

The Bishop's Letter

Who are you at census time?

*From Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, Bishop of Parramatta
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When you complete the census form on 9 August 2011, you'll be participating in the centenary of census taking in Australia.

In antiquity, censuses were taken so rulers could tax people and conscript them into the army! The Old Testament records 10 such censuses and they were often far from welcome.

In New Testament times there was an imperial and a provincial census. St Luke's Gospel sets the birth of Jesus in the context of a Roman census, which explains why Joseph took his heavily pregnant wife away from home and to 'Royal David's City' of Bethlehem.

Nowadays, the census is about more than tax and military service. The Australian Bureau of Statistics says it's interested in getting a good picture of who we are, how we live and so on: population, housing, family structures, ethnic background, incomes, geography, you name it.

This allows the experts to build up a rich picture of modern Australia, of each neighbourhood, even each household. And that helps government, business, community organisations and the churches to serve people better.

But while those other questions are compulsory, the one about religion isn't. Some people just leave it blank. There are groups urging us to tick 'no religion'.

So I exhort you to declare your Catholic faith – on the census as elsewhere in life – and if you are a Catholic, say so.

Why? In the census you identify yourself: name and address; date and country of birth; family, occupation, income etc. This describes your identity and that of our community.

Now, most Australians are believers. Most Australian believers are Christians. And Catholics are the largest group of Christians. It would be strange indeed if the profile of individual Australians and the whole community left out this crucial aspect of our identity.

Being a follower of Christ is every bit as central to our identity as the other questions. In fact, it qualifies all the other questions. Who am I? Someone with a Christian name. Where did I come from? A family who passed on the 'Faith of our Fathers' to me. What is my nationality? I am an Australian (or whatever ...), but I am also a member of the human family and of God's family; heaven is my real homeland. What is my occupation? Factory worker, taxi driver, mother, whatever, but all that is my vocation of living the Gospel in the world ...

Always remember that you are a new creation. In Baptism you were brought into Christ. Declaring yourself a Catholic on the census form gives witness to that most fundamental characteristic of who you are.

Of course, the question is not about the quality of our faith or practice, how 'hot' we are for Jesus, how full on in our devotional life, how often we go to Mass or Confession, how often we serve others or work for justice or assist in some parish ministry, how much we give to the Church or to the poor. We could all do better on those scores! But the census question is about our identity, the who and why that explains why we do those things.

Apart from the truth value of this – that it gives us a more accurate picture of our population – and the witness value of this – that it is an opportunity to stand up for who you are – there is another good reason to say Catholic on the census.

We don't want to be under-represented in social policy and advocacy for the services we offer. We want to be taken seriously when decisions are made about the future of our community. And numbers count here.

The census also helps parishes and the Diocese understand their local Catholic community: the kind of people we are, the needs we have, where the growth and movement is, what provisions we should make for the future (churches, schools, health and aged care, welfare services ...). So identifying your faith in the census helps us help you.

When our young Australians go to World Youth Day in Madrid next month (including nearly 300 from our Diocese alone) it will be, amongst other things, so they can feel part of a bigger Catholic community.

There's a bit of that about saying 'Yes I'm a Catholic' in the census. It means we are thinking not just of who we are, but about who we are together. We are expressing solidarity with all those who believe in God, and saying faith and people of faith count!

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>