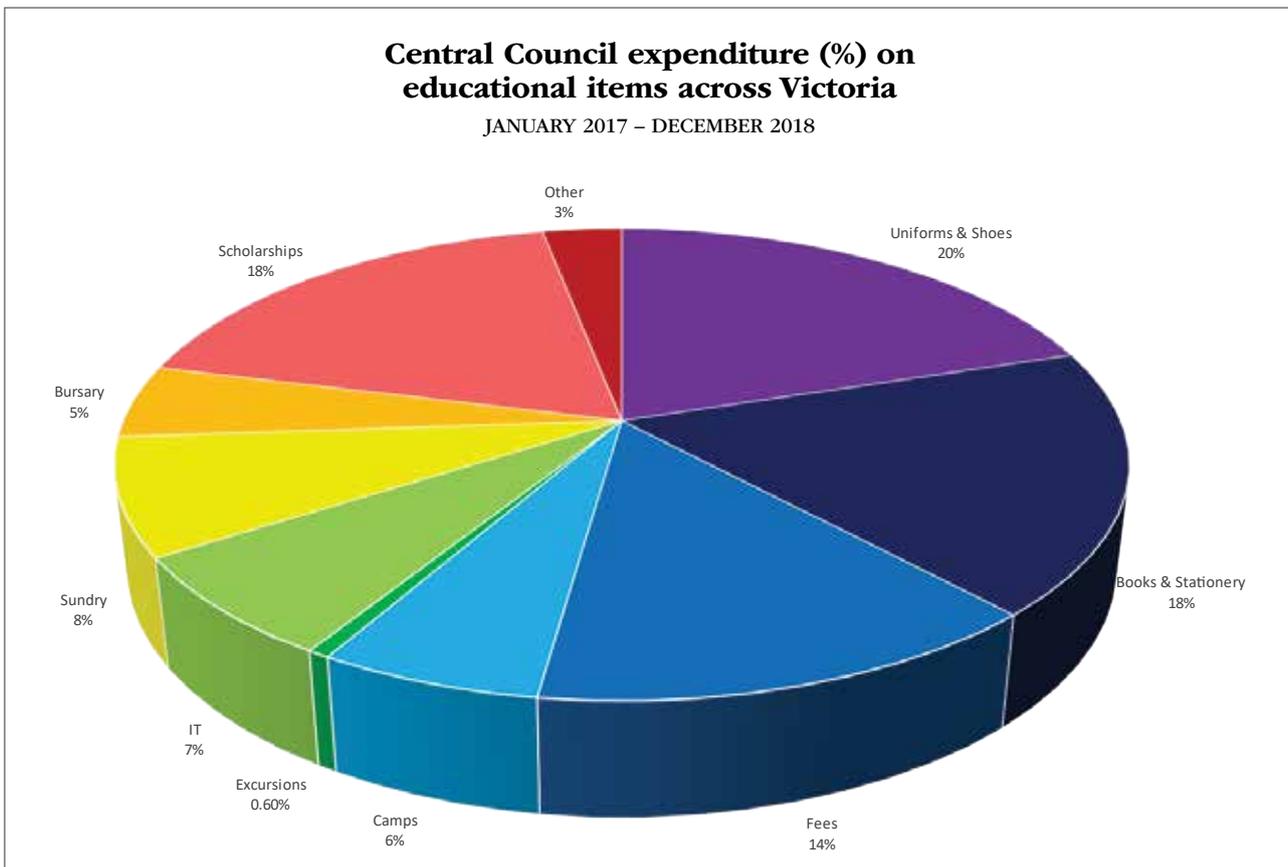
conference was able to provide \$2500 for her schooling and found three anonymous donors who provided \$6000 towards the daughter's participation in the international space camp. This is a great story with a happy ending in this case, but it could have ended quite differently if the local conference had not been committed to the concept of education as a key to breaking the poverty cycle.

In essence, what we are asking is that state and federal government education ministers and opposition education spokespersons recognise the real costs of all aspects of education for parents, especially those who are struggling financially.

Governments need to re-visit their education department's policies on information technology access and the equipment required by students for this technology. They also need to monitor more carefully what schools ask of children and their parents regarding attendance at school camps and excursions, and how the costs of these are to be met.

In Victoria, Society members have a high awareness of the actual costs of education. This has resulted in greater assistance to families for education expenses, and in some instances, the introduction of scholarship schemes for those starting secondary school. ♦

Margaret Gearon is chair of the Victorian Social Justice and Advocacy Committee for the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria.



# Poetry

## Life Just after Death

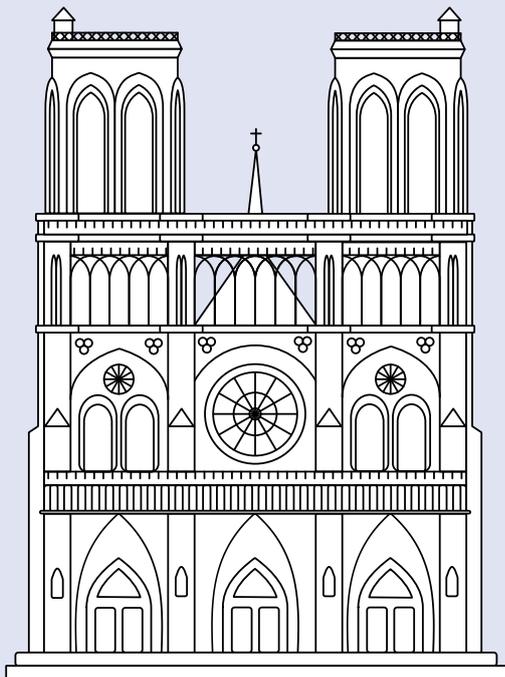
Like a dream that fades into dawn  
the old world withdraws, and a new one is born  
less ponderous than this, but surprisingly the same.  
The people look like they did, their faces remain,  
their bodies make the same kind of show,  
but they cast no shadow.  
There`s something missing, solidity or mass,  
they`re like an image reflected from glass.  
They do not speak,  
there is no need,  
their inmost thoughts are plain,  
their feelings are the same.  
They depart on a new adventure;  
may they be good travellers. ♦

*Reg Naulty*

## Miracles

Would I like a miracle?  
If miracles are oddities –  
a leaf left stranded on a winter branch,  
a thickened snake that never sloughs its skin,  
a corpse discovered more or less intact,  
a single lemming hesitant to jump,  
a ululating dog that howls in verse –  
I would not like a miracle.  
If miracles are gifts –  
a June display of autumn leaves,  
a clear sunset after two days rain,  
a dog thought dead returning home,  
a piper heard across a twilit park,  
a space preserved while ice floes close -  
I would like the greatest gift:  
to live until I die. ♦

*Andy Hamilton SJ*



## Notre Dame 2019

We are The Thorns  
in His Crown  
yet we have been saved  
from this inferno –  
is it to remind us  
that we ourselves  
crowned Him? ♦

*Jan Price*

# Church calls for living wage for Australian families

*Neither employers nor governments are doing enough to support low-paid Australians, and particularly Australian families, the Catholic Church has told the Fair Work Commission.*

The 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.

Megan Kavanagh, a member of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Employment Relations Reference Group, said there had been a tradition in Australia—dating back to the Harvester decision in 1907—that people in full-time work with dependants should not live in poverty.

‘The current level of the minimum wage falls far short of the objective identified and set by Harvester in a much less prosperous Australia 112 years ago,’ she said.

Ms Kavanagh said although Australia has a much greater economic capacity to support working families and protect children against poverty than it did more than a century ago, including through the modern social safety net, that is not the lived reality for a large number of families.

She said the value of the minimum wage, relative to national wage levels, has decreased significantly over the past two decades.

‘The Fair Work Commission last year found that the minimum



wage provided a reasonable income for a single adult without family responsibilities,’ Ms Kavanagh said.

‘In other words, what was an adequate wage for a family two decades ago has become a reasonable wage for a single adult without family responsibilities. That is simply unacceptable.’

In its submission in March, the ACBC argued that the minimum wage should 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 raised by \$31 per week and 3.7 per cent for wages above \$837.40 per week.

‘The process to reverse two decades of inadequate responsiveness to the economic realities facing families can’t happen overnight, but we believe our recommendations are an important step,’ Ms Kavanagh said.

‘Our submission argues that the Fair Work Commission has failed to provide reasonable support for the hundreds of thousands of wage-dependent families who do

not have a decent standard of living by contemporary standards and, in particular, has failed to alleviate the suffering and disadvantage of hundreds of thousands of children who are living in poverty in working families.’

Joe Zabar, Director of Economic Policy at Catholic Social Services Australia, said the living standards of Australians on the minimum wage or in other low-paid roles could be lifted by higher wages, additional government assistance or both.

‘Right now, we have the Fair Work Commission arguing that it is not its job to ensure that employers pay a minimum wage that is sufficient to be a living wage for single income earners with dependants,’ Mr Zabar said.

‘Paradoxically, based on the decisions of successive governments to cut, freeze and repurpose funding from Family Tax Benefits, it seems that governments, too, don’t think it’s their job to ensure families have access to a living wage.’ ♦

This article was first published on the ACBC Media Blog and is reprinted with permission.

# Vinnies Queensland celebrates 125 years

BY JOE HIGGINS

*Paul Finch had personal reasons for joining the St Vincent de Paul Society, just like thousands of others Queenslanders over its 125 years.*

Mr Finch lost his Ipswich home in the 1974 Brisbane floods and, inspired by the people who helped him in that difficult time, decided 'it was time to give something back'.

But, for Mr Finch, a 40-year veteran of the organisation, Vinnies was more than just a charitable organisation.

'My experience is you get much more out of it than you ever put in,' he said.

'The philosophy of Vinnies is we join the St Vincent de Paul Society to deepen our faith. That's the whole guts of it.'

And this sentiment was clear in the Society's Queensland origins when, a year on from Brisbane's Great Flood of 1893, churchgoers at St Brigid's Church, Red Hill, gathered to see what they could do for those still struggling from the natural disaster. This simple act of charity kicked off the first Vinnies conference in Queensland.

St Brigid's was also where, 125 years later, hundreds of Vincentians gathered to celebrate the milestone anniversary on 17 February. A liturgy was held for the 125th anniversary, with a historical display and a morning tea afterwards where familiar faces had a chance to mingle.

Mr Finch said one of key lessons Vinnies taught him was how privileged he was.

'I started work at 14 and went back to study in my mid-20s, and finished up with a very good job,' he said.

'I had a pretty good income and pretty good super—really, I'm



*St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland spiritual advisor Sr Mel Dwyer and membership and volunteer services general manager Carolyn Sawage at the 125th anniversary Mass on 17 February.*

privileged. And to my mind, Vinnies keeps reminding me about that; I think you need to be grounded.'

But it was also about family. Mr Finch said his family always supported him. His son Michael continues the tradition, being an active Vincentian at Coorparoo.

'It's interesting, isn't it? The main appeal for funds to help people in Townsville and the northwest is being managed by Vinnies,' Mr Finch said.

'You [see the ad] on TV: "This is the number to ring." I think that's an indication the state government thinks we're a pretty worthwhile organisation as well.'

And it wasn't just the organisation's official phone numbers always ringing.

Mr Finch said Vinnies Queensland Chief Executive Officer Peter Maher was a great example of the organisation's strength, saying being a Vincentian was a 24/7 job.

'I'm president of Petrie Conference, and really, we're at it every day,' he said. 'It's not unusual for my phone to be ringing on Saturday or Sunday. Because when people are in trouble, it doesn't matter what day it is, they need help.'

Queensland State President Dennis Innes said it was the Society's 9000-plus members and volunteers who were essential in helping thousands of struggling Queenslanders each year.

'We assisted more than 331,500 Queenslanders last financial year and gave more than \$231 million in service and support to families and individuals in need,' he said.

'We couldn't achieve this without our dedicated members and volunteers who give freely of their time, making a difference in the lives of disadvantaged Queenslanders.'

St Brigid's Red Hill and Rosalie Sacred Heart Conference President Richard Robinson said he was honoured to carry on the legacy of those first Vinnies volunteer members in Queensland—some of whom visited the struggling members of the community, handing out money for food and clothing.

'Times may have changed but our work helping people in need in this part of Brisbane hasn't. We're still here 125 years later when those who are doing it tough are in need of our help,' Mr Robinson said. ♦

This article was first published in *The Catholic Leader* and is reprinted with permission.

# Young people feel the full effect of economic disadvantage



*With work insecurity and income inequality growing in Australia, we need to carefully consider the impact that a family's limited financial resources have on young people, writes Mission Australia's Jacquelin Plummer.*

A report recently released by Mission Australia shows that young people who live in households without a working parent or guardian face increased challenges that are made worse by a lack of financial resources and a more limited support system.

Our 'Working through it' – Findings from the Youth Survey 2018 report highlights significant differences between the responses of economically disadvantaged 15–19 year-olds and their peers who have parents with paid work. It also pinpoints the negative

impacts for young people on their wellbeing, aspirations, post-school plans, family relationships and support when their parents are not in paid work.

The findings are stark. We found that economically disadvantaged young people did not experience the same level of support to deal with important issues as those with parents in paid employment. It was very concerning to see that nearly one in five (19.4 per cent) economically disadvantaged young people felt they did not have someone they could turn to if they were in trouble or facing a crisis. This is more than double the proportion of respondents with parents in paid work (8.4 per cent). Similarly, more than twice the percentage of economically disadvantaged young people also reported feeling 'very sad/sad' with life as a whole (19.3 per cent), compared with just 9.3 per cent of their peers.

Young people whose parents do not have paid work also indicated much higher levels of personal concern about financial security. We saw that 27.3 per cent of disadvantaged young people indicated high levels of concern about financial security compared with 15.8 per cent of other respondents. They also reported higher levels of personal concern about domestic/family violence, discrimination, bullying/emotional abuse and suicide.

There was also a worrying gap in aspirations and perceived career opportunities for disadvantaged young people, raising significant concerns about the risk of intergenerational, entrenched disadvantage. A notably higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people were more likely to perceive barriers to finding work than those from families with paid work (51.9 per cent compared with 38.0 per cent).

They were also less confident in their ability to achieve their post-school goals than those from families with paid work (14.5 per cent compared with 9.6 per cent).

With work insecurity and income inequality growing in Australia, we need to carefully consider the impact that a family's limited financial resources have on young people. I'm sure readers of *The Record* will agree that young people, irrespective of their economic background, should have the opportunity to reach their full potential and be able to access the services, supports, education and training that they need.

Clearly, there is a genuine need for more targeted, evidence-based policies that support families where parents are not in paid work to reduce stress and pressure. There is also a need for supports and services to help disadvantaged young people to engage with education, start their careers and work through their wellbeing concerns so that all young people have the best chance for a bright future.

While there are many fantastic programs in Australia that offer vital supports to disadvantaged families and young people, there

remains a glaring gap in transition programs available to our most disadvantaged youth. We need more programs that include careers advice, mentoring and skills training, as well as help to re-engage with education and work experience. Support should also offer the flexibility to engage with a young person's family, and assist with working on underlying issues that might stand in the way of a young person securing and maintaining employment.

We also need to expand and replicate the great models we have for alternative education and addressing educational disengagement. We see good results from many programs that support young people at risk of disengaging in school, but they are patchy and not always available when and where they are needed. Once a young person makes it through school, they shouldn't be deterred from pursuing further education at TAFE or university by financial barriers.

While parents are not in paid work, income support must be adequate to meet basic family needs. Rates of Newstart and Youth Allowance need to be urgently increased to reduce the stress that financial insecurity

places on family life. Improved employment supports are also required for parents and guardians in economically disadvantaged families to secure work that will have a positive impact on family relationships and young people's sense of agency and confidence.

We must continue to listen to the voices of young people facing economic disadvantage so that we can better understand the policies and services they need and give them the very best chance at fulfilling their potential.

These results came from Mission Australia's Youth Survey 2018. Our yearly Youth Survey provides a critical temperature check on the thoughts, concerns and aspirations of young people across the nation. Our Youth Survey is celebrating 18 years this year and to celebrate, we're encouraging a record number of young people aged 15–19 years-old across Australia to get involved. Please consider asking the young people in your life and networks to participate and have a say. ♦

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Find out more:  
[www.missionaustralia.com.au/youthsurvey](http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/youthsurvey).

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Jacquelin Plummer is Head of Policy & Advocacy at Mission Australia.



## The politics of charity and justice

*St Vincent de Paul Society members can play a vital role in pushing for structural change in their local communities to improve the lives of vulnerable people, writes Peter McNamara.*

Like many, I joined my local Vinnies conference for one reason—to do charity—but found much more. I discovered that each relationship in service led to justice—a hand up for those we were assisting.

That was 35 years ago. In the last five years, I have been part of a social justice campaign that has engaged members and volunteers, changed political party policy and brought the needs of the disadvantaged to the minds of our community leaders.

### **The bridge over the Great Dividing Range of poverty**

From its outset, the Society of St Vincent de Paul was intended to be a bridge between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless.

Not long after we European settlers conquered our own physical Great Dividing Range in this ancient continent, Frédéric Ozanam spoke of a great divide in his world:

*The question which is agitating the world today is a social one. It is a struggle between those who have nothing and those who have too much. It is a violent clash of opulence and poverty which is shaking the ground under our feet. Our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves*

*between these two camps in order to accomplish by love, what justice alone cannot do.*

That struggle of Ozanam's day, launched from the vast inequality evident in the industrial revolution and exploding into the violence of the French Revolution, is still with us. We still have great poverty, even here in our rich country, so deep we cannot meet the need. We still have homeless people sleeping on our city streets—a living memorial to a monumental failure of public policy.

Our inequality is evident not just from those sleeping rough, but in the data on those couch surfing and on the brink of homelessness. Now, the challenge of having a home is confounded by an unholy alliance between on the one hand the raw cynicism of politicians, and on the other, the jaded



*Staff and members.*

cynicism and distrust of the voters. This mutual cynicism is evident in our lack of resolve to fix our housing crisis.

Our role today as Christians remains to moderate our social problems. The social teachings of the Catholic Church are clear—we should have a preferential option for the poor. We are called to love the poor, to take our place by the barricades and moderate the battle.

### **The homelessness battlefront**

In 2016 our National Council published *The Ache for Home* report. In response to that call, in New South Wales we decided to launch a campaign that would enthuse our members, and that would result in better housing for people experiencing disadvantage.

We wanted to energise our members and volunteers and to reinforce and extend our reach into the community.

### **How could we do it?**

The groundwork was simple. We laid a foundation of internal Society structures that would provide social justice leadership. Following the youth representative model, we appointed a Vice President (Social Justice) on State Council and every other Council with a specific remit of social justice. Those Council representatives formed a Social Justice Committee to advise the Council. That was easy.

The strategy from there was based on a general plan that grew as we went.

1. We gathered our members at annual Social Justice Forums in Sydney. These 140 members worked hard on responding to the key issues they experienced, and top of the list was housing.
2. We developed a policy statement on housing, representing our shared position, so that any member or volunteer had full authority to promote the policy to the community.

3. We identified a clear and specific policy goal so that we had a headline ‘ask’. The housing problem is complex and the solutions many. The goal we chose was ‘inclusionary zoning’. This has been used in cities around the world—in London and New York—and in Australia, to capture a proportion of the value generated by new developments for the community; in this case, for affordable housing. Inclusionary zoning is often opposed by developers, particularly those banking land in the hope it will be up-zoned, because it may reduce their profit margins.

Housing pressures were greatest in the inner Sydney area. The NSW Government had created a new, independent body to lead Sydney planning, the Greater Sydney Commission. This presented an opportunity to embed, in planning rules, affordable housing for those on low incomes.

*continued on page 16 ▶*

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4. We started a formal campaign asking the NSW Government to mandate affordable housing targets of 15 per cent for all new developments. We launched the Right to Home Campaign in October 2016 at our annual Rosalie Rendu Lecture, where the Honourable Susan Ryan AO (our first Age Discrimination Commissioner) spoke about the crisis in housing for older women.

5. We held a series of campaign events across Sydney, west to Mt Druitt, north to Newcastle, to Burwood and Leichhardt in Sydney's inner west, south to Hurstville, Liverpool and Kingsford. Led by members, volunteers and staff, these events took various formats and were opportunities for local and state government politicians to respond to questions about what they were doing to make housing affordable.

6. We visited members of parliament and local government councillors across the state. Armed with our NSW social justice statement, our members and volunteers could speak confidently for the whole Society. The politicians said:

*You ring, I might find out. You write, I should see it. You visit me, I wake up. When 20 others in the party room say they're all getting the same message, I sit up and we do something.*

7. We had a bright idea—we could petition the parliament. Our members in parishes and our Vinnies retail outlets championed the cause, and in just over a month our petition had not only the 10,000 signatures needed for the issue to be debated in parliament, but over 16,300 signatures from across the state.

We then approached the key political parties to see if they would present the petition to the House. Following initial reluctance



Damien Tudehope.

from both parties, in October 2017 Damien Tudehope, then the Liberal Member for Epping, agreed. The day after Tudehope posted the petition on the Parliamentary Noticeboard, Labor announced it was generally supportive of the Vinnies' inclusionary zoning policy.

The day the petition was presented to parliament we walked past the homeless persons tent city in Martin Place. We saw Tudehope introduce our petition, witnessed by a record-breaking 200 members, volunteers, staff and friends of the Society, requiring additional security and broadcast of the parliamentary presentation to a separate room. Labor Opposition Leader Luke Foley, his Deputy Leader Michael Daley and Greens housing spokesperson Jenny Leong supported the petition, while then Planning Minister Anthony Roberts argued against mandatory targets on the grounds they would impede overall housing supply.

After the petition had been presented, we continued to advocate for affordable housing targets. March 2018 saw a minor

breakthrough, when the Greater Sydney Commission recommended Affordable Rental Housing Targets of 5 to 10 per cent in its plan, *A Metropolis of Three Cities*. In May 2018, the NSW Labor Opposition officially adopted an affordable housing policy with mandated targets of 15 per cent on private land, and 25 per cent on government-owned land.

8. We worked with other organisations. In May 2018, we formed a partnership with the Sydney Alliance and started encouraging local councils to take action.

9. We urged the removal of barriers to affordable housing. Our local forums called on local government to ask for the state government to extend to them legislation so they could prepare affordable housing contribution schemes. In December 2018, the NSW Government expanded the legislation to all local government councils.

10. We organised a large public assembly. State and federal elections were looming. We made a tripartite agreement with Sydney Alliance and

the Everybody's Home campaign to hold a Housing and Energy Assembly at Sydney Town Hall in March 2019. We managed to fill Sydney Town Hall's 2000 seats. The politicians addressing the assembly faced a crowd of people from diverse communities across Sydney and united in our call for action on affordable housing. Politicians, and all in attendance, were moved by stories from people who experience poverty and disadvantage first-hand.

The assembly did not result in any commitment by the Coalition Government to inclusionary zoning, but lobbying in the lead-up to the event helped secure funding commitments from NSW Labor towards new social housing and increased homelessness services.

Access to affordable housing remains a big issue for the St Vincent de Paul Society NSW. Each day, our members and our staff see the adverse impact of unaffordable housing on those seeking help.

The NSW election is over, and we are still trying to push social and affordable housing higher up the government's agenda. We are working with other community groups who want communities in which each person has a stable home where they can thrive.

### **Good politics grounded in the gospel, good values and good works**

Frédéric Ozanam was intrigued with social issues, and hence with political issues. Vinnies members are not and should not be party political. However, our advocacy for affordable housing targets, or indeed for any other policy position, is politics. We are getting the community to change its heart, change its mind and to change the



rules. We are doing politics but, like Ozanam, good politics grounded in good values and good works, accomplishing by love what justice has not.

We offer the positive counterpoint of cynicism and politics from both voters and politicians. I think our point of difference is that we are inspired by Jesus' call, and the call of the social teachings of the Church, to seek first the poor.

We offer our positive counterpoint in the tradition of Jesus Christ, in the traditions of St Vincent de Paul, Sr Rosalie Rendu, Frédéric Ozanam and Catholic Social Teaching. We offer not cynicism and politics, not power and politics, not self-interest and politics, but instead: love and politics; service and politics; charity and politics; spirituality and politics; and social justice and politics.

I joined Vinnies to do charity, but over 35 years, found justice. Wrapped around charity and justice—in the members, volunteers, staff and those they assist—I found love. I found the hand of God, an earthy, grounding spirituality.

### **Have a go!**

I urge any members interested in making a difference to have a go at the social justice issue that interests you and that sparks the imagination of others. Our Councils are keen to encourage new ideas. It is not difficult to implement new structures within the Society to accommodate social justice. We have shown how the Rule is flexible and permits constant innovation.

Our members and volunteers desire to be social entrepreneurs in the mould of Ozanam and his fellow uni students. We have members that have campaigning and influencing skills. Alone we can do a little, but together we can speak up, and give those that most need it a hand-up so they don't need yet another hand out.

Those interested in knowing more can ring their social justice representative on their State or Territory Council. ♦

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Peter McNamara is Vice President (Social Justice), St Vincent de Paul Society NSW State Council.

# Open arms and hearts greet immersion program participants

*The 2019 St Vincent de Paul National Immersion Program gave nine members a deeper appreciation of life in a remote Indigenous community, writes Annmarie MacGinley.*

‘**M**GK, Tim, Amy. Are we playing footy now?’ These were the excited cries that greeted us every morning from the kids of Nganmariyanga. In their bare feet, they ran along the red dirt road to meet us at 8am. The smiles on their faces never faded during our two-week immersion.

On 6 April, nine St Vincent de Paul members met for the first time in Darwin. We had travelled from Perth, Tasmania, Canberra, Melbourne and Brisbane to spend two weeks in the remote Indigenous community of Nganmariyanga—a community of 500 people, 400km southwest of Darwin. The weekend in Darwin allowed for team bonding, preparation of resources, and organisation of food for the time in the community. Importantly, this period allowed for open discussion between the immersion members and invaluable cultural awareness training provided by Dominic McCormack, a Darwin lawyer who grew up in the region where the immersion would take place and is a fluent speaker of the local language Murrinh Patha. We celebrated Mass at St Martin de Porres Catholic Aboriginal Community in Darwin, where we were welcomed and blessed before heading out to the community.

On Monday, day 3, the immersion team boarded a 12-seater light plane for a 50-minute flight into Nganmariyanga. The community,



which is often cut off by road during the wet season, consists of a primary school, a grocery store, a health centre, a church and a community centre. For the next two weeks, we were without telephones, television and newspapers. We completely immersed ourselves into the life of Nganmariyanga. It was the beginning of ‘being comfortable with the uncomfortable’—a phrase introduced to us by our spiritual advisor, Belinda Chapman.

It was the most amazing experience. We spent the first week working in the school assisting the teachers in the classrooms, which ranged from a parents and babies group (emphasising FaFT—Families as First Teachers) through to high school years. The second week, during school holidays, we held fun and engaging activities for the children. These ranged from hot and hectic football games on the oval, to making slime and playdough. We



enjoyed colouring-in and craft sessions and making pikelets for afternoon tea. A water activity was held every afternoon to provide much-welcomed relief from the heat—the most popular being the slip and slide. We were fortunate enough to be there during Holy Week and to celebrate Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday and Good Friday.

The 2019 ‘Vinnies Mob’ have all come away from the two weeks with a range of varied and cherished experiences. I will always remember collecting palms for Palm Sunday and the Stations of the Cross procession through the community.

The experience was made even more meaningful by several community elders who, together with the Year 1 teacher, painted the Stations of the Cross. These paintings were a mixture of the Indigenous dot artworks and traditional religious art. The paintings were paraded through the community together with a large cross.

As the Stations of the Cross began on one side of the community the group was small, but as the procession continued past the houses our group grew and became a representation of how a journey can bring people together. It was poignant to be able to journey with the community, finally finishing at the church, which consists of a tin roof over a concrete slab. Though a humble structure, it felt more church-like than many others I have been in. It was reminiscent of Pope Francis’ statement: ‘I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security’.

We were so privileged to share in the uplifting and energising spirit of the Catholic community, with most services filled with beautiful songs and liturgical dancing. The dedication of the Church elders and the depth of faith was inspiring and moving.

The 2019 immersion participants feel so blessed to have been given the opportunity to learn and be offered a deeper appreciation of life in a remote Indigenous community. Every day we would play, reflect and pray. It was a journey of personal growth, culture and faith. A journey that we will carry home with us to our local conferences and daily life.

We are thankful to St Vincent de Paul Society for supporting a program that is meaningful and allows for a cross-cultural understanding that would otherwise be hard to experience or grasp. Likewise, we are grateful to the elders and community members of Nganmarriyanga that welcomed the Vinnies Mob with open arms and hearts. I would highly recommend other members of St Vincent de Paul to apply and journey with God. ♦

More information and application forms are available from [https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Our\\_Impact/Indigenous\\_Australia/Immersion\\_Program\\_2019/](https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Our_Impact/Indigenous_Australia/Immersion_Program_2019/).

# Raising the rate of Newstart

*The stark inadequacy of Newstart is pushing many recipients into poverty, contributing to housing insecurity, financial stress and diminished health and wellbeing.*

*The rates of Newstart Allowance and student payments fall well below the poverty line and are not enough to cover the cost of essentials. These payments have not kept pace with rising living expenses and, unless they are increased and properly indexed, will slide even further behind.*

*Increasing the base rates of Newstart, Youth Allowance and related payments is vital to reduce poverty and inequality, and to enable people who receive income support to live with dignity.*

## **Newstart Allowance is inadequate**

A single unemployed person on Newstart receives as little as \$275.10 a week, or just \$39.30 a day.

This is not enough to meet day-to-day living costs such as rent, food, transport, health care and utilities. The inadequacy of Newstart is pushing many recipients into poverty and contributing to financial stress, housing insecurity and diminished health and wellbeing.

The rates of Newstart and Youth Allowance fall well below standard benchmarks for income adequacy and poverty—even when additional supplementary payments



PHOTO: istock.com/kokkai

(such as rent assistance or the energy supplement) are factored in.

Researchers from the University of NSW have calculated the 'budget standard' for an unemployed person (this is the minimum income a person needs to afford essentials such as housing, food, electricity, health care and transport). They found a single unemployed person needs \$434 per week to cover the cost of the basics. Newstart is just \$275.

## **The situation is getting worse**

The base rate of Newstart has not increased in real terms since 1994—a quarter of a century.

In fact, the value of Newstart has gone backwards in real terms because of the way it is calculated. Payments are adjusted each year according to the Consumer Price Index (CPI). But the cost of essentials such as housing, utilities, health care, transport, education

and food have increased much more rapidly than CPI. Low-income households spend the vast bulk of their income on these essentials.

Because CPI is lower than the growth in average wages, the gap between what an unemployed person receives and what the average worker earns has grown, as has the gap between Newstart and pensions.

Australia's unemployment payments are the lowest in the OECD. We also have the second-highest rate of poverty among the unemployed across all OECD nations.

Unless payments are indexed in a way that better reflects actual increases in wages and essential living costs, people on Newstart will continue to fall further behind.

## **The consequences are wide-ranging**

The inadequacy of Newstart and Youth Allowance is having

devastating effects on individuals, families and communities: deepening inequalities, robbing people of their dignity, and undermining the health and wellbeing of families.

Studies show the daily struggle to survive on meagre benefits has a range of damaging social, emotional and health consequences. Whether it is the emotional harm of being disconnected from friends and family, and excluded from community life because you cannot afford to drive or catch public transport; or having to skip meals, or being unable to afford nutritious food, dental care or medicines; or the fatigue and ill-health that comes from constant stress about one's finances; or being unable to heat or cool your home during hot or cold weather.

Insufficient payments also contribute to housing insecurity and homelessness. According to Anglicare's 2018 Rental Affordability Snapshot, not one property in Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide, Darwin or Perth was affordable to someone on Newstart. Only three private rental properties across Australia were found to be affordable for a single person on Newstart with no children.

It is not only individual recipients who are hurt by the abysmal rate of Newstart. It hurts their families too. Children with parents on Newstart are much more likely to be living in poverty. For charities and community organisations, the inadequacy of Newstart adds to the demand on frontline services. And for the wider community, low unemployment benefits contribute to economic inequality and social division, undermining social cohesion and eroding trust.

Without government action to increase Newstart Allowance, everyone loses: governments, the

community, front-line services and, most of all, people receiving Newstart and their families.

### **Low payments make hunting for jobs harder**

There is a lack of evidence to support the notion that poverty-level payments are necessary to 'incentivise' people to take up paid work. Research has shown that inadequate income support payments don't increase labour force participation and, by pushing people into poverty, can act as a barrier to securing employment.

Current payment rates do not cover basic living costs, let alone the additional costs of looking for work (e.g. internet expenses, and clothing and transport costs to attend job interviews). The ongoing stress and struggle to make ends meet can detract from job search activities and undermine health and wellbeing, further diminishing employment prospects.

### **The benefits of raising the rate**

Everyone benefits when we have a strong social security safety net.

Raising the rate of Newstart and related payments will:

- lift hundreds of thousands of people on the lowest incomes out of poverty;
- improve people's prospects of finding decent paid work;
- increase social and economic participation;
- strengthen local communities;
- reduce the pressure on charities and other frontline services that deal with the flow-on effects of poverty and financial hardship;
- boost the overall economy by increasing consumer spending.

Raising Newstart will have a positive effect on the economy, contributing to job creation, helping to raise wages and boosting regional economies. These positive economic effects will arise largely because every spare dollar received by someone on a low income goes back into the economy through increased consumer spending.

According to independent modelling by Deloitte Access Economics, raising Newstart by \$75 per week would generate 12,000 new jobs in 2020–21, increase wages by 0.2 per cent and increase government revenue by \$1.25 billion.

By alleviating the poverty of those who are unemployed, additional benefits would be likely due to a reduction in the costs involved with entrenched disadvantage, such as reduced pressure on health and social support systems.

Critically, increasing Newstart and rebuilding our social safety net will strengthen communities and improve the decency and fairness of our society.

A strong social safety net is key to a just and inclusive society. It is about individuals and families having security in the face of vulnerabilities and contingencies—by providing an adequate income that enables them to live with dignity.

As one of the wealthiest nations in the world, none of us should accept that Australia cannot afford an adequate social security safety net.

Raising the rate of Newstart and related payments is the single biggest thing government could do to repair our social safety net and reduce entrenched poverty and disadvantage. ♦

# World Youth Day – Panama 2019

*World Youth Day is a worldwide encounter with the Pope that typically happens every three years in a different country. Oceania Youth Coordinator Luke Brouwer represented the region at World Youth Day 2019, held in Panama in January. Luke shares his WYD experience with The Record.*



*A disciple is not merely someone who arrives at a certain place, but one who sets out decisively, who is not afraid to take risks and keeps walking. This is the great joy: to keep walking. You have not been afraid to take risks and to keep journeying. Today we were all able to 'get here' because for some time now, in our various communities, we have all been 'on the road' together.*

Pope Francis,  
World Youth Day Panama 2019

Before World Youth Day, the first thing that came to my mind when hearing about Panama is the Canal and, unfortunately, I did not know much more than this. The choice of Panama as the venue for WYD was often questioned by those attending. Although it is a small country with a population of four million, its 85 per cent Catholic population and locality for North and South American nations made for an extremely passionate contingent.

### Vincentian youth gathering

Every World Youth Day, there is a meeting of the Vincentian Family (FAMVIN), which includes the Ladies of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, the Sisters of Charity Federation, the Association of the Miraculous Miracle, the Vincentian Marian Youth and the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

I was one of seven Society youth representatives from around the world in Panama for the WYD and FAMVIN.

This year's three-day FAMVIN was held at Hogar de San Jose, a school (picture part school, part retreat centre, part prison) about half an hour from Panama City.

The humbleness of the event was clear to see—the international President of St Vincent de Paul attended the event as an 'ordinary' pilgrim without fanfare or introduction, while the Panamanian Vincentian President handed out mattresses to the pilgrims.

At this event, as well as sharing the works of the Society, I had many opportunities to learn about the works of the other FAMVIN members.

The chance to collaborate and

learn about the challenges and issues affecting the other regions of the world, from both a general and Society perspective, was too good an opportunity to miss.

The main purpose of FAMVIN was to meet and to share in the charism of what it means to be Vincentian, particularly in Latin America. Each day consisted of Mass, catechesis, many meal breaks and nightly cultural celebrations.

The catechesis sessions were quite light but provided an excellent chance to meet pilgrims from other countries. We were split into language groups, with the English-speaking group the smallest compared to Spanish and Portuguese.

Topics discussed in catechesis included describing what makes the 'perfect' Vincentian, Vincentian trivia and a mock court case to decide if our facilitator could genuinely say he was guilty of being Vincentian! The main issue I had with the sessions was that they almost felt like a gap-filler between meals, which seemed to be an hour break for every 45 minutes of content and ran on 'Latin time'. Precedence was given to shortening sessions that never started on time to ensure we could get to the meals at the specified hour.

Other FAMVIN events included an opportunity for discussing the works of each group. The Society's International Youth Coordinator Willian Alves told the gathering about the Society's good works and showed a video from the 2018 Salamanca meeting (highlighting young Vincentians' great talents for flag waving). Then probably the oddest part of the meeting was the presentation/testimony from actor Clarence Gilyard of *Walker, Texas Ranger* fame, discussing a film festival he is putting together.

The absolute highlight of the Vincentian meeting was the nightly cultural celebrations. Each night, different countries (mainly from Latin America) showcased song and dance, turning the meeting into a mini carnival, with deafening drums and sweaty dancing. The organisers and participants did a fantastic job, and it was encouraging to see the sense of spirit between so many different countries. It was a great example of how to celebrate culture in a way that does not patronise but allows each country to show off something special from their homeland.

### World Youth Day

After FAMVIN, the seven international Society youth representatives moved on to our WYD home stays, about four kilometres out of the centre of Panama City. Leo, the Asia Youth Coordinator, and I stayed at the home of a local mother and son. The generosity and kindness they showed to strange pilgrims was terrific and made us feel at home for the week we were there.

The week of WYD activities included an Australian pilgrim meeting with more than 1000 Australians, catechises (including a talk by Canberra-Goulburn Archbishop Chris Prowse), a youth festival, vocations fair, a welcome Mass celebrated by the Archbishop of Panama and the Way of the Cross. It also included three events with Pope Francis—the welcoming ceremony, WYD vigil and the Closing Mass. The final Mass, held in a huge field just outside of Panama City, was attended by 700,000 people. ♦

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Luke Brouwer is the St Vincent de Paul Society's Oceania Youth Representative.



## Being Vincentian

*Frank Brassil is the Society of St Vincent de Paul's International Territorial Vice President for Oceania. Here he explores the enduring quality of the Society and what it means to be a Vincentian today.*

The Society of St Vincent de Paul is a lay Catholic multinational organisation whose members live their faith through service to the most vulnerable, marginalised and excluded. Founded in the 1830s by a group of French university students led by Frédéric Ozanam and mentored by Emmanuel Bailey and Sr Rosalie Rendu DC, the organisation is present in over 150 countries and is one of the most recognised and well-regarded volunteer social welfare organisations in the world.

The Society is unique in Catholic organisations and in the community of organisations that serve the poor. I want to explore what it is that makes the Society unique and has

sustained it and enabled it to grow and survive for nearly 200 years. I also want to examine some of the challenges that arise from the way the Society functions so that we can recognise those challenges and respond appropriately. Finally, I want to explore how this affects people who are members of the Society. What does it mean to be Vincentian?

It seems to me that there are at least four unique features of the Society.

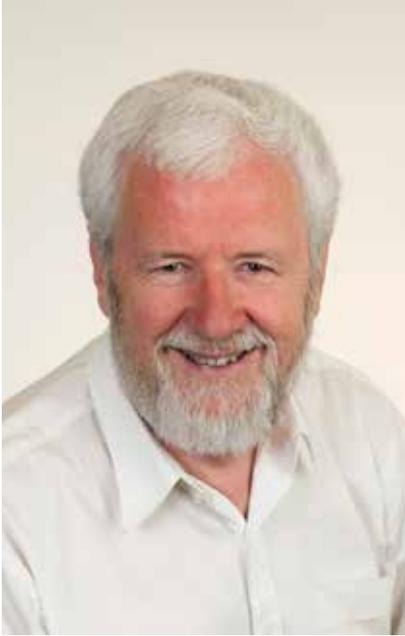
### **1. The conference structure**

The idea of the conference is the genius of the Society. A conference is a group of people in a village, town, parish or any other identifiable area or social grouping, who come together to live their faith through service to those in their community who need help, primarily using local resources. The Society is owned by its members, and membership exists primarily through joining a conference.

Conferences have wide latitude

and autonomy to adapt themselves to their local context and make decisions about the kind, extent and form of support they give. Moreover, conferences are accountable for the way they use the Society's resources to help people, which is key to being Vincentian and ensuring accountability for the service we give and the resources we use.

Democracy is central to being Vincentian. We link conferences through a council structure that goes all the way to the International Council General, but the process of determining who forms our councils is from the bottom up. Conferences elect their presidents, who form regional or area councils. These elect a president who takes part in a central or diocesan council. This 'bottom-up' way of forming higher councils is democratic and reflects the interests of conference members. Those with more senior positions cannot control who is elected at the various levels, and the elected members are always in the majority on a council.



Frank Brassil.

The council structure binds conferences into the worldwide organisation that is the Society of St Vincent de Paul and makes each conference a part of the Society. The entire council structure exists to support, sustain and extend the work of conferences. One can rightly describe the structure of the Society as a 'chain of support', not a 'chain of command'.

In the Society, the president of a conference or council has a special role, and the role holds great respect and trust. Being a president entails two distinct responsibilities. The first is leadership within the conference or council. In this role, the president is called on to make decisions to ensure the continuing effective operation of the conference or council. Presidents must be sensitive to the participation of conference or council members in making decisions and must at all times respect the rights of members to be informed and to participate in decisions. There is a balance to be found so that decisions are made democratically and with participation, but in a way that does not hamper sensible governance.

The second role of a president is participation in the next higher council. This participation is not merely as the representative of the conference or council from which the president is elected. It is a full engagement with and responsibility for the governance of the Society at the scale of the council. A council member is responsible for making appropriate decisions in the best interests of the Society within the scope of that council and, when necessary, transferring decisions to a higher council if that is the more appropriate level. At a certain level, matters of legal corporate governance become essential to conducting the business of the council. In these cases, council members' responsibilities are broadened to include accountability under legislation, including (but not limited to) corporations law, charities and not-for-profit law and laws relating to safeguarding and protection of vulnerable people.

In undertaking roles at these levels, being Vincentian requires that there be no honour or status attached to holding any office—it is merely an opportunity for service. The Society requires its senior office holders to have a deep humility in carrying out their role and a willingness to let go once the term has concluded. Any sense of entitlement or ownership of any role is inconsistent with being Vincentian. Equally, a council member has to accept the decisions of his or her own council and all higher councils and work for their implementation even if the decision was not the preferred decision of member.

## 2. A lay Catholic organisation

The Society's founders were dedicated to a Catholic foundation of the Society. This is evident in

the writings of Frédéric Ozanam, which preceded and informed the encyclicals that now form Catholic Social Teaching. The political context of the time was not at all friendly to the Church, and it took considerable courage to construct the Society as they did. Ozanam was a noted Catholic apologist, but he was careful to establish the Society as a lay-controlled organisation, respectful of the clergy and the hierarchy but never ceding control to them. Most Vincentians think this has served us well and, it can be argued, with the significant challenges the Church now faces, that the Society's governance structure would be a good model for the Church if it really wants to change.

A core element of Catholic Social Teaching is the recognition of the intrinsic human dignity of every person. Other value systems may argue similarly, but as a Catholic organisation, we must recognise each person as a human being, with the same God-given dignity as any other. We do not help people because we are privileged and kind-hearted or because it makes us feel good. We help people because their intrinsic value as humans cries out for justice and equality, and we cannot ignore it.

A second element of Catholic Social Teaching is the principle of subsidiarity, which means that decisions should be made at the level of their greatest effect but as close to the point of effect as possible. In the Society, we sustain the autonomy of conferences as an exercise of subsidiarity, and we try to ensure that each level of the council structure exercises its authority consistently with its ability to give effect to its decisions. There will always be debates about what is the appropriate level for

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making decisions, but the debate itself is a sign of vigorous exercise of subsidiarity.

Each council has a responsibility to attend to those matters that are best managed at the scale at which the council functions, but always on behalf of conference members and always consistent with their best interest. For example, the growth of the Vinnies Shops as a business has seen the management of shops move from conference to state council level. This has not been painless or without problems, but the overall improvements in the shops as a business that sustains the Society and is a face for the Society in the community are demonstrable.

The third element of Catholic Social Teaching is solidarity. Vincentian solidarity binds us as a worldwide organisation, not just a collection of local groups with a shared name. We serve first the people of our own community, but we do not limit ourselves to that. We share what we have with Vincentians across the country and other parts of the world, both to support them as Vincentians and to support their service to their communities.

The other dimension of being a Catholic organisation is our essential spirituality, which derives from the Gospels and from the sacramental nature of the faith, especially the Eucharist. We see Christ present in the poor and, because Christ present in the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, we see the poor in a eucharistic way. To see Christ, we visit the poor. To serve Christ, we serve the poor. To love Christ, we love the poor.

The Society does not take a narrow view of its spirituality. We welcome in our conferences, shops, special works and staff people from other backgrounds who feel an alignment with what

the Society does and the values and beliefs that drive us. For some people, sharing in the work of the Society is their expression of their spirituality, and we welcome the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work through us.

Equally, we apply no test of spirituality nor any requirements for any particular spiritual practice in those we seek to serve. We simply hope that the gift of our time and service may generate a spiritual response in the people we serve, which may manifest itself in ways we never see. We provide an opportunity for the Spirit to work.

### 3. The Rule

*The Rule* is our foundation document and defines our heart and essence as an organisation. All Vincentians are urged to read *The Rule* and to return to it frequently.

*The Rule* has three sections:

- Part 1 is the general statement of the nature, objectives and values of the Society. It applies to all Vincentians everywhere.
- Part 2 is concerned with the international governance of the Society but contains some important expressions of Vincentian thinking.
- Part 3 is where each national council adapts Parts 1 and 2 in the context of the needs and capabilities of their country.

*The Rule* is a thin book. It is not a large compendium of detailed rules and prescriptions—it is a statement of high-level principles and values and contains some specific detail that defines the Society as the Society. It provides considerable flexibility for local contexts, but its values and principles define the Society and are binding for Vincentians.

I am greatly concerned when I hear members understating the importance of *The Rule*. Sometimes it is said that *The Rule* is ‘only a guide’ or ‘a framework’. This fundamentally misunderstands its importance, and one is left wondering what ethos is being sustained if it is not in *The Rule*.

To operate as a large organisation in the community, we have to establish legal entities to enable the Society to own property, employ people, manage business risk and meet requirements for accountability and transparency. These can be in the form of incorporated associations or entities under the corporations law, such as Companies Limited by Guarantee. Confusion sometimes arises between the Society and its legal entities. Where the constitutions of such entities have been inconsistent with *The Rule*, difficulties have arisen if there has been any attempt to bypass or override *The Rule*.

The move in recent years to Companies Limited by Guarantee as the corporate entity has helped to clarify this because it segregates the corporate entity within the appropriate council governance structure and does not involve most members.

Being a member of the Society of St Vincent de Paul means being a member of that international organisation of charity defined by *The Rule*. Participation in any legal corporate entity is parallel to the Society and subsidiary to *The Rule*. All corporate entities, to the maximum extent possible, must include *The Rule* within their constitutions and never act in any manner inconsistent with *The Rule*.

*The Rule* is a document produced by people in a given context and it is not perfect. It is capable of being changed, but only at the highest level of the Society with the



participation of national presidents from around the world. This is as it should be and, even though there are some parts of *The Rule* some may wish to see changed, doing that affects members across the world and the process is necessarily challenging.

By and large, *The Rule* is an excellent document for the Society and should be treasured by all Vincentians. *The Rule* defines us and it makes us what we are. It is foundational to us as an organisation.

#### 4. A worldwide network of charity

Frédéric Ozanam spoke of building a ‘worldwide network of charity’ and the international character of the Society is a core part of being Vincentian. The Society is an excellent exemplar of the adage: ‘think globally—act locally’. Conferences are, through the council structure, part of a multinational organisation that is present in most parts of the world.

Members, however, can sometimes limit their vision and perspective to their local concerns. I have heard people say that they want money raised in their shop to be spent in their parish, town or district. This is not Vincentian. As a Catholic

organisation, we have a concern for people in need everywhere and there is no basis, when we have resources to do so, to exclude people in other places from our support. Obviously, those at hand have the first call on our support, but—especially in wealthier countries such as Australia—we are able to share with a wider world and we are called on by the Gospels, *The Rule* and by Catholic Social Teaching to do so.

Twinning is conferences standing in solidarity, linking with and sharing resources with conferences in other countries. This is a powerful and effective model, but it takes a lot of work and effort to sustain it. The highly decentralised way the Society works means that communications are a great challenge. Failures in communication lead to failures in understanding and failures in trust. Modern technologies are making this easier and we need to become better at using them. It is often easier for a conference member in a remote country to send a text message than to write a letter. Solidarity between Vincentians should encourage persistence and the willingness to try alternatives when communications are difficult.

Twinning is only a part of the international structure of the

Society and we should see over time our bonds with our Vincentian sisters and brothers strengthening and growing.

#### Being Vincentian

To bring this together, being Vincentian to me comprises some essential things:

1. Our conference structure that enables members to live their faith through service to the most vulnerable and excluded in their community;
2. Our status as an independent lay Catholic organisation informed by Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic spirituality that is totally responsible for itself and is led and operated by its members;
3. *The Rule* as our foundation document, which defines who we are and the principles and values that govern and guide us; and
4. The Society as a worldwide network of charity, bringing Ozanam’s vision to reality.

These are what make being Vincentian unique. As Vincentians we seek to fulfil our mission through service to those who rightly claim our time and resources in justice and charity. ♦

# I don't want slaves working for me

*I have the power to show, through the choices I make, that everybody matters—that I don't want any slaves working for me, says Good Samaritan Sister Sarah Puls.*

One of the most courageous people I've ever had the pleasure to know is a woman named Mary (not her real name), who was a victim of human trafficking.

Mary and I meet up regularly so that we can, together, negotiate the challenges of her day-to-day life, which she lives with courage and determination, but also with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. One day Mary would like to tell her own story; I could never do it justice anyway. But I'd like to tell you how Mary has become a part of my story.

When Mary was brought to Australia, she was held captive, deprived of food and subjected to physical and sexual violence by multiple men every day for almost two years. Before I met Mary and heard something of her experience, I could never have imagined that a human being could subject another human being to such inhumane, violent and horrific treatment. I certainly could never have imagined how a person who'd been a victim of such treatment could not be fundamentally broken.

And yet, what I see in Mary is a woman who is fundamentally changed but definitely not broken. I, too, am fundamentally changed through knowing Mary's story and walking beside her in her pain.

As I listened to her story, I had so many unanswerable questions: How could those men do that to her? How is it possible for one human being to use another person like



they are a 'thing' to be abused and discarded? What does it mean to live in a community where there are people who can treat other people in this way? And if this darkness exists in my community, what is my responsibility for that?

Over the past year, there has been growing awareness in the community about human trafficking and modern slavery. With the encouragement of Pope Francis and our bishops, many people have been praying for the safety and recovery of victims and for a change of heart for the traffickers. Praying and working for change is terribly important, but I wonder if there is another aspect to the issue which I could be considering.

I can think of people like Mary's abusers and imagine the 'bad guys' are very different from me. I may think of cocoa farms in Western Africa, cotton farms in Uzbekistan or sweatshops in Bangladesh and believe that the problem of modern slavery is far away, beyond the reach of my influence. But the disturbing reality is quite the opposite.

Regularly in my day-to-day life, I bump up against the edges of the world of trafficked people, because here in Australia, we all do. The

distressing truth is that it is easy for me—and for all of us—to be complicit in systems and processes which allow human trafficking to be a growing problem in our world. Though not abusing people directly, our choices every day connect us with the systems and supply chains in which people are used as objects, in which the life of a human person is worth very little indeed.

Everyday purchases like clothing, food and technology connect us with supply chains in which slavery and labour exploitation are endemic. The choices I make reflect my values, my commitment to human rights and my ability to recognise every person as having equal dignity and value.

When confronted with issues as disturbing and challenging to my understanding of humanity as human trafficking, it can be very tempting to say with the Pharisee: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people' (Luke 9:11). But the reality is that my indifference to the suffering of others—my 'sinfulness'—is held at a distance, allowing me to feel I am not responsible. It is so much easier to look away and try not to think too much about the \$3 t-shirt and how

# Poetry

it is possible for a product to be produced so cheaply. I don't want to think about the hands that held that t-shirt before me, and the kind of life that worker has.

But that worker and I do have a connection. And in the relationship between us, I am not able to wash my hands entirely of the way he/she is treated. I may not have the power to change that person's life, but I do have the power to show, through the choices I make, that everybody matters—that I don't want any slaves working for me.

These issues are complex, and finding reliable information is not always easy. Our efforts to be aware and to make a difference can feel small in comparison to the magnitude of the problem. But we can't be indifferent to the humanity and dignity of people who suffer.

Mary escaped from her slavery, but her suffering continues every day. Her suffering is not just the physical and psychological effects of being abused; it is also the deep woundedness of someone who has been treated as though her life was worth nothing at all.

As an ally on the painful road Mary is travelling, I find myself often having to explain to her that I think differently—that I think her life is important and that she matters. Through my words and my actions I say to her that, unlike her abusers, I think she is a person of value and dignity.

I believe that about every life and every person, but I know I could do more to ensure that is true, not just in how I treat Mary or the person in front of me, but for all people. ♦

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## The Candle

*(Dedicated to the memory of a much loved member of the Mooroolbark conference, Val Stafford, who passed away on 28 March 2019)*

Lost in the candle's dancing flame,  
The human heart forgets its woe  
As memories come flooding in  
Of all that was so long ago.

Childhood candles on marble altars  
Wisdom candles on wayside shrines  
Candles around the solemn coffins  
Of youth's assassinated dreams.

Dispel the darkness in my soul,  
Cast out the gloom of barren years;  
Light up the little time remaining  
before the darkness stakes its claim.

How little time and space we fill in living  
for you and I must run our course and be no more.  
Consuming fire we share the processes of self-destruction  
till only dust is left.

And who will distinguish yours from mine?

And yet one last, faint hope remains;  
that when the tyranny of time is overcome,  
everything that ever was will always be,  
embedded, fixed in timelessness, Eternity! ♦

*Jim Clearly*

# Refugee's uncompromising exploration of humanity

## *No Friend But the Mountains*

Behrouz Boochani

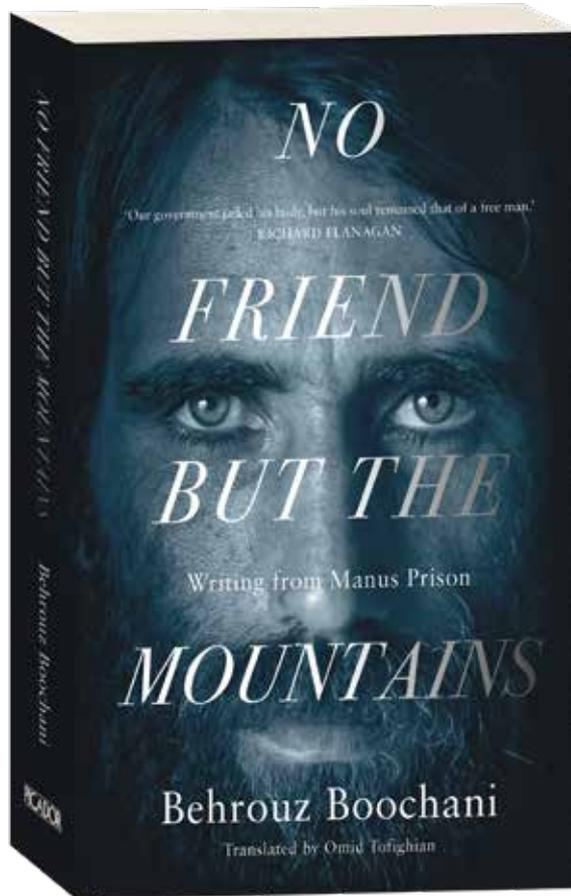
Picador, ISBN 9781760555382

One of the great challenges of our work as Vincentians is to enter people's lives and to experience the world through their eyes. It is fairly easy to help people with food and with other services. It is a little harder to listen to people's stories and to spend time with them while we are visiting. But to enter their world, to taste it, smell it and feel it as they do is a rare gift that blesses both us and the people with whom we walk.

Books can help us do this. An outstanding recent example is *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, by Behrouz Boochani. He is a Kurdish refugee who has been imprisoned on Manus Island for many years. A journalist and a writer of great power, he sent the content of his book in text messages to friends in Australia, and then worked with his translator and others to write this book. It will surely be remembered as a great work of literature as well as an account of what it means to be a refugee.

Boochani's description of his two attempts to reach Christmas Island by boat displays a rare gift for storytelling—the reader seems to hear the storm and feel the drenching spray of the waves. His mastery of language enables him to explore the cosmic themes of sea, storm and fate, and the way individuals respond in crisis.

Most of the book describes daily life on Manus Island—a life of endurance within a prison, in which there are no events. Space is fenced in and time has no past or meaningful future. To capture that experience, Boochani describes people only with honorific titles,



such as the Fat Boy, The Prophet, The Cow and The Gentle Giant, which pare them down to their characteristic stances. He explores character by observing and reflecting on his own and others' response to the dehumanising forces at work in the storms at sea and especially in prison.

He shows in harrowing detail the experience of being imprisoned: the effects of heat and overcrowding, of the pervasive stink of sweat and latrines ankle deep in urine, of hunger caused by inadequate and poor food, of the reduction of people to numbers, of the long queues for everything, of the hierarchy in the prison of government representatives in Australia, unseen officials, officers watching and officers in direct contact with the refugees, ancillary

nursing and catering staff, the local PNG officers and the refugees themselves, and the combination of arbitrary changes of regulations and processes and of the refusal of officers to take responsibility for any decision to vary regulations. In the most shameful example, this led to a son repeatedly being prevented

from telephoning his dying father.

These features of Manus Island were not accidental. They were designed to turn people into sheep, terrified by any rumour, malleable to every command, and unable to take responsibility. When reflecting on the mechanisms by which the prisoners' behaviour and feelings are controlled, Boochani presents a system in which all the relationships of one person with another, with the natural and built environment, and with time are controlled in such a way that freedom is excluded, humiliation, dependence, competition between people and self-disgust are fomented, power is exercised hierarchically and arbitrarily, and regulations are made by unnamed people at a distance from the people to whom they apply.

Boochani understands that the hell he inhabits is the intended outcome of a policy that sent people unwanted in Australia to the prison so that their suffering would deter others from coming by boat.

From my observation, in Australian detention centres such a system is the inevitable result of thinking that the end justifies the means. Once that position was enshrined in the mandatory detention, and later in the exile to Nauru and Manus Island of innocent people, their subsequent treatment was inevitable—controlled by considerations of security, cost and concealment that were increasingly, and now totally, divorced from the human dignity of the people affected.

Within Australia over the last few years, the treatment of refugees has been increasingly shaped by operational questions of how to guarantee absolute control. The complex and hierarchical steps created between policymakers and those dehumanised by the policy ensure that no one in the process regards as salient the consequent degradation of the people seeking protection. As the goal of deterrence has been fused with the goal of electoral advantage, the corruption has spread to affect the way that the unemployed, Indigenous Australians and the homeless are treated.

Boochani's story, however, is ultimately not about death but about life; not about slavery but about the search for freedom. He details how he and others seek a standing place in this dystopia and so might find grounds for self-respect. These underlie the formal titles he gives to people. Some seek it in manners—respectable dress and address, others in attempts to lead, others

in jesting, others simply in being the first in queues and being fed, others in attending to the needs of their neighbours.

Boochani is sensitive to the way these masks can be self-delusion; clothing oneself with virtues or power that one knows one lacks. But he also recognises that to take on such social roles is an act of resistance. For example, Maysam the Whore—a young man with a gift for satirical dance—gathers people to his subversive performances, much to the discomfort of the guards.

Boochani tries to find himself through suffering in solitude. When alone, he can sometimes wonder at the beauty of nature around the camp and also remain connected with the dreams and memories of his youth, with all the dislocation caused by war. These lyrical passages lighten the heaviness of the storytelling while highlighting the squalor and brutality of the prison.

In the final section of the book, he has a lyrical vision that brings together the mountains of the Kurdistan of his childhood, his first love, the flowers and vegetation of Manus Island. He concludes the book with an event that matches in its epic power the sea journey with which it begins. The prisoners riot and so, despite their lack of self-awareness, assert their freedom. The riot was brutally put down in one section of the prison. The other prisoners were marched outside the fences and later returned through a room piled with groaning and beaten people.

The concluding lines of the book are enigmatic.

*Chauka flies down from the  
summit of the tallest coconut tree  
in the prison to unite with the  
hero /*

*Chauka laments*

*The Hero laments /*

*The chant of a bird and the  
chant of a man /*

*Both chants blends into one /*

*The lament ... of nature ... this  
lamentation of nature /*

*This lament ... of a human ...  
this lamentation of the human  
being*

The message arrives.

They had killed Reza. They had killed The Gentle Giant.

So the book ends apparently in the death of the noblest prisoner and in the victory of Australian power. Or does it end with the vindication of freedom? Christian readers may read in it a hint of resurrection.

As an Australian, I read this book with anger at what is done in our name on Manus Island and with shame at the portrayal of Australians as incurious, faceless and brutal empty vessels, compliant cogs in a disrespectful machine. With shame, too, at how we imagine people who seek protection as victims, heroes, vicious, virtuous, pawns, as causes—as anything but real human beings like ourselves.

*No Friend But the Mountains* is one of the great Australian books, uncompromising in its exploration of humanity under torture, assuredly poetic in its style, and revealing of national character. It will continue to be read in the distant future when the people who devised Manus Island are remembered only as footnotes. At the end of the book the prisoners briefly recover their humanity at a heavy cost. The book asks what price we Australians will place on our own humanity. ♦

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Andrew Hamilton SJ is Chaplain to the St Vincent de Paul Society of Victoria's Young Vinnies.

