

**Speech at the Launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops'  
Social Justice Statement 2013–2014**

***Lazarus at Our Gate***  
***A critical moment in the fight against world poverty***

**Given by**

**BISHOP GREGORY O'KELLY SJ AM DD**

**Bishop of Port Pirie,**

**Leone Ryan Auditorium, Australian Catholic University, North Sydney NSW**

**11 September 2013**

On behalf of Australia's Catholic Bishops, let me thank John Menadue and Helen Forde for their eloquence in launching this year's Social Justice Statement. I would also like to thank the many people who have been involved in the consultations and drafting of the document and in its design and production.

The foundation of this year's Statement is one of Jesus' great parables: the story of the poor man Lazarus, who lies unnoticed at the gate of the rich man. This is the Gospel reading for Social Justice Sunday this year. Please recall that this statement, the 66th Social Justice Statement of the Australian bishops, is unanimously endorsed by all the bishops of Australia in conference, and is therefore a very powerful statement to our Australian church.

*There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received*

*your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony ...* (Luke 16:19–31)

Like all of Our Lord's parables, this story presents us with a poignant challenge. It asks us directly: Where am I in this story: who am I in this story? The parables of Jesus are not allegories: they invite us to enter them at the level of our own imagination. When Christ spoke these parables he was looking at his hearers. How do I respond to his gaze?

None of us can hear this story without being reminded that on our streets – the streets and roadsides of every nation on earth – are men and women like Lazarus. We sometimes walk past without seeing them.

And that, it seems, is what the rich man in the parable did. He didn't directly make Lazarus poor. He didn't rob Lazarus or cheat him. Lazarus was just there, at the rich man's gate, and the rich man ignored him. It was the sin of indifference, of omission rather than commission: Jesus asks us to go beyond that which is simply required legally.

Our response has to be twofold. The first is our instinctive response: we can share our good fortune and donate money or time to people and groups that are committed to helping Lazarus. That has been the tradition as set out from the earliest pages of the Bible. That is taking personal responsibility for hearing and acting on Christ's call.

However, we cannot say we truly hear the story of Lazarus unless we ask a second question: what kind of world is this where there is so much plenty and so much poverty? What is happening in our world that leaves so many people poor, excluded and powerless? Please remember that 189 nations penned their names to the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, goals to be met in 2015. Much good has been done since then. The number of desperately hungry has been halved, but so much remains to be done.

In this Statement, the Bishops address both these responses. It brings you the words of individuals: men and women who are struggling against marginalisation and injustice. We hear the words of Flabiana in East Timor, Haman Abdou in Nigeria, Samphors in Cambodia, and Zarfeh Shibleyh, who fled from the violence in Syria.

We are reminded that there are 45 million individual stories like that of Lazarus among the refugees and asylum seekers fleeing their homes around the world. Each of the 370 million Indigenous people in the world has a name and a story. Each of the 870 million people who are chronically undernourished, whose children face the possibility of stunted growth and permanently damaged health – each of these is a parable that cries out to be told.

Five groups of the poorest of the poor are put before us.

Firstly, the desperately hungry, reduced in proportion but in sheer numbers so overwhelming.

Next, the disaster affected. Without the same infrastructure of physical protection and resources, disasters like tsunamis and earthquakes wreak so much greater havoc amongst the poorest. Haiti is still only a few per cent reconstructed, all these years later.

Thirdly, the Indigenous, five per cent of the world's population but 15 per cent of the world's poor. I see this in my diocese, the desperation of lack of potential and achievement in the traditional communities in the APY lands and the grossly disproportionate numbers of Indigenous prisoners in our white jails.

Fourthly, people with disabilities. The dreadful statistic is there – in the developing world 90 per cent, yes 90 per cent, of children afflicted with a disability never get to school.

Fifthly, those forcibly displaced – some 45 million. Syria was host to half a million refugees, but now 2 million of its own have fled.

Faced with all this our government now proposes to reduce foreign aid by \$4.5 billion, in favour of roads! Roads against such poverty? The Millennium Goals, to which we ascribed, asked the 189 nations to lift their aid funding to 0.7 per cent of gross national income. We are now reducing ours to 32 cents out of every \$100 dollars of national income, and yet Lazarus is at our gate.

Once we understand that these people are individuals, we must respond to their need as individuals. Organisations including Caritas, Catholic Mission, Jesuit Refugee Services and countless other groups cannot do their work without the individual generosity of people who are prepared to offer their time, skill and money.

Beyond that is our second question. What are the structures in our societies that make people poor and keep them poor? The Statement quotes the words of Pope John Paul II:

How can it be that even today there are still people dying of hunger? Condemned to illiteracy? Lacking the most basic medical care? Without a roof over their heads? ...

In other words: what are we going to do about this not just as individuals but as a society – as global citizens?

Recently Pope Francis in his very first journey outside Rome visited the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, which is the first landfall for thousands of refugees from North Africa. It is

120 km off the coast of Tunisia. It is said thousands have died trying to get there. It is Italy's version of Christmas Island. Pope Francis celebrated Mass there with the residents of the islands and with people who had arrived as immigrants seeking protection and a better life.

In his homily Pope Francis turned to the people of Lampedusa and thanked them for their solidarity with those who had made the terrible journey there.

Then he put some hard challenges to all of us. He reminded us that in the Bible at the beginning of the story of humanity, God put two questions: 'Adam, where are you?' and 'Where is your brother?'

Here is part of what he said:

'Where is your brother?' Who is responsible for this blood? Even today this question comes with force: Who is responsible for the blood of these brothers and sisters? No one! We all respond this way: not me, it has nothing to do with me, there are others, certainly not me. But God asks each one of us: 'Where is the blood of your brother that cries out to me?' Today no one in the world feels responsible for this; we have lost the sense of fraternal responsibility; we have fallen into the hypocritical attitude of the priest and of the servant of the altar that Jesus speaks about in the parable of the Good Samaritan: We look upon the brother half dead by the roadside, perhaps we think 'poor guy,' and we continue on our way, it's none of our business; and we feel fine with this. We feel at peace with this, we feel fine! The culture of well-being, that makes us think of ourselves, that makes us insensitive to the cries of others, that makes us live in soap bubbles, that are beautiful but are nothing, are illusions of futility, of the transient, that brings indifference to others, that brings even the globalization of indifference. In this world of globalization we have fallen into a globalization of indifference. We are accustomed to the suffering of others, it doesn't concern us, it's none of our business ...

But I want to set before us a third question: 'Who among us has wept for these things, and things like this?' Who has wept for the deaths of these brothers and sisters? Who has wept for the people who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who wanted something to support their families? We are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of 'suffering with': the globalisation of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!

Indifference is really what the rich man was guilty of, and what we are often guilty of as a society that is comfortable in its wealth. We might join Pope Francis in the prayer with which he ended his homily on Lampedusa:

We ask forgiveness for the indifference towards so many brothers and sisters, we ask forgiveness for those who are pleased with themselves, who are closed in on their own well-being in a way that leads to the anaesthesia of the heart, we ask you, Father, for forgiveness for those who with their decisions at the global level have created situations that lead to these tragedies. Forgive us, Lord!

I thank you for being here today to join us in launching this Statement and I ask for God's blessing on all of us – and for his help in hearing the call to build his Kingdom on Earth. God bless you all.