



Faithful Citizenship 2008

Sixth in a Series

Option for the Poor & Vulnerable / Dignity of Work & the Rights of Workers

“It is not merely a matter of ‘giving from one's surplus,’ but of helping entire peoples which are presently excluded or marginalized to enter into the sphere of economic and human development. For this to happen...it requires above all a change of lifestyles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies.”

Centesimus annus (The Hundredth Year) 58

Catholic Social Doctrine

The Catholic tradition teaches that God has a special love for the poor and vulnerable, and that all policies must be judged according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person.

This “option for the poor and vulnerable” is as old as the Hebrew prophets. Among the earliest biblical ordinances are laws designed to protect widows, orphans, and strangers. The radical commandment to love one’s neighbor as one’s self is another expression of this preferential option. In the New Testament, Jesus identifies intimately with the poor (Matthew 25:31-46) and promises that the poor will inherit the kingdom (Lk 6:20).

In his landmark encyclical, *Rerum novarum* (*On the Condition of Workers*), Pope Leo XIII affirms that, “the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration” and notes that severe disparity in the possession and exercise of power is a factor contributing to poverty.

One hundred years later, in *Centesimus annus*, Pope John Paul II reminds us that, “It will be necessary above all to abandon a mentality in which the poor – as individuals

and as people – are considered a burden, as irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced. The poor ask for the right to share in enjoying material goods and to make use of their capacity to work, thus creating a world that is more just and prosperous for all.”

The “option for the poor and vulnerable” does not mean we should pit one class of people against another. Rather, it teaches that the community as a whole is wounded by the deprivation and powerlessness of those who are poor. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of people.

As for the rights of workers, our social doctrine reminds us that work is more than a way to make living; it is a means by which all people participate in God’s creation. Workers, employers, and unions should not only advance their own interests. They should also work together to advance economic justice and the well being of all. (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (FCFC) 52)

Whenever possible, economic freedom, initiative, and creativity should be protected and directed toward the common good.

Key Issues

Because the elimination of poverty and discrimination serves the common good, we call on you to:

- Support policies that create jobs for all who can work in **decent working conditions** and with adequate pay that reflects a **living wage** (i.e., sufficient to meet the basic needs of a worker and his/her dependents).
 - Overcome barriers to **equal pay and employment** and combat **discrimination** based on sex, race, ethnicity, disabling condition, or age.
 - Relieve **hunger** by supporting programs that ensure those in need always have adequate food.
 - Affirm the **right of workers to choose to organize**, join a union, bargain collectively, and exercise these rights without reprisal.
 - Advocate for **safe and affordable housing** for all, and address the **foreclosure crisis**.
 - Measure success of **welfare reform** in terms of reducing poverty and dependency, rather than in terms of cutting resources and programs.
- Reform the nation's **health care system** so that affordable care is available to all as a fundamental human right.
 - Strengthen programs that extend health care coverage to children, pregnant women, workers, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations, including those suffering from **HIV/AIDS** and those coping with **addictions**.
 - Support measures to help ensure that **financial institutions** meet the credit needs of local communities, so that poor families are not subjected to predatory lenders.
 - Change the **Social Security** system only if it continues to provide a decent and reliable income for retired or disabled workers.
 - Protect **family farms** and encourage **sustainable agriculture** that provides fair prices for agricultural products so farm families can make a decent living, raise animals ethically, and maintain environmentally sound management practices.
 - Reform the **criminal justice system** through rehabilitative and restorative justice.
 - Support the work of **faith-based** groups not as a substitute for, but as a partner with, government efforts.

Resources

Centesimus annus (The Hundredth Year), Pope John Paul II, 1991

Laborem exercens (On Human Work), Pope John Paul II, 1981

Rerum novarum (On the Condition of Workers), Pope Leo XIII, 1891

Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope; A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, 2003

A Place at the Table: A Catholic Recommitment to Overcome Poverty and to Respect the Dignity of All God's Children, 2002

Responsibility, Rehabilitation, Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice, USCCB, 2000

A Commitment to All Generations: Social Security and the Common Good, Administrative Board of the USCCB, 1999

Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action, USCC, 1995

Making Wisconsin Work Well: A Labor Day Challenge, WCC, 2001

Public Safety, the Common Good, and the Church: A Statement on Crime and Punishment in Wisconsin, WCC, 1999

The Changing Role of Rural Life in Wisconsin, WCC, 1997

Resources available on the web:
Go to www.wisconsinatholic.org
Click on "Elections 2008"