

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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WHETHER IN THE WOMB OR THE MARKETPLACE, HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT COMMODITIES

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The cornerstone of Catholic social teaching is that human life is sacred. As such the Catholic Conference evaluates any law, policy, or program in terms of its impact on the life and dignity of the human person.

Catholic teaching on the economy reflects this emphasis on the human person. Pope John Paul II put it quite directly in his 1981 encyclical letter, *Laborem exercens*. He recalled that the error of early capitalism can be repeated wherever humans are treated as mere instruments or means of production and not as ends in themselves.

The bishops of the U.S. made the same point in their 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, reminding us that the economy is made for people, not the other way around. Pope Benedict affirmed this again in 2009 in his encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, when citing the Second Vatican Council, he wrote that “the primary capital to be safeguarded is man, the human person in his or her integrity.”

This fall lawmakers introduced two bills that recognize the dignity of human beings in the marketplace.

One proposal, Assembly Bill 281, authored by Rep. Cory Mason, increases the minimum wage to \$7.60 an hour for most workers. The bill seeks to restore the purchasing power lost by minimum wage earners in recent years. This bill furthers the goal that workers should always earn a wage adequate to earn a decent living for themselves and their families.

Mandating a living wage for workers reminds us that labor is not just another commodity in the production process, the value of which is determined by supply and demand. Rather, it furthers the truth that the human beings who do the work are more important than the machines and processes that produce the goods and services.

Another bill also rejects the notion of the person as a commodity. Rep. Andre Jacques has authored Assembly Bill 214, which bans the sale and use of fetal body parts of an aborted unborn child. In preventing the sale of such body parts, Rep. Jacques’ bill affirms a different but equally powerful truth: human organs and tissue are not “spare parts” to be bought and sold in the marketplace. AB 214 reminds us that our humanity endures even after our death and even when it is not recognized during our life.

Both proposals will ask many of us to see life from a vantage point other than our own.

Most of us – and all who might be considered “movers and shakers” – earn far more than the minimum wage. The need to choose between paying the rent and paying for groceries is not a choice most of us face. The prospect that a full day of honest work fails to generate enough income to provide for the most basic of our family’s needs is not a reality many of us encounter. Thus, the need for AB 281 may not be as obvious to us as it is to the lower income workers affected by it.

The ban on selling body parts of aborted children also asks us to look outside our comfort zone.

Few of us want to think about the fact that the lethal impact of abortion on a child in the womb might be followed by the commercial exploitation of that child’s remains. We may be comfortable donating our own organs after we die, but are we really at peace with selling the organs of an unborn child who had no voice in the choice that ended his/her life? AB 214 compels us to address such questions.

Both bills will be “tough sells” in the current economic climate. Both will have their opponents. Critics will label both as harmful to economic development.

But both bills reflect a deeper truth – that prosperity cannot be purchased by sacrificing the lives and dignity of the vulnerable. They both recognize that true economic development fosters human dignity and enriches life. Both make our marketplace more human and both deserve our support.

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