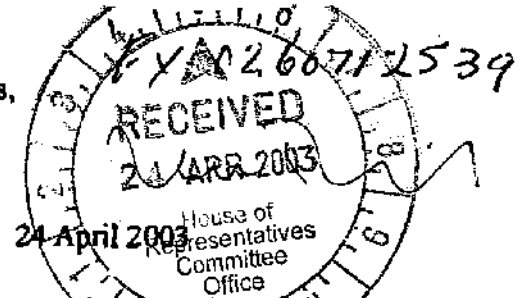


Submission No.44

House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires,  
The Secretary  
Fax: 02 6277 4424

Dear Friends,



Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your committee enquiry. Really, I do so with the advice of Sophie Panopoulos with whom I have already had a contact.

My experience relates to the fires in the North-East of Victoria, particularly in the areas of Mitta Mitta/ Eskdale and the Nariel Valley.

From the outset, I was very concerned about the welfare both of the people in the fire threatened areas and of those fighting the fires. For the first week, my focus was on those fighting the fires since they came to the local towns – Tallangatta and Corryong, for their meals, etc. and I was able to meet them at the local Memorial Hall and assure them of the community's care and prayer for them. This was very enlightening as I became more aware of the great support we were receiving; people were with us not only from distant Western Victorian towns, such as Horsham, Warrambool, but also from South Australia.

When I raised the question of being in touch with people threatened by the fires, I was informed that without 'pecuniary' interest, I was not to enter the area. It should be noted that the character and direction of the fire threat varied so much. On one occasion, I took the opportunity to visit the Mitta muster ground where the CFA and Red Cross were gathering; there they were preparing support for those at the fire-front. There, through the Red Cross, I was asked to visit a number of homes, and in doing so discovered that this was a real need for these people (and possibly many others). They were mature aged, solo residents and in the crisis, had no-one with whom they could communicate face-to-face. With their stories, came their fears and unease; tears flowed, and then came expressions of appreciation that I, a complete stranger to them all, had called to see them. Later I heard from others how much they missed the District Nurse and Meals-on-wheels. Both would have been appropriate avenues for that dialogue that allowed them to release the burden weighing upon them.

I should acknowledge that there was no complaint about information; they were adequately informed by the various authorities and had complete confidence in those matters. So they knew how to care for their homes and how they would be cared for when the crisis became absolutely critical.

With the fires lasting so long (and the 'road-closed'), and the character of the fire threat varying so much, these people were deprived human services. This is reflected to some extent in the criterion determining entry into the 'road-closed' area, namely 'pecuniary' interest. There is a need to protect properties that have been abandoned for the sake of safety, from looting. However the prime care should be for the humanity of those in the area. That does come through in the care for those at the fire-front, but needs to be extended to all people who happen to be in that area. There was a care there; they had been informed. Unfortunately, the emphasis on the restrictive character of the criterion, overlooked those residents whom I mentioned. Surely, it can be widened so that no matter how long the fire lasts, no matter how varied the fire threat is, the human well-being of all in the relevant area is the first priority, not the property.

I must also comment that on looking at the 'Terms of Reference' for the 'House Select Committee on recent Australian bushfires' I notice that there is minimal specific reference to the human dimension. 'Local communities' are referred to in (a) and 'protecting life' in (f)...these could be seen to refer to the residents whom I mention; also 'the roles and contributions of volunteers' in (j) could be an appropriate term of reference under which the matter could be considered.

I hope that this is clear enough. Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution. I do look forward to hearing your response, and, if need be, to clarify my submission.

Thank you,

Yours sincerely,



Rev.Fr.R.Burtonclay.

