



**A LABOR DAY CHALLENGE
BY WISCONSIN'S ROMAN
CATHOLIC BISHOPS**

SEPTEMBER 3, 2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT *LABOREM EXERCENS* TASK FORCE

To assist us in this endeavor, we formed a Task Force to review work in our state and factors that influence working conditions and to relate these to the teachings of *Laborem Exercens*. We are grateful to the Task Force for their hard work, insightful counsel and the passion and enthusiasm they brought to the project.

The Most Rev. Robert Morneau
Auxiliary Bishop of Green Bay

Sister Lois Bush, SSM, Senior Vice-President for Mission
& Culture Integration
Ministry Health Care
Milwaukee

Eva J. Diaz, Parish Consultant
Archdiocese of Milwaukee
Milwaukee

Dr. Christine Firer-Hinze, Ph. D.
Associate Professor of Theology
Marquette University

Tom Hale
International Brotherhood of
Painters & Allied Trades, Local 802
Reedsburg

Dan Idzikowski, Director
Catholic Charities of the Diocese of La Crosse, Inc
La Crosse

Tom Kurkowski, Finance Officer
Diocese of Green Bay
Green Bay

Laura Lietch
White, Hirschboeck & Dudek
Madison

Elio Pascutti, Past Director
Headwaters, Inc.
Rhineland

Deacon Tim Reilly
De Pere

Rev. Charles Schluter
St. Mary's Catholic Church
Platteville

Shelly Schmidt
Lone Rock



MAKING WISCONSIN WORK WELL

A LABOR DAY CHALLENGE BY WISCONSIN'S ROMAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS

SEPTEMBER 3, 2001

INTRODUCTION

Labor Day stands for much more than the end of the summer vacation season. Its true significance derives from the occasion it provides for us to reflect on our work and the contribution we make through our work to the community.

We observe this Labor Day amid uncertainty about the state of the economy, a serious public discussion over a labor shortage in our state and questions about Wisconsin's future in a global marketplace. Choices made to address these concerns will affect all of us.

It has also been five years since federal welfare policy was changed to replace a cash grant to needy families with a requirement that all adult welfare recipients should, if possible, work as a condition of receiving benefits. Wisconsin has been a leader in this effort with the Wisconsin Works program, commonly known as W-2.

Of special concern to Catholics, it was twenty years ago this month that Pope John Paul II authored his encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), in which he affirms that work is at the center of social issues that affect justice and peace. *Laborem Exercens* anticipated many work related issues facing us today and its message is very relevant to the important questions now before our state.

As we assess the status of work and workers in Wisconsin on this Labor Day in light of *Laborem Exercens* and our Catholic tradition, we believe it is appropriate for us as Catholics to challenge ourselves and others to ensure that all Wisconsin workers are able to work in ways that fulfill their potential, care for their families and contribute to the common good of society.

Working is a truly noble activity. But our work can also overwhelm us, clouding our values and relationships. We need look no further than our own lives and the lives of our parishioners to see this ambiguity.

Sharing the same pew this weekend may be two factory workers, one of whom enjoys his work and takes pride in the goods he produces and another for whom each day offers drudgery with no opportunity for growth. Seated nearby may be a farm family who savors its linkage to the land, loves farm life but struggles to make the farm profitable and another family who has transformed its farm operation into a profitable agribusiness.





Singing in the choir may be a mother who struggles to support herself and her two young children in a low wage job and another woman who has postponed or interrupted a business or professional career to devote more time to her children. Ushering together may be a retired teacher who volunteers at a shelter for the homeless and the owner of a small business whose generosity to her employees makes her company a good place to work.

As these examples suggest, work today is an experience that contains joys and satisfactions as well as concerns and worries. But all of us can benefit from what the Church has to say about work and all of us can strive to make our work an expression of our faith.

THE VISION OF WORK IN LABOREM EXERCENS

Written to mark the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the first papal encyclical devoted to the condition of labor, *Laborem Exercens* offers a vision of work that builds on the past, affirming important truths about work and the people who perform it.

*Work Derives Its Dignity from the People Who Perform It.*¹ First and foremost, *Laborem Exercens* affirms that we must evaluate work in light of how it affects people. Though we are destined for work, work exists for the human person—the person does not exist for work.² All people, regardless of differences in nationality, religion, gender, race, or disability, are entitled by the fact of their humanity to work and to humane working conditions.³



Work Is Social, Not Private. In *Laborem Exercens*, the Holy Father stated that human work should not only take care of the needs of individuals and families, but also contribute to greater justice, to a deeper sense of solidarity, and a more human ordering of relationships. In other words, work should contribute to genuine human progress and development.⁴ Since each of us shares in a common vocation to build for subsequent generations,⁵ we all benefit when our work permits us to reach our potential.

The Concept of the “Indirect Employer.” *Laborem Exercens* also challenges our traditional understanding of the relationships between workers and employers by introducing the concept of the “indirect employer” into our discussion of work relationships.

While the role of those who own businesses and employ people is primary, these “direct employers” are not solely responsible for working conditions. Equally important are “indirect employers,” or those institutions and agencies that influence and affect the work conducted within the whole socioeconomic system.⁶

Like other employers, “indirect employers” affect the way labor is organized and influence the formation of just or unjust relationships.⁷ Government exerts significant influence through the establishment and enforcement of just labor policies.⁸ Through planning, government also seeks to arrange for different types of work as required by society.⁹ Other large entities, such as financial institutions, labor organizations, and quasi-public entities that affect how work is organized may also be indirect employers.



The Spirituality of Work. *Laborem Exercens* contains a unique treatment of the spirituality of work. Work, it states, can help us come closer to God, the Creator and Redeemer, and make us participants in His saving plan for us and for His world. Work can deepen our friendship with Christ by participation in His mission.¹⁰

Through work, we share in God's activity as creator and continue, each one of us according to our capabilities, God's creative work and bring it to perfection. For this reason, we can consider the words of Genesis, "And God saw that it was good," as applied to our own work. But we must also imitate God in resting on the seventh day, making room for other aspects of our spiritual and human development.

Through work we also draw closer to Jesus Christ, "the carpenter."¹¹ A man of work Himself, Jesus had a remarkable appreciation and respect for human work, constantly referring to workers in His parables—the shepherd, the farmer, the doctor, the sower, the householder, the servant, the steward, the fisherman, the merchant. He spoke about and praised in particular the work of women.¹² But Jesus also warned us about too much anxiety about work and called us to a greater reliance on God's loving providence. Finally, there is a special blessing on work. Toil, intellectual and physical, is a part of all human life on earth. It unites all efforts at betterment to the sacrifice of Christ Himself. Work and toil are ways of following Christ each day. Through our work we find a point of union with Christ and his cross and participate in the Paschal mystery. No wonder such a view of work can lead us to a more profound respect for this earth and a yearning for the "new earth" where justice will abound.¹³

The vision of work set forth in *Laborem Exercens* is echoed in other statements by Pope John Paul II, by the Bishops of the United States in the pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, and in other writings of the bishops of the world in the twenty years since the encyclical was written.

WORK IN WISCONSIN TODAY

Our Task Force on Work heard diverse views regarding work and working conditions in Wisconsin and those who shared their perspective provided a generally positive view of work in our state. Yet the Task Force also noted that, for some people, work does not foster personal development and Wisconsin is the poorer for it.

Wisconsin is blessed in many respects as a good place to work. Our state's workforce is talented and motivated. Wisconsin's natural resources, consisting of rich farmland, extensive forests, abundant water, and interesting geography, provide a superior economic base for agriculture, industry and tourism.

Despite recent trends, our state's economy is, for the most part, healthy. In most of our counties unemployment remains low. Wisconsin's diverse economy also offers freedom of career choice and steady employment for many. Wisconsin is also heir to a legacy of progressive labor policies, a tradition of concern for the well-being of workers, laws and public policies that foster economic justice, and a solid reputation for an excellent education system that blends the gifts of public, religious and independent schools. And today, Wisconsin remains a leader in social policy experiments.



Yet there are those in our state for whom the vision of work in *Laborem Exercens* remains a promise, not a reality.



Although unemployment remains low, the ranks of the working poor are growing. In 1997, 30% of Wisconsin workers held poverty-wage jobs and 8.9% of working families with children fell below the poverty line. Furthermore, most of the new jobs created in Wisconsin over the last decade and a half tend to be lower paying jobs in the service sector.¹⁴

Nor is the workplace “color blind.” Jobless rates for minorities remain higher than those of the population as a whole. In Milwaukee, for example, overall unemployment is at 3% but minority unemployment is 10%.¹⁵ Statewide, median wages for African-American workers have declined since 1979 and roughly one in three African-American workers hold jobs that do not pay above the poverty line.¹⁶

Paradoxically, our state faces a labor shortage, particularly of skilled workers. Demographic changes and a lack of diversity in the workforce are cited as major factors contributing to the labor shortage.¹⁷ This shortage is likely to become more acute as the number of workers entering the labor force will not keep pace with the number who will retire in the coming years.¹⁸

Despite this demand for workers, many who could work will remain unemployed or underemployed because they lack the skills to take a job or the ability to travel to the place of employment. Others are “underemployed” in that their jobs do not allow them to fulfill their potential and use gifts and talents that would better serve them and the community. Such workers often find it difficult to escape low wage jobs that do not fully utilize their talents.¹⁹

Rural Wisconsin faces an economic crisis, losing three family farms a day.²⁰ For many others, farm-related work has become less fulfilling, resulting in a loss of human spirit and reduced capacity to contribute to the social fabric of their rural communities.

Too often work is not “family friendly.” Working parents find it difficult to attend to family responsibilities while meeting the demands of their job. Nationally, hours worked in a typical four-person family have increased by 18% since 1979. It is likely that Wisconsin families work more hours than the national average.²¹ Increasingly, educators are concerned that the academic performance of high school students is adversely affected by the time spent on part-time jobs.²²

The Task Force also heard compelling testimony that the future of Wisconsin as a place to work will be greatly influenced by what many call the “globalization of the economy” although opinions differ as to whether this is on balance a positive or negative development.

As an activity vital to personal development, work is a matter of both personal responsibility and public concern. For Catholics our response must be both pastoral, by responding on a personal level to the needs and situations of individuals, and prophetic, by calling on our Wisconsin community to make structural changes that can make work more human for the people who perform it.

PASTORAL CONCERNS

Whatever our vocation, each of us faces the challenge of integrating our work with our spiritual growth. As the Bishops of the United States said in *Economic Justice for All*, “the road to holiness for most of us lies in our secular vocations. We need a spirituality that calls forth and supports lay initiative and witness not



just in our churches but also in business, in the labor movement, in the professions, in education and in public life. Our faith is not just a weekend obligation, a mystery to be celebrated around the altar on Sunday. It is a pervasive reality to be practiced every day in homes, offices, factories, schools and businesses across our land."²³

We witness our faith in how we live and work with each other. Each of us can start our day with a commitment to act in concert with God by fostering creation in our daily activities. We can also work in a way that reflects a belief that our work matters to ourselves and to others. We can be present to our work and to our coworkers. We should always act in ways that demonstrate an appreciation of our own infinite worth and that of the people we meet through our work. We should also strive to acknowledge and affirm the dignity of others in the marketplace by regularly thanking those whose work helps us and doing the small things that make their jobs easier.²⁴

Although work is not the sole measure of our worth as human beings, it is important to affirm the dignity of every worker. Jobs that may appear menial or routine to some are often fulfilling to those who perform them and valuable to those who benefit from the work done. Our work fulfills our humanity but does not define it. Neither our self-image nor our image of others should be measured solely by career or job status. The custodian and the CEO enjoy the same measure of God's love and enjoy the same promise of eternal life. They deserve an equal measure of respect from us.

God desires that we pursue a healthy balance of time for work, family life, leisure, and worship. Doing so can be difficult, for at times we can work too much, we can work too little and we can work in the wrong way.

For those who work too much, or are caught up in "careerism," workaholic habits can crowd out other relationships and stunt spiritual growth. We may be called to reach out to such people, helping them to see that there is more to life than their work and that others need their love and time as much as the material good they provide.

Others may work too little, failing to see the value in working to foster their own potential, remaining deaf to God's call to help build the kingdom and add to the common good. We should invite such people to have a greater appreciation of their gifts and encourage them to see that they have something to offer to society and to creation that no one else can give.

And some may work in the wrong way, engaging in pursuits that degrade themselves and other people or which devalue life itself. They too need to be encouraged to see that work has a moral dimension and they are obligated to refrain from work that exploits or demeans themselves and others.

All of us should reflect on the extent to which we work in order to increase our consumption. As John Paul II wrote, "It is not wrong to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed toward 'having' rather than 'being,' and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself."²⁵ People should strive to work in ways that allow them to fully realize their potential but also in a way that allows others the same opportunity.

Organized parish responses. While many aspects of organizing work and providing job opportunities are matters of economic and social policy, individuals and parish groups can make a difference in the lives of their friends and neighbors. Every parish can and should be a place where people can talk with each other about their work, what it means to them, and how their work affects their lives, especially their spiritual lives.



These conversations can foster a variety of responses. Activities such as tutoring, mentoring those who lack skills or access to work, acting as a “job coach,” providing help for family members left alone when a person works or affirming a person’s worth when the economy does not are all important ways of being helpful. Scripture-based discussion programs can help workers and employers who belong to the parish to dialogue on the value of work.

More formal support for workers might involve expanding existing childcare programs or initiating new ones to meet the needs of families with working parents. Assistance with transportation and housing needs can also be critical to workers in their efforts to enter the work force or from the ranks of the “working poor.”

Parishes can also provide a vital ministry to migrant workers, immigrants, and other workers who are new to a community by making them feel welcome in their new home. This ministry should include taking steps to ensure that new workers are not exploited or subjected to dangerous working conditions.

Affirming those who don’t work for pay. For many, performing work involves activities that are not valued by the marketplace and often involve no remuneration at all. Much of this involves work in the home, usually by women in their role as mothers and caretakers of family members. Others who are not paid for their work may be “retired” or may serve as volunteers who give of themselves in ways that do not show up in economic activity reports. It is important that these people are recognized for the intrinsic value of the work they do by including them in activities or programs designed by parishes to help those who work for pay.

THE CHURCH AS A DIRECT EMPLOYER

Many Catholics have responded to a vocation to work for the Church in its various pastoral and social ministries. Every such person is a treasure whose gift of self has enriched the Church. In virtually no instance is a decision to work for the Church the result of economic considerations. Nearly all who do so could earn more money elsewhere.

Yet a decision to work for the Church does not include a waiver of one’s claim to just working conditions, wages, and the right to be treated with dignity by one’s employer. As a matter of justice, the Church needs to recognize the economic realities of its own employees. It must take action to ensure that all of its employees are paid at levels that keep them above the designation of “working poor.” This must include, but not be limited to, providing support for workers even in areas where the law exempts religious employers. One such example is unemployment insurance. Since 1986 our diocese and the Wisconsin Catholic Conference have operated such programs for church employees. Parishes and agencies that do not currently participate in the unemployment pay programs must take steps do to so.

THE CHURCH AS ADVOCATE

“Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God.”²⁶ So it is appropriate for people of faith to evaluate and adapt social structures to make society more just so that those who live and work in society are more able to do so in ways that foster their fulfillment.



Work and Family

“Work constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right...It must be remembered that the family constitutes one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work.”²⁷

It is no accident that the growing concern over a loss of “family values” in the last generation and the other social ills traced to the weakening of the family has coincided with stagnating wages for many parents and an increase in the number of parents who have found it necessary to spend more time at work.

Too often this occurs because economic and social policies assign a greater value to a person’s role as worker than that of parent. We are convinced that wars on crime, pornography, and violence—as important as they are—will not succeed if we as a society do not assign greater value to time spent with family than does the market.

Twenty years ago, Pope John Paul II affirmed that work should be structured in ways that do not undermine a mother’s ability to devote herself to the care of her children.²⁸ It is also important that structures and policies affirm the importance of fathers in the lives of children and the need to ensure that work is “family friendly” for fathers as well as mothers. Moreover, all employers should be supportive of the right of a parent to stay at home with children. Additionally, parents, who forego work outside the home or who work fewer hours to gain or maintain job skills should not be penalized by losing access to public assistance.

An important element of organizing ourselves for work is to acknowledge our Jewish-Christian tradition to reserve one day each week for worship and spiritual renewal. All people benefit from such a commitment to nourish and nurture their spirituality. This is a particular challenge for families whose work-dominated schedules deny them opportunities to worship together.

Whether we are direct or indirect employers, it is important to recognize that flexible, family-friendly work practices benefit workers and the common good. Such practices can be implemented in an effort to support families without undue hardships to the employer.

Work and Education

“Education in itself is always valuable and an important enrichment of the human person.”²⁹

“Becoming a human being is precisely the main purpose of the whole process of education.”³⁰

Since work is an activity that transforms us, allowing us to achieve the potential for which we are created, education is vital to our ability to work well. When we fail to educate our children, we cheat them of their potential and rob the community of their gifts. In Wisconsin, as in the rest of the nation, areas of persistent poverty and underdevelopment are often those in which educational opportunity is denied. This is particularly true in large urban areas.

The connection between educational deficiency and a loss of human potential was most vivid in the work of our Task Force on Corrections. Thus we are convinced that support of schools, be they public, religious or independent, and of the right of parents to choose whichever schools are most beneficial to



their children, is vital to making sure that Wisconsin works well in the future. It is also important that we do more to assure work does not interfere with the education of our young people attending high school.

Women in the Workplace

“The true advancement of women requires that labor should be structured in a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them and at the expense of the family, in which women as mothers have an irreplaceable role.”³¹

Today, women work in nearly every sector of life and should be able to do so without suffering discrimination or being excluded from jobs for which they are capable. The demands of work must respect the desires of women to care for their families while permitting them to contribute together with men, to the good of society. The dignity of women in the workplace must also be respected by assuring that their wages, benefits and opportunities for growth are the same as those available for men who engage in comparable work.

The Right to a Living Wage

“In every case, a just wage is the concrete means of verifying the justice of the whole socioeconomic system.”³²

Direct and indirect employers alike should ensure that people working in full-time jobs receive a living wage and benefits. In this context, a living wage must be a wage adequate to support a family at more than a subsistence level. In calculating a living wage it may be appropriate to factor in the value of benefits such as subsidies for health care, retirement, and other necessities that help relieve the employee of his or her need to meet basic family obligations. We echo the Pope’s affirmation that such benefits, especially that of health care should be affordable for all employees.

The benefits due to workers include the right to rest and leisure. Workers also have a right to an adequate pension and insurance for loss of income and to a working environment that does not jeopardize their health or safety.³³

The Valued Place of Employers

Those whose vocation involves employing others make a special contribution to the community. In many cases, their initiative and creativity inspires similar traits in others.

Employers exemplify participation in God’s creative design when they provide work that helps their employees realize their potential and employers who operate their businesses and treat their workers in a manner consistent with the norms of social justice make a special contribution to the common good.

Yet, just as a worker is about more than his job, a business is about more than making a profit. Businesses, too, exist as a community of persons who endeavor to satisfy their basic needs while forming a particular group at the service of the whole of society. Though important, profit is not the sole regulator of the life of a business. Other human and moral factors must also be considered which are equally important for the life of a business.³⁴ In this context, it is appropriate to encourage employers to look beyond their immediate needs and to evaluate their broader responsibility to the common good.



The Importance of Labor Unions

“The experience of history teaches that organizations of this type are an indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrialized societies...They are indeed a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice...”³⁵

Workers have a right of association and a right to form unions for the purpose of defending their vital interests as employees.³⁶ As such, they are a vital and indispensable force for the struggle for social justice, not of “class struggle” against others. Historically, the Church has recognized the important role played by democratic unions in protecting and advancing the interests of working people. At the same time, support for the right of workers to organize does not translate into an automatic endorsement by the Church of every union activity or policy stance.

Wisconsin’s own history is an example of how strong labor unions contribute to social progress and a high quality of life. Here, as across the nation, workers created unions as a means of protecting vulnerable people from the harsh realities of the marketplace and to secure the rights of workers to care for their families. Unions are truest to their roots when their advocacy is consistent with those fundamental values.



While the percentage of workers in labor unions is lower than it used to be, we believe it is a mistake to assess the value of unions in terms of the size of their membership. Unions remain vibrant and vital as voices for economic and social justice in the community. By their presence and their example, unions serve the interests not only of their own members, but also of many workers who are not unionized themselves. We Catholics have a crucial role to play in cooperation with the labor movement in achieving common goals. This includes being supportive of “living wage campaigns” and other efforts to improve the lives of working families and to bring economic justice to the workplace and the wider community. Catholics should also actively support the right of workers to organize without employer interference or intimidation and oppose the illegal firing of workers active in organizing campaigns.

At the same time, unions are called to take into account the general economic situation of the country in pressing their claims.³⁷ Thus *Laborem Exercens* cautions that “union demands aimed at correcting defects in society not be turned into a kind of group or class ‘egoism.’”³⁸ For just as it is a mistake for every employer to assess every decision and policies in terms of its impact on the firm’s profitability, so is it unwise for unions to evaluate everything in terms of their self-interest. But these cautions in the encyclical do not in any way detract from the irreplaceable role that labor unions and other worker associations play in fostering social justice and the common good.

The Needs of the Working Poor and the Future of Wisconsin Works

“Just remuneration can be given ...through other social measures such as family allowances or grants to mothers devoting themselves exclusively to their families. These grants should correspond to the actual needs, that is, to the number of dependents for as long as they are not in a position to assume proper responsibility for their own lives.”³⁹

Currently, our public policies governing social welfare, health insurance and other work related benefits are based on the assumption that private sector jobs will provide the wages and benefits needed to allow a worker to be “self-sufficient.” But many employers, particularly small businesses, find it difficult to do so.



This becomes especially important if whole sectors of our state's economy are dependent on low-wage workers with few benefits.

To the extent that small employers cannot provide a family wage to their employees, it is incumbent on the public sector and other indirect employers to fashion responses that provide help to these workers and their families. At a minimum, this includes health insurance, childcare, and affordable housing.

As regards to the Wisconsin Works program, we recognize that it remains very much a work in progress. As the program is refined, we urge citizens and policymakers alike to evaluate its future in light of the vision of work in *Laborem Exercens*.

The number of families receiving public assistance is much lower than it was before the advent of the Wisconsin Works program, or W-2. To the extent the parents in these families are participating in the workforce at jobs that will allow them to support their families, welfare reform is a positive development.

Yet serious questions remain about W-2's long-term impact on families.⁴⁰ One report suggests that work has not lifted families from poverty and they still face difficulties in achieving basic subsistence. In some instances, the loss of health care, child care and other assistance more than offsets increases in wages.⁴¹ Another study suggests that women in the Wisconsin Works program suffer from depression and face difficulties in trying to raise their children.⁴²

A founding principle of the W-2 program is that the measure of how it treats needy families will be the manner in which public policy treats the working poor. Accordingly, it is even more important to insist that wages and other benefits available to the working poor meet basic tests of social justice. This is critical to the fundamental fairness, not only of W-2, but our entire society.

It is unjust to insist that the poor work in jobs that offer neither living wages nor the training to develop their potential. Doing so exploits workers in a way that denies everything we teach about work as a path to self-sufficiency. The working poor, whether or not they participate in W-2, deserve access to education and training that will help them work to their potential. Such investment in the working poor must be part of our efforts to address Wisconsin's shortage of workers.

Work on Our Farms and in Rural Wisconsin

"The world of agriculture, which provides society with the goods it needs for its daily sustenance, is of fundamental importance...Thus it is necessary to proclaim and promote the dignity of work...but especially of agricultural work..."⁴³

One of the critical issues facing Wisconsin is the lack of value placed on agricultural work, farm workers and their families. Agricultural work is critically important to the common good and to our prosperity as a state. Yet this work is difficult and often unappreciated by society. This lack of appreciation, reflected in payments to farmers that fail to cover the cost of production, and depressed wages for workers in many sectors of the food economy, has a social cost. Both those who own and operate farms and agricultural workers frequently lack access to basic health, disability and unemployment benefits which further undermines their dignity.

With regard to agricultural workers, *Laborem Exercens* takes note of the lack of legal protections for farm workers and their families and further observes that farm workers are too often denied the opportunity to share in decisions concerning their services.⁴⁴ Many farm owners in Wisconsin also share this concern as they experience a sense of powerlessness in their relationships with the inputs, processing and distribution sectors of the food economy.



Significant changes are needed to restore to agriculture and to rural people their just value as the basis for a healthy economy.⁴⁵ As consumers and indirect employers, we should critically examine economic development that impacts on rural life to distinguish between developments that enhance the lives of rural people and rural communities and improve the quality of our food and fiber and those that reflect domination by the strong over the weak.

Working People with Disabilities

“The disabled person is one of us and participates fully in the same humanity that we possess. It would be radically unworthy of man and a denial of our common humanity to admit to the life of the community, and thus admit to work, only those who are fully functional.”⁴⁶

Persons with disabilities share fully in our humanity and deserve the same opportunity to work to the fullness of their capabilities. Although Pope John Paul II recognizes the difficulties of removing all obstacles to full participation by persons with disabilities, he affirms that they, too, are called to contribute to the progress and welfare of their families and of the community and should be allowed to do so.⁴⁷ As we foster such inclusion, we must recognize that even those who are prevented by disability from working retain their fundamental dignity that flows from God and deserve to be treated accordingly.

The Opportunity Created by Diversity in the Workplace

“...(T)he person working away from his native land, whether as a permanent or seasonal worker, should not be placed at a disadvantage in comparison with other workers in that society in the matter of working rights. Emigration in search of work must in no way become an opportunity for financial or social exploitation...The value of work should be measured by the same standard and not according to the difference in nationality, religion or race...”⁴⁸

It is significant that one explanation for Wisconsin’s labor shortage is the lack of diversity in its workforce.⁴⁹ This invites consideration of employment for people of color and immigrants.

The coexistence of high unemployment among African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other people of color with their overrepresentation in our criminal justice system and in the W-2 program, all while we experience a labor shortage, is a situation that cries out for change. Policies that provide equal work opportunities for all, including educational reforms that will help enhance job prospects, are a moral imperative. At the same time, we should resist policies that disproportionately limit or deny job opportunities for minorities.

As regards immigration, people have a right to leave their native land and also the right to return. When this happens, it is generally a loss for the land left behind—a loss of a human being whose efforts could contribute to the common good—and a gain for the worker’s new home.⁵⁰

Pope John Paul II’s exhortation to welcome workers from other places as equals has a special relevance to our state. Rather than seeing newcomers—from other states or from other nations—as a drain on our resources, our future may well depend on our commitment to see them as agents of our future growth and potential.

Globalization

“Globalization, a priori, is neither bad nor good. It will be what people make of it. No system is an end in itself, and it is necessary to insist that globalization, like any other system, must be at the service of the human person; it must serve solidarity and the common good.”⁵¹



Globalization is a complex and rapidly moving phenomenon. As such, it presents serious challenges that command our attention, challenges that are economic, cultural, political and most of all moral. Globalization may offer economic benefits to many people. But, as Pope John Paul II wrote in 1981, and reaffirmed this year, the ultimate test of this progress will be its effect on the dignity of human beings,⁵² and our assessment of globalization must be based on two inseparable principles: First, the human being must always be an end and not a means, a subject not an object, nor a commodity of trade. Second, globalization must not be a new version of colonialism. It must respect the diversity of cultures.⁵³



While globalization brings wealth and prosperity for some, it is less kind to others. As the Pope has observed, many of the poor experience globalization as something that has been forced on them.⁵⁴ At the same time, globalization is becoming a cultural phenomenon in which the values of the market pervade many areas of human activity. Social, legal, and cultural safeguards are, if anything, more necessary than in the past in order to preserve a proper balance in our lives. The common good demands that control mechanisms should accompany the inherent logic of the market to avoid reducing all social relations to economic factors.⁵⁵

Accordingly, we in Wisconsin must assess the value and justice of globalization and international economic arrangements in light of their impact on the human rights and quality of life of the workers touched by them, be they here or abroad. This is a challenge for all of us including Wisconsin based firms who participate in the global economy. Prosperity at home must not be purchased by reliance on unjust working conditions in other places.

As we take up this challenge, we can benefit from our state's experience from the Progressive Era, where our ancestors fashioned a vigorous state government that helped restrain the excesses of economic interests and fostered a community where the fruits of economic growth and progress were available to the broader society.

CONCLUSION

So long as the creative energy that enters the marketplace belongs to spiritual beings, our Gospel values will be as indispensable to the market as the work we do. Our work serves not only in our earthly progress, but also in the development of God's kingdom. To the extent that we recognize these truths and make them part of our daily lives, we will give witness to the fact that on earth, God's work is truly our own.

These are worthy aspirations for all of us as we reflect on our lives and our work on this Labor Day of 2001.



END NOTES

- ¹ *Laborem Exercens* (LE) #26.
- ² LE, #27.
- ³ LE #109.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ LE, #73.
- ⁶ LE, #77.
- ⁷ LE, #75.
- ⁸ LE, #78.
- ⁹ LE, #83.
- ¹⁰ LE, #24.
- ¹¹ Mark 6:3.
- ¹² LE # 26.
- ¹³ LE, # 27.
- ¹⁴ *Barely Getting By: Wisconsin's Working Poor Families*, A Joint Report by the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, the Institute for Wisconsin's Future, and the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.
- ¹⁵ Presentation to WCC Task Force on Work by Jonathan Swain, June 21, 2000.
- ¹⁶ *The State of Working Wisconsin*, 2000, p. 39, Center on Wisconsin Strategy.
- ¹⁷ "Wisconsin's Labor Shortage," *The Wisconsin Taxpayer*, April, 2000, and *The State of Working Wisconsin 2000*, p. 9, The Center for Wisconsin Strategies.
- ¹⁸ *The Wisconsin Taxpayer*, April, 2000, Vol. 68, #4, p. 3
- ¹⁹ *Barely Getting By: Wisconsin's Working Poor Families*, Center on Wisconsin Strategy, July, 2000.
- ²⁰ Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics Service, 2000.
- ²¹ *The State of Working Wisconsin*, 2000, p. 14, Center on Wisconsin Strategy.
- ²² *Protecting Youth at Work: Health, Safety, and Development of Working Children and Adolescents in the United States, 1998*, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education.
- ²³ *Economic Justice for All*, #25.
- ²⁴ Taken from "Ten Ways to Honor Work and Workers," *Saint Anthony's Messenger*, May 2000.
- ²⁵ *Centesimus Annus*, #36.
- ²⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, #39.
- ²⁷ LE, #42 and #43.
- ²⁸ LE, #91 and #92.
- ²⁹ LE, #36.
- ³⁰ LE, #42.
- ³¹ LE, #92.
- ³² LE, #89.
- ³³ LE, #93.
- ³⁴ *Centesimus Annus*, #35.
- ³⁵ LE, #95 and #96.
- ³⁶ LE, #94.
- ³⁷ LE, #96.
- ³⁸ LE, # 97.
- ³⁹ LE, #90.
- ⁴⁰ Legislative Audit Bureau Report, April, 2001.
- ⁴¹ *Making Work Work: How Tax and Benefit Policies Discourage Workers*, The Institute for Wisconsin's Future, March, 2001.
- ⁴² *Raising Children in a World of Work, Not Welfare*, A Study Commissioned by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference and Catholic Charities of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, November, 1998.
- ⁴³ LE, #101and #103.
- ⁴⁴ LE, #102.
- ⁴⁵ LE, #103.
- ⁴⁶ LE, #104.
- ⁴⁷ LE, #104-106.
- ⁴⁸ LE, #109.
- ⁴⁹ "Wisconsin's Labor Shortage," *The Wisconsin Taxpayer*, April 2000.
- ⁵⁰ LE, #107.
- ⁵¹ Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, April 27, 2001.
- ⁵² LE, #85.
- ⁵³ Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, April 27, 2001.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why do you work? How does your response to this question compare with the vision of work expressed in *Laborem Exercens*?
2. Under what conditions do you experience work as a noble activity? As a dissatisfying activity? Can work ever be both ennobling **and** dissatisfying?
3. How have you experienced “working too much,” “working too little,” and “working in the wrong way”? Which of the three presents the greatest challenge for you at this point in your life?
4. What impact does work have on your family?
5. How is the Church doing as a direct employer? How can we improve in this area?
6. What is your understanding of the concept of “indirect employer”? In what ways might you be an “indirect employer”?
7. Why is education so important regarding employment?
8. How diverse is your place of work? How do you account for the lack of diversity in our state’s workforce?
9. What is your understanding of a “living wage”?
10. What is society’s responsibility to the “working poor”? How well do we live up to that responsibility?
11. What action can the Church and other organizations take to support disabled people in the workforce?
12. How does globalization impact your life?
13. What role do labor unions play in making work more dignified? Do unions have an obligation to society other than protecting the rights of workers?
14. Is farm work valued and dignified by the broader society? What is society’s obligation to family farmers and farm workers? Do we as individuals have a responsibility in this regard?
15. How do you respond to work that is glorified by society, such as medicine or athletics? Does such work relate to your own daily work experience?



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland
Bishop Richard J. Sklba

Diocese of Green Bay

Bishop Robert J. Banks
Bishop Robert F. Morneau
Bishop Aloysius J. Wycislo

Diocese of La Crosse

Bishop Raymond L. Burke
Bishop John J. Paul

Diocese of Madison

Bishop William H. Bullock
Bishop George O. Wirz

Diocese of Superior

Bishop Raphael M. Fliss

THE WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) was founded in 1969 by the Bishops of Wisconsin. The Conference seeks to fulfill the vision of Vatican Council II, which called upon the Church to be more involved in the world.

With the message of the Gospel and the social teachings of the Church as its foundation, the WCC offers a specifically Catholic contribution to state and federal public policy debates. The Conference also offers a statewide response to issues common to its five dioceses.

For additional copies please contact:

Wisconsin Catholic Conference
131 W. Wilson St., #1105
Madison, WI 53703-3245
Phone: (608) 257-0004
Fax: (608) 257-0376
E-mail: office@wisconsincatholic.com
<http://www.wisconsincatholic.com>

