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Labor Day 1996

Labor Day Statement

AN ECONOMY OF PARADOXES: LABOR DAY CHALLENGES

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Labor Day, 1996 comes in the midst of a national election campaign. Our country is facing a series of economic issues, choices, and proposals. It also comes two months before the Tenth Anniversary of the Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Economic Justice. In this Labor Day Statement, I wish to share some of the reflections of the Catholic Bishops on the continuing challenges of the economic pastoral. Their statement, "A Decade Alter Economic Justice for All," provides a vital moral framework for reflection as we celebrate this Labor Day and prepare for Election Day.

Ten years ago, our pastoral letter insisted that the measure of our economy is not only what it produces, but also how it touches human life, whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person, and how it promotes the common good. Economic decisions have human consequences and moral content; they help or hurt people, strengthen or weaken family life, advance or diminish the quality of justice in our land.

On this Labor Day, in the midst of this growing national debate on economic life, the Catholic community must continue to speak for poor children and working families. The U.S. bishops have pointed out our nation must reduce its deficits, reform welfare, reshape its foreign assistance, and reorder national priorities. However, the fundamental moral measure of these policy choices is how they touch the poor in our midst, especially children and families who struggle against economic, social, and moral pressures that leave them poor and powerless.

In the last few weeks, we've seen welfare legislation adopted and signed which cut resources and reallocated responsibilities, but failed to provide the decent jobs and protect vulnerable children which are at the heart of real welfare reform. The welfare debate was driven more by fiscal and political factors, than by the needs of poor families. The nation desperately needs real welfare reform. Sadly, this measure targeted hungry children and

legal immigrants, instead of the economic and moral forces which leave a fifth of the nation's children in poverty. As the bishops have pointed out, poor children, workers, and families may not have the most powerful lobbies, but they have the greatest needs. We welcome a broad debate on economic life, but we cannot support a retreat in the fight against poverty and economic injustice.

One: Nation: Three Economics

All this takes place in an economy marked by paradoxes. Profits and productivity grow, while many workers' income and sense of security decline. The younger you are in America the more likely you are to be poor. One-quarter of our pre-schoolers are growing up poor in one of the richest nations on earth. It often seems that when the government reports job increases, the stock market declines on those days. Some businesses cut jobs and prosper while their workers pay the price for downsizing. Parents wonder whether their children will live as well as they do.

As the bishops' reflection pointed out, the power and productivity of the United States economy are leading not to one nation, but three nations living side by side:

One economy is prospering and coping well with the challenges of global economy and the information age, growing more powerful and productive. In this economy, people are creating businesses, surfing the web, and managing their investment portfolios;

A second is being squeezed by declining real incomes, frightened by corporate downsizing and fearful about keeping their jobs and health care. In this economy, people wonder whether they can afford a good education for their kids and a decent retirement for themselves;

A third community lives on the margins of our economy. Families, often without fathers, jobs or a living income, are the signs of an economy that leaves millions behind. In this economy, people wonder whether they can pay the rent or afford food at the end of the month.

As people of faith, we believe we are one family, not competing classes. We are sisters and brothers in Christ, not economic units or statistics. We must come together around the values of our faith to shape economic policies that protect human life, promote strong families, create decent jobs, and reduce the level of poverty in our society. A decade after the pastoral, it remains clear that the moral test of our society is how the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable are faring. And by this standard we are falling far short.

Questions for Reflection

In their Tenth Anniversary statement, the bishops cite a number of key questions. Several are particularly appropriate for this Labor Day reflection:

- How can our nation work together to overcome the scandal of so much poverty in our midst, especially among our children?
- How can our Church take a leadership role in calling those in positions of power to promote economic growth, job security, decent wages, and greater opportunities?

- What are the moral responsibilities and limitations of markets, the state, and the voluntary sector? How can business, labor, various levels of government, and mediating structures like churches, charities, and voluntary groups work together to overcome economic injustice and exploitation in our communities?
- How can the dignity and rights of workers be protected and enhanced in an economy where increasing competition, frequent downsizing, and less unionization have left many workers at risk?

The Catholic tradition is complex. It emphasizes both rights and responsibilities, promotes increased charity and insists on greater justice, and advocates greater personal responsibility and broader social responsibility. We recognize the vital roles and limits of markets, governments, and voluntary groups. In this election year, we need to get beyond some of the false choices and ideological polarization in the economic debate and join in a renewed search for the common good in economic life.

The Marketplace and Public Square

It has always been clear that the pursuit of greater economic justice is not carried out primarily in the activities of religious bodies, but in the broader marketplace -- where investments are made, contracts are negotiated, products are created, workers are hired, and policies are set. Owners, investors, consumers and workers are moral agents in economic life, building up or tearing down justice and community.

The search for economic justice is also carried forward in the public square. In this election year, while others are campaigning for office, let us campaign for poor children and vulnerable workers. Let us ask those who seek to lead and represent us how they will govern and vote on key issues of human life, human dignity, and economic justice, on wages and work, on poverty and economic growth.

A Recommitment

Whatever our economic status, political identification, or ideological preferences, we are called as Catholics to work for an economy more respectful of human life and human dignity. We may differ on specifics and priorities, but let us recommit ourselves on this Labor Day -- whatever our economic, ideological, or political positions -- to work for a society and economy offering more justice and opportunity, especially for workers and the poor.

In the midst of all the campaign rhetoric and economic debate, it's time to refocus on some traditional values from Catholic teaching -- the dignity of work, the living wage, the social contract between employer and employee and the common good. It is time to recall that in our tradition, people have a right and duty to work, to decent conditions and to a fair wage for an honest day's work, to organize and join a union, to start and build a business. These many forms of economic initiative should contribute to a basic measure of economic security for all. As the pastoral insists, "the economy should serve the person, not the other way around."

These values won't settle the ongoing economic debates, but they can help shape them. Small business and unions, government and corporations -- all have a responsibility to the broader community beyond their own immediate interests. It is time for the leaders of

economic and public life to focus on the long-term health of the society instead of just short term financial and political gains. By building up the common ground of respect for human dignity and economic fairness, all of us can contribute to a more just and decent society.

In these debates, let's ask what's in it for all of us, not just what's in it for me. The questions should not just be "am I" better off than I was four years ago, but "are we" better off --all of us, especially the poor and vulnerable. This concern for others is the essence of the virtue of solidarity which Pope John Paul II called us to in his inspiring visit last fall. He called us to build "a society in which none are so poor that they have nothing to give and none so rich that they have nothing to receive. America will continue to be a land of promise as long as it remains a land of freedom and justice for all."

As we celebrate Labor Day in 1996, let us recall these powerful words and the challenges of our economic pastoral of 10 years ago. Let us recommit ourselves to the task of building a more open, more productive and more just economy for all God's children.

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