

## Leaders gather to consider Catholic policy response to COVID-19

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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Leaders of Catholic agencies and a number of external experts gathered online on Monday to consider the challenges of the pandemic for Australians and what the Catholic community can contribute to public policy ideas to bolster the country's COVID-19 recovery.

The roundtable discussion, "A Catholic contribution to public policy on COVID", was co-hosted by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Australian Catholic University's public policy think tank, the PM Glynn Institute.

The event was inspired by the work of the Vatican's COVID-19 Commission.

Economist Chris Richardson from Deloitte Access Economics and social commentator Bernard Salt from the Demography Group were the two keynote speakers, focusing on the impact of the pandemic on the economy and the community.

Responses to the keynote presentations were offered by Catholic Social Services Australia CEO Ursula Stephens and ACU's Pro Vice-Chancellor Engagement, Professor Sandra Jones.

Issues canvassed during the discussion included how well Australia has responded to the pandemic; the impact on employment and housing affordability; planning for future crises; the effect of changing work patterns for cities, suburbs and regions; the impact on vulnerable groups such as the homeless and mentally ill; the impact on aged care, education and the environment; and opportunities for strengthening social cohesion, trust in institutions and local communities.

Michael Casey, director of the PM Glynn Institute, said an important part of the roundtable was to identify challenges and opportunities that need to be brought into sharper focus in policy discussions about the lessons from COVID-19.

"The pandemic has magnified problems that were already there and also highlighted the generosity of people in helping each other in a time of crisis. A strong theme in the discussion was about what we can learn from this to help build a better society," Dr Casey said.

"In his teachings during the pandemic and in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis has emphasised our interdependence and the importance of working together if we want to emerge into a better place from COVID-19. The roundtable is a contribution to coming to grips with what this might mean practically for public policy."

Among the participants at the roundtable were leaders of national Catholic agencies, business executives, academics and key decision-makers in government and policy, encompassing expertise in education, health, welfare, the environment, Indigenous affairs, business, unions, politics, public policy, ethics and Catholic social teaching.

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“The discussion brought up a great range of ideas including improving our social infrastructure so we have a permanent structure to help people weather economic shocks like COVID, addressing underemployment and what the Catholic notion of the common good can contribute to public debate,” said Jeremy Stuparich, the Bishops Conference’s public policy director.

“Working alongside government, other faith-based and community organisations and the wider community, the Church can have a big role in helping the country emerge from COVID a better place, just as Pope Francis hopes.

“Monday’s roundtable discussion is one part of a larger effort to define that contribution.”

One of the fruits of the roundtable will be the publication of a discussion paper summarising the major issues raised during the event. It will also pose policy questions for closer examination.

The paper will be released for public consultation after Easter, to help in the development of detailed policy proposals for consideration by government and the community.

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