

# The Bishop's Letter

## Don't gamble with our future

*From Most Rev Anthony Fisher OP, Bishop of Parramatta,  
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Last year, the Productivity Commission published a report on gambling which observed that gambling is an enjoyable pursuit for many Australians, helps support various sporting and charitable activities, and brings people together socially in clubs and pubs. Most Australians are not wowsers and neither are most Catholics. We don't wag our fingers at harmless fun.

But sometimes gambling is far from harmless. Australia's Catholic Bishops recently expressed themselves "painfully aware of the damage that problem gambling, especially problem poker machine gambling, causes for many people. It can lead to financial disaster, family breakdown and even suicide."

The Productivity Commission estimates that there are around 115,000 'problem gamblers' in Australia and another 280,000 at 'moderate risk' of gambling away more than they can reasonably afford.

The effects include mounting debt and financial hardship, crime and social isolation, marriage and family breakdown, mental health issues, and suicide.

Pokies seem to be particularly 'addictive'. An estimated 600,000 Australians (4% of the adult population) play them at least weekly. Of these regulars about 1 in 6 are classified as problem gamblers and they account for 40% of the \$12 billion lost each year on gaming machines.

They each lose an average of \$21,000 per year to poker machines, which is a lot of money for a Western Sydney 'battler'. Many lose a lot more than average.

So the Productivity Commission suggested that we move to a system where people set binding limits to their losses. Politics being what it is today, proposals and counter-proposal, threats and stalemates followed. There was a hue from the hotels and a cry from the clubs. Billboards on the M4 told us that 'A licence to punt is un-Australian'.

So what does the Church have to say about this? Well the *Catechism* is clear that games of chance can be a form of entertainment and entertainment is a good thing (*cf.* CCC 2413).

On the other hand, you can have too much of a good thing. If you spend too much, you'll be neglecting your family or yourself or the poor. People can even become 'enslaved to the passion for gambling'. This is contrary to justice, charity and human dignity.

I've met some of the victims. Wives who first discovered their husbands had a problem when the bank moved to foreclose on their house. Families messed up by the breach of trust, the lies, the self-deception. Gamblers suicidal with shame and a sense that there's no escape.

The Australian Church sees the damage gambling does close up. Just talk to anyone in the St Vincent de Paul Society or working for CatholicCare Social Services here in the Diocese of Parramatta.

That's why the Bishops say in their statement that "problem gambling is never responsible. Nor is it in any way acceptable that a large percentage of gambling profits come from problem gamblers."

We commend the efforts of our civil leaders to address the problem and we call on Catholic clubs "to lead the way in addressing problem poker machine gambling."

The Church has no special wisdom on the best strategy to deal with problem gambling. But the argument that the common good is best served by measures such as mandatory pre-commitment seems strong. At the very least it might be trialed along with other initiatives and support structures.

Meanwhile, as a Catholic community, we must be there not just to preach and lead, but also to pick up the pieces. CatholicCare Social Services in the Diocese of Parramatta, through its Responsible Gambling Counselling Service at Blacktown and Emerton, is trying to address the devastating effects of problem gambling.

They told me a story of a man who telephoned the service desperate and suicidal. He had gambled away everything – his marriage, home, job, money, self-esteem. He was overwhelmed by debts, about to be evicted from his rented room, and about to have his car repossessed.

Our counsellor saw him immediately and suicide prevention strategies were put in place. Intensive work was done with him over the following weeks, both psychologically and financially.

I'm told he has now abstained from gambling for six months, is making small repayments on his debts and recovering his life. He continues to receive support from the service.

If you know a problem gambler, or a family being adversely affected by one, encourage them to seek counselling through our services: CatholicCare Parramatta tel (02) 9671 2011 or visit: [www.ccss.org.au](http://www.ccss.org.au)

They gambled for Christ's clothes as He hung naked on the Cross (*Lk 23:34*). Christ cares. The Church cares. I hope our government and community will also move on this one.

Bishop Anthony's pastoral letters in *Catholic Outlook* are archived at:  
<http://www.parra.catholic.org.au/bishop-of-parramatta/most-rev-anthony-fisher-op/catholic-outlook-letters.aspx>