

Parish Life blog: Social Justice Sunday

Fr Andrew Hamilton | 19 September 2019



The subject of this year's Catholic Social Justice Statement is the Digital World. The Statement will be delivered on Social Justice Sunday on 29 September.

The Digital World is a huge topic and timely because the advances in digital technology have so changed society. It is important to reflect on these changes and on what they mean for human growth.

We need only think back 50 years to recognise the good effects of digital communication.

Then distance separated people acutely. Communication by telephone was expensive and often unreliable and expensive. Letters took a long time to arrive. Missionaries in very remote and dangerous parts of the world to which the only access was by a monthly plane or boat had no way of letting others know if they were ill or under threat.

For them the satellite phone could literally be a life saver. Now families and community organisations can communicate with distant members by Skype, seeing as well as hearing one another.

NEW POSSIBILITIES

The internet, too, has brought huge new possibilities. To check historical facts, correct spelling, opportunities for buying and selling goods, current news, how to cook particular dishes or fix bicycles and other machinery we would once have needed to consult a variety of books and magazines. Now we can find initial information on the internet and suggestions about how to inform ourselves more fully.

The most significant change brought about by social media, however, has been to enable us to communicate simultaneously with large groups of people. We can share our thoughts, our pictures, our writing and feelings with our friends and with the world. We can also easily organise events, seek funding for good causes, and join in discussion of public issues.

These new forms of communication can help us to build stronger communities and to act generously in working for a better world. They can also be used, however, to narrow our humanity and to produce a worse world.

Because digital skills and equipment affect employment, connection with government agencies and communicating with friends, they can easily create a division between more affluent Australians who can afford computers and mobile phones and disadvantaged people who cannot. This must be addressed by ensuring that all children have access to education in digital technology and the equipment necessary to be at home in the digital world.

DANGER OF SUPERFICIAL KNOWLEDGE

Although digital resources make it easier for us to find information they can also lead us to mistake superficial knowledge for understanding, and opinion for truth. When our search engines privilege sites that reflect our opinions, our prejudices can easily be reinforced.

We can then take false assertions and dodgy arguments for gospel truth. This is harmful to society. Once truth disappears from public life, justice soon follows. So it is good not to rely on social media, but in addition to read deeply and to engage in conversation with people who differ with us.

Social media, which can help us build and deepen our relationships, can also destroy friendships. We often stories of people entering apparently good relationships through social media, only later to discover that their partner is motivated by lies and greed.

NO SUBSTITUTE

We also know of people who have been bullied and ostracised. The effects on their growth and self-respect can be catastrophic. Social media are best understood as a way of deepening face-to-face relationships, not as a substitute for them. They call for the same respect, compassion and tolerance we would like to show when speaking directly with people.

In social media, as in all human activities, it is important also to ask who profits from them and what price we must pay to participate in them. In this case the owners profit by using our personal data to sell advertising. It is important that they be accountable for what they put on their channels.