

Social Justice

"[The Church] has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice...cannot prevail and prosper."

– Pope Benedict XVI

■ WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE?

For an ideal that arouses so much passion, the meaning of social justice is very difficult to pin down. Precisely because it is such a powerful force, social justice is known as a 'highly contested' term – meaning no two people agree as to exactly what it is and what to do about it. This is evident in the quote, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Our view of social justice in many ways depends on our personal views.

The Society's founder, Frederic Ozanam, knew this. When asked to describe where and how social justice work should be focused, he was very clear: "It is the struggle between those who have too much and those in poverty which is shaking the ground beneath our feet. Our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves between those two camps." This is the space the St Vincent de Paul Society occupies today.

■ GLOBAL POVERTY STATISTICS

- More than one billion children worldwide live in poverty.
- The richest 2% of adults in the world own more than half of all household wealth.

– Global Issues website
www.globalissues.org

CASE STUDY

"My mother died last year when soldiers came to our village. Since then, I have to look after my brothers and sisters. I want to take care of them but I'm sad that I can no longer go to school. Sometimes we don't have enough to eat and the little ones cry."

– Safiya (Aged 16)

■ ASYLUM SEEKERS STATISTICS

- In 2009, 2,726 people successfully applied for asylum in Australia; less than 4% of them arrived by boat.
- Most illegal immigrants were UK travellers who had overstayed their visas, yet asylum seekers who arrive by boat continue to be persecuted.

– United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2010) www.ohchr.org

CASE STUDY

"I couldn't stop thinking of my father. He had been taken by the government and tortured. Although he was missing, he had arranged to get me, my mother and my sister out of the country. Our boat held about 30 people, even though it was only meant to carry eight. It was three weeks in open water before we were picked up; by that stage, six children had died of starvation." – Na'eem (Aged 11)

■ HOMELESSNESS STATISTICS

- 105,000 Australians were counted as homeless in 2006. In 2001, the figure was 99,900.
- Nearly half of the homeless population are under 25.
- More than half of those seeking emergency accommodation are turned away due to a lack of resources.

– Australian Bureau of Statistics
www.abs.gov.au

CASE STUDY

"The worst thing about homelessness isn't the cold, the hunger, the violence or anything else. It's the loneliness that is the hardest. That's what gets you in the end. Nobody wants to know you. People cross the street to avoid talking to a homeless person."

– Mitchell (Aged 23)

ACTIVITY 1

"Many young people today feel frustrated because they cannot see any worthy challenge, which excites them, within the present capitalist world...Young people dream about creating a perfect world of their own." Muhammad Yunus, 2006 Nobel Prize for Peace speech.

Social justice, in theory, is a good aim for society, however addressing these issues can often be controversial and difficult. Imagine you have just been made Prime Minister and have been given the opportunity to create any policies for your country. What kind of society would you create and how would you deal with some of the following social justice issues?

- (1) Global poverty
- (2) Asylum seekers
- (3) Homelessness
- (4) International disaster
- (5) Global warming
- (6) Millennium development goals

Keep in mind that not everyone is as fortunate as us. Many people struggle to survive from day to day, while we live in relative comfort, with three meals a day and a bed to sleep in each night.



SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY

The St Vincent de Paul Society is very active in social justice advocacy.

The Society's most recent social justice research report investigated the causes of homelessness. This report was tabled in state parliament and identified as a key resource in addressing homelessness among non-urban populations. Recommendations and case studies from the Society's

research have been used to shape state and federal government policy on homelessness and ensure that the issue remains at the forefront of government priorities.

Refer to the Known Territory report by Dr Andy Marks, Senior Researcher with the Society, NSW.

For a copy of this report and others, go to www.vinnies.org.au

WHAT CAN I DO?

"The knowledge of social wellbeing and reform is not to be learned from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to a poor man's [house], sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, and sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind."

– Blessed Frederic Ozanam

Record and act on the social justice issues you encounter:

- keep a journal, diary or visual account
- tell Vinnies or other social justice advocates
- talk to your friends and family
- monitor reliable news sources
- challenge negative stereotypes and stigma
- have faith and believe that change begins with you

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

– Article 1: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949)

"What we want and how we get it depends on our mindsets. It is extremely difficult to change mindsets once they are formed. We create the world in accordance with our mindset. We need to invent ways to change our perspective continually and reconfigure our mindset quickly as new knowledge emerges. We can reconfigure our world if we can reconfigure our mindset."

– Muhammad Yunus

"Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements."

– The Rule of the St Vincent de Paul Society (2005)



For more information

St Vincent de Paul Society www.vinnies.org.au

Salvation Army salvos.org.au/more/get-involved/social-justice/what-is-social-justice/

Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission www.humanrights.gov.au/education/index.html

Global Issues www.globalissues.org

United Nations www.un.org