

Let's Call a Spade a Spade

Truth serves peace

The current Social Justice Statement issued by the Australian Bishops' Conference is entitled "[Truth and Peace: A Gospel Word in a Violent World](#)". It is a fine addition to the grand array of social justice statements that the bishops have issued in this country since 1940. It is indeed encouraging that the annual social justice statement is the only Statement given to the nation by the bishops on a regular yearly basis.

The issues dealt with in the statement are many and varied, and they are all relevant to the state of the world at present. At 16 pages in large print with illustrations, the document is not beyond any of us to read. It is a fine basis for prayer and reflection over months. The issues it deals with, while not exhaustive, are deeply concerning to anyone claiming allegiance to Jesus Christ.

One of the important matters considered is the growth of "misinformation" and "disinformation" in the public arena, globally and in Australia. These matters are discussed widely elsewhere, in articles and on social media. What is concerning is why we have two five-syllable words for the realities of "mistakes" (misinformation) and "lies" (disinformation). The statement does not deal with this, limiting itself to the danger of both realities in public discussions. But the distinction between the two is well worth thinking about. The words misinformation and disinformation are so similar! Only one letter in each word is different, and yet their meanings are poles apart.

People can make mistakes, and many do – we all do. We can easily "get the bull by the tail". There are people who believe what they read and see regardless of its worth, and some pass that onto others. If it is done without malice it is unfortunate, but with consequences nevertheless. There is an obligation on all of us to be wary, as the tidal waves of misinformation that engulf social media verge on the ridiculous. The advent of AI (artificial intelligence) makes us sitting ducks for all sorts of wrong-headed claims that are presented vividly in word and pictures.

However, it is "disinformation" that is most concerning. This is so far apart from "misinformation" that it certainly needs a better, truer word to describe it. Disinformation means *lies*. Untruths. False witness. A piece of disinformation is a lie. A lie is a statement, an assertion, an image that is untrue, and is known to be untrue by the person who says it or promotes it. It is against the 8th commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour". Jesus told us that he was the truth (John 14:6) and that everyone on the side of truth listens to him (John 18:37). Pontius Pilate, the man who sentenced him to death, had a problem with the truth, even asking what it was (John 18:38).

Fake news, alternative facts and partisan news sources are on the increase and they generate mistrust. People can get confused when they are enticed by attractively presented hyped-up claims despite their questionable basis. Recently I saw a Facebook image of our Foreign Minister Penny Wong with a black eye. The articles presented with the image had nothing to do with a physical assault on her so it was just an eye catcher (pardon the pun). Perhaps a shock and horror suggestion of domestic violence to entice engagement with gossipy social media garbage bin?

The prevalence and reasons for the sharing of false information is the subject of [current investigations](#). Many of us have first-hand knowledge of questionable material and its effects. During the lead-up to the Voice referendum in 2023 a woman came to me in a church and said that if the Indigenous people had a Voice in Parliament they would turn off the hot water. I had not read or heard this claim anywhere, but that is what she told me. The following week I questioned her about where she heard it and she dismissed it as something that maybe wasn't right. Her response could well have been a result of my amazement, but the facts are that she said it to me, she got it from somewhere, and she initially believed it. The lawyers [Gilbert & Tobin](#) have shown the inaccuracies in the official

Australian Electoral Commission's booklet regarding the Voice referendum (The AEC printed the [cases made available to it by politicians](#) in the referendum.)

In their statement, the Australian Bishops draw the obvious conclusion about the links between lies and conflict, truth and peace: "What is increasingly clear is that the more disinformation and misinformation proliferate, the greater the risk of conflict. The connection is unmistakable" (p.4). The reason is clear: one cannot trust a liar. Put more positively, truth generates trust. So without trust, real peace is beyond us.

Echoing Pope Francis and previous Popes who anguished for the world, the statement inspires us all to work for peace and for truth, whoever and wherever we are. The suggestions at the end of the document are practical and achievable, all working with our primary duty of prayer.

This current Social Justice Statement by the Bishops is essential reading for every Catholic, every Christian, every person. It is a proclamation of hope, as truth brings trust and trust undergirds peace, the heartfelt hope of any good person. We need not be daunted by lies, liars and the suffering they generate. The evil of lies appears to surround us, but as throughout all of history, when lies are unmasked we see them for what they are: fancy-dress, poppycock, rubbish, weakness. The antidote is plain old dependable truth, glorious in its nature as essential to peace and to humanity.

The tribulations that accompany current global lies call for perseverance in the truth, and as Paul writes, perseverance produces character, and character hope: hope which does not disappoint (Romans 5: 3-5). We celebrate this hope, our hope, in this [Jubilee Year](#).

We are fortunate to have the [2024-2025 Bishops' Statement on Truth and Peace](#). Well worth reading and pondering!

Sister Susan Connelly February 2025