

Living the *Gospel* in Times of Social Division



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SOCIAL JUSTICE STATEMENT • AUGUST 2026

PREFACE



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Living the Gospel in Times of Social Division

I am pleased to commend this Social Justice Statement, *Living the Gospel in Times of Social Division*.

We are living through an era of heightened community tension and a growing normalisation of abusive behaviour, incendiary language and violence.

In such moments of tension, the temptation is to retreat into trenches of suspicion or to treat those who differ in their views as opponents rather than as people.

The Gospel offers a different path. It calls us back to Jesus Christ, who meets division not with hostility but with mercy; not with the logic of 'us and them' but with the costly love that heals and transforms.

Living the Gospel in these times is not a private devotion. It is a public witness that human dignity is not negotiable, that truth matters and that peace is more than the absence of conflict - it is the fruit of justice, reconciliation and communion.

In Australia, the strain on social cohesion has been made painfully visible by a disturbing rise in antisemitism.

Jewish communities have reported unprecedented levels of abuse, intimidation, vandalism and, in the case of the Bondi Beach attack, shocking deadly violence. It has left many to feel unsafe in places that should be secure, such as schools, synagogues, streets and public events.

Such hatred is an affront to God.

Catholics stand in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters. We must unequivocally denounce antisemitism and work to rebuild trust, safety and mutual respect in our communities. Indeed, both tolerance and respect for people of all religions, cultures and ethnicities are the essential foundations for such a rebuilding.

How are we to live the Gospel in these times?

First, by remaining close to Christ in prayer and the sacraments, allowing the Lord to convert our hearts before we seek to change the world.

Second, by practising a “culture of encounter”: listening before reacting, seeking to understand the fears and hopes of others and choosing relationship over caricature.

Third, by exercising restraint in what we say - especially online – rejecting gossip, slander, dehumanising labels and the sharing of unverified claims. Christians must be known as people who speak truthfully, argue respectfully and never delight in humiliation.

Fourth, by concrete acts of compassion and justice: standing with those targeted because of their faith or background, supporting families under economic pressure, welcoming migrants and refugees and working for the common good through parish, school and community initiatives.

In these practical ways we become “salt” and “light” (Matthew 5:13–16). This statement invites us to see our current social climate as an opportunity to witness to the Gospel.

We offer Jesus and the hope born of his death and resurrection. When we choose forgiveness over enmity, hospitality over isolation and solidarity over vilification, we help to create the conditions in which a more peaceful society can prosper.

I encourage parishes, families, schools and agencies to use this statement as a resource for prayer, formation and action.

Living the Gospel in Times of Social Division

“Let us remember that love lives through sacrifice and is nourished by giving ... without sacrifice there is no love.”

These words were spoken by Saint Maximilian Kolbe, a Catholic priest imprisoned and executed in Auschwitz during the Second World War, who stepped forward to take the place of another prisoner, Franciszek Gajowniczek, a husband and father who had been condemned to die. In that dark place and in that moment, St Maximilian didn't respond out of fear or self-preservation. In offering his own life so that another man might live, Kolbe demonstrated the power of a radical Christ-like, sacrificial love. His example reminds us that the deepest foundation of a healthy and humane society is found in the way that we treat one another; not as threats or competitors or burdens, but as neighbours who possess an inherent God given dignity and goodness.

In recent times, the sense that we can live together in Australia in peace and harmony – what is sometimes called ‘social cohesion’ – has been threatened by a growing polarisation of views about important issues in politics and in the community. While there is nothing wrong with people holding opposing views and seeing things differently, regrettably, this

polarisation has been accompanied by harsh words, discrimination against people of certain faiths and races and even horrifying violence. Our society has for some time now witnessed an alarming rise in antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of racism. The tragic massacre of 15 Jews in Sydney in December 2025 marks a grave escalation in violent hatred and signals a troubling decline in community safety and social cohesion.¹

We wish to consider how the Church can respond to these challenges. In particular, we want to reflect on how the “sacrificial love” witnessed by the life of St Maximilian has the power to address the current social divisions which threaten the sense of belonging and safety which all Australians want and deserve.

St Maximilian's life and actions were shaped by the radical teaching of Christ, a teaching that calls us to love our enemies, forgive without limits, and recognise each person we encounter as “my neighbour”.

The love of Christ and the witness of His life offer a powerful answer to a fractured and polarised world, with a vision of community and flourishing that goes beyond mere ‘tolerance’ or ‘coexistence’. Jesus calls His followers to a radically different way of living,

marked by mercy, forgiveness and a genuine commitment to the good of others.

This transformation begins in the conversion of the human heart; social cohesion grows when individuals allow their attitudes and actions to be shaped by love and humility. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges the instinct for retaliation and division by teaching His disciples to love their enemies and “pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). The Golden Rule to “do unto others as you would have them do to you” calls us to recognise every person as a neighbour. Jesus illustrates this powerfully in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the ‘good neighbour’ was the one who shows compassion and helps a stranger in need (Luke 10:25-37).

St Maximilian’s witness shows that the self-sacrificial love of Christ, lived faithfully in both the small sacrifices of daily life and the great sacrifices asked of us in moments of trial remains one of the most powerful forces for healing division and strengthening the bonds that hold us together as a society.



Encounter is the key

In the midst of the social tensions which beset our country, we are called to witness to the “great love”, the

infinite love of God which sustains us, in both our attitudes and our actions.

Our shared identity as relational, as Imago Dei

In the current context, people are increasingly encouraged to define themselves and others by political allegiance, cultural identity or ideological alignment. The Church proposes a different understanding of human identity. It proposes that we are not defined by our affiliations or preferences, but rather by our shared origin and destiny as daughters and sons of God made in the image of the one God who is trinitarian, as imago dei (‘image of God’).



Our very being and identity is to be relational, like the Trinity, to see ourselves as one with the other, to not dominate the other but respect their part in the oneness of our common existence. We are thus called as individuals and communities to recognise one another, not even simply as neighbours but as kin called to care for each other just as much as we are called to care for our common home, the earth.

The call to “a culture of encounter” to overcome our divisions

As we have pointed out, to be human is to know conflict on occasions, and



to experience differences of opinion, knowledge and understanding, and even enmity for another, exemplified in the story of Cain and Abel.²

To overcome these tendencies, which can lead to communal and societal division, Pope Francis emphasised the building of “cultures of encounter”. He noted that “in today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalised indifference, born of deep disillusionment concealed behind a deceptive illusion: thinking that we are all powerful, while failing to realize we are all in the same boat.”³

To speak of a “culture of encounter” means, in Pope Francis’ words, that “we as a people should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone”. It becomes “an aspiration and a style of life” in which the whole community takes responsibility for building relationships across differences and recognising the dignity of every person. Social peace “demands hard work, craftsmanship” and grows from the patient work of encounter. “What is important is to create processes of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences.”⁴

It is in re-discovering the richness and beauty of the sense of being part of the one family and working together for the common good that we can overcome our divisions. In the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “Society is a conversation scored for many voices. But it is precisely in and through that conversation that we become conjoint authors of our collective future, rather than dust

blown by the wind of economic forces. Conversation – respectful, engaged, reciprocal, calling forth some of our greatest powers of empathy and understanding – is the moral form of a world governed by the dignity of difference.”⁵

Love draws us out of ourselves and into a culture of encounter with others. It entails drawing close to others who have very different life experiences from ours. It means deep solidarity with them, seeing their plight with our hearts and not just with our eyes, listening intently and not just hearing, not passing by, but stopping to engage with them with great compassion, not pity. It means committing to walk with them on a journey of healing and renewal. No-one is worthless. We learn from each other, even though we may disagree on one matter or another.⁶

Acting justly

Crucial to our efforts to live with difference and address conflict in society is a commitment to understanding what justice is. Justice, kindness and humility (Micah 6:8) must shape our approach to encounters with others. Those to whom we reach out should not be seen as objects of our pity, charity or generosity. Justice demands that we accept them as companions in a mutual pursuit of healing and the common good. The process of these encounters should be developed collaboratively. Each has much to offer and learn from the other. Respect and kindness enable us to navigate differences and problems along the way.

God is close to those who are poor and on the margins of society. In the psalms we read that the “poor soul

cried and was heard by the Lord: and was saved from every trouble” (Psalm 34:6) The eighth century prophet Amos warns those who “trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land” (Amos 8:4). They will bring about social fracture and definitively break their relationship with God, which will have lasting spiritual consequences. Embracing our call to witness to God’s abundant love requires that we let go of our fears and self-interest. Encounters with those on the peripheries of society are an essential part of our efforts to break down divisions in society and to nurture social cohesion. Reaching out to the poor with love, accompanying them in their struggles for justice and dignity, learning from their life experiences and spirituality, and collaborating with them to find justice helps us to draw closer to God and to foster the peace and harmony in society which God desires.



The justice which God wants must always be complemented by a spirit of forgiveness and mercy. As St John Paul II declared: “No peace without justice. No justice without forgiveness.”⁷

Threats to social cohesion

Across the community, people from different backgrounds and beliefs are experiencing rising hostility. Words and actions that demean, threaten or target others have

become more common, and abuse and violence directed at individuals and communities have become more prevalent.⁸ Attacks on property are also rising.⁹ The consequence of all these incidents and the intolerance, discrimination and prejudice which underlie them is that many Australians live in great fear. We have long believed that Australians, for the most part, live in harmony and peace. Recent events challenge that belief.

Underpinning some of the growing attacks on some groups, especially migrants, are the economic pressures faced by many. The ongoing cost-of-living crisis is affecting many people significantly. Lack of housing security is of particular concern to many, especially younger people.

Migration rates are being blamed by some for housing cost pressures and, unfortunately, migrants are being attacked and abused publicly by some.¹⁰

The role of social media

Social media, by its nature, tends to contribute to the amplification of existing divisions in society.

Algorithms shape each person’s online experience according to their existing interests and concerns, creating personalised information environments that reinforce existing views and anxieties. Artificial Intelligence increasingly delivers individually tailored content designed to capture attention and prolonged engagement often by provoking indignation, fear or outrage. As a result, two people sitting side by side may be consuming entirely different versions of reality, each shaped by unseen digital forces.



Digital platforms might be worsening division and polarisation in a less obvious way: time spent on devices is time not spent in community with other people. Research continues to show alarming increases in social isolation as community groups, church congregations, unions and sporting clubs struggle to bring people physically together.

Pope Leo spoke to this last year, calling young people not to live their faith in isolation:

“You know that in recent years many young people have approached the faith through social media, successful programs and popular online Christian witnesses. The danger is that a faith discovered online is limited to individual experiences, which may be intellectually and emotionally reassuring, but are never ‘embodied’. Such experiences remain ‘disembodied’, detached from the ‘ecclesial body’. Nor are they lived alongside others in real-life situations, relationships or sharing.”¹¹

Unfortunately, the disembodied reality Pope Leo speaks of can, sometimes, spill out into the real world with devastating consequences!



TAKING ACTION

The aim of our dialogue with others is not so much to change their beliefs but to understand their beliefs and motivations as part of a process of finding ways to collaborate on work to lower social tensions and promote the common good.

In his first magisterial document, *Dilexi te*, Pope Leo writes about the need for us to reach out in love to others in society:

“[The Church] knows that her proclamation of the Gospel is credible only when it is translated into gestures of closeness and welcome.”¹²

We can all act in our dioceses, parishes, schools and agencies, engaging in these gestures of welcome and closeness, to address the factors causing increased social tension and to foster stronger, more resilient and cohesive communities.

Practising a culture of encounter

We have already explained the great value of a commitment to a culture of encounter. We encourage efforts at all levels of the Church to reach out to those in the community who are marginalised so that lasting relationships can develop for the sake of greater community harmony.

Exercising restraint in what we say

In his Lenten message for this year, Pope Leo recommended that we refrain from words that offend and hurt others. He urged us to be measured in what we say and to practise kindness to others. This simple practice enables us to develop relationships of respect and trust with those we encounter.¹³

Welcoming migrants and refugees

Over many decades, the Church in Australia has welcomed migrants from many

countries. We have become a Church of many cultures and languages. We are all the richer for this. It is something worth celebrating. Many parishes, schools and dioceses celebrate our cultural and linguistic diversity with multicultural Masses and other events. We encourage this to continue and grow, especially on Migrant and Refugee Sunday, and at other times of the year.

There are many Church and community groups across Australia offering practical support and help with advocacy for migrants and refugees. We encourage greater participation in the work of these groups and organisations.

A commitment to reconciliation

The history, culture and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is of great significance for the nation and the Church. Without acknowledging this in word and practice, we cannot truly be a just and inclusive society. We must continue to celebrate this and commit ourselves to the ongoing process of reconciliation in National Reconciliation Week, on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday and during NAIDOC Week as well as at other times of the year. Some dioceses, parishes and schools have made a commitment through the development and implementation of Reconciliation Action Plans. We support and encourage this commitment to continue and grow.

Overcoming Racism

Racism, in all its forms is incompatible with the dignity of the human person and must be firmly challenged and eliminated from our society. We encourage work at all levels of the Church to understand the nature and impact of racism and to work towards its elimination.

Returning to Pope Francis' invitation to build "cultures of encounter", we are reminded that overcoming division requires the patient work of building relationships, fostering dialogue and recognising and upholding the inherent dignity and worth of every person we meet. These are dispositions of the heart and practical actions that each person can cultivate in their own lives and communities.

Conversations in the Spirit

Learning to listen attentively to others who, often, have different experiences and views from us is a missionary skill we have been practising within the Church for many years. At the heart of that listening are what are called conversations in the Spirit. Many of us who participated in the consultations leading up to the Fifth Plenary Council of the Australian Church a couple of years ago would have experienced this method of listening. These conversations were also at the heart of the process used at the Synod on Synodality in Rome. We encourage all in the Church to learn how to use this process of listening and to adopt it to conduct conversations about important issues. If used well, it can be a good way to ensure that people of all ages, cultures and backgrounds are included.

Community organising

The Church has long defended the importance of civil society: spaces that are not the government, and not the market. In the twentieth century, civil society came under attack from ideologies that directed everything to come under a centralised state. In our context, it is under pressure from the market. Commercially mediated relationships, especially in the digital realm, are crowding out the space for community, where we learn to ‘live together well’.

We can and should bring a culture of listening and inclusion to the wider community. In some parts of the country, people from churches and faith communities join with representatives from many different community organisations to work on finding solutions to problems faced by the community. This community organising model encourages participants to listen to the daily experiences of others, to discern what problems are a priority for action, and to undertake action to bring about change for the better. We encourage participation in such alliances if they exist in your locality. If they do not, consider approaching other churches, faith communities and community organisations to come together to address a significant issue for the local community.¹⁴

Promoting online safety

Becoming informed about the ways in which social media can be misused and abused is important for all of us. Pope Francis has warned that “sometimes and in some places, media sites have become places of toxicity, hate speech and fake news” and that as such, “the use of digital media, especially social media ... [raises] a number of serious issues that call for wise and discerning judgment”.

We are called to use these digital and social media tools in ways that promote truth and human dignity. Pope Francis encourages efforts to help people, especially the young, “develop a sound critical sense, learning to distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong, good from evil”.

In practice, this calls for us to approach social media with wisdom and charity: engaging with others respectfully, even when we disagree, pausing to listen rather than react, and using digital platforms to encourage dialogue, understanding and a genuine concern for the common good.¹⁵

Salt and light

Politics is a part of life. So, too, are people expressing firmly held views informed by very different experiences and ideologies. Many will express these views in the media, on the internet and on the streets. It is inevitable that tensions will emerge when people’s views clash. However, these differences cannot excuse hatred, abuse and violence.

In the midst of social division, we Christians are called to be “salt of the earth”

and “light for the world” (Matt 5:13–16).

Inspired and sustained by the great sacrificial love of which St Maximilian so powerfully embodied in his life, we can bring new hope to communities weary of division and violence and longing for peace.

Paul tells us: “...you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness (1 Thess 5:5)”.

Committed to a culture of encounter, we can be a light which dispels the darkness of the endless political point-scoring and ideological warfare that can beset our country.

Faithful to the spirit of the Gospel, we can help to build bridges within the community to challenge fear and distrust and build a renewed sense of mutual respect and belonging.

Dedicated to the dignity of every person, no matter what their faith, ethnicity or political opinions are, we can work with others to challenge the discrimination and exclusion which threaten our social cohesion.

We are the body of Christ entrusted with a mission to act justly and work for justice in society, knowing that there can be no peace in our land without justice, especially for the most marginalised and vulnerable in our community. With each encounter, with every conversation and with every community action we plan with others, we strengthen the ties which bind our community together.

Hopeful and trusting in the God who is love, we confidently echo the words of Zechariah:

“The dawn from on high will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78–79)[





Social Justice Statement Prayer

You created every person in your image and call us to live as one human family.

In a world marked by division, fear and misunderstanding, fill our hearts with the self-giving love of Christ. Teach us to see one another not as strangers or opponents, but as sisters and brothers, worthy of dignity, respect and compassion.

Give us the courage to build bridges where there is distrust, to seek encounter where there is separation, and to work for justice with humility and mercy. Help us to listen with open hearts, speak with kindness, and walk together in the way of peace.

May your Holy Spirit guide us to welcome the stranger, stand beside those on the margins, reject all forms of hatred and racism, and become instruments of reconciliation in our communities.

Through the example of Saint Maximilian Kolbe and all the saints, strengthen us to live the Gospel through sacrifice, generosity and love, so that your light may shine through us and bring hope to our nation.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

[illegible]

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