



# FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

*The nonpartisan public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Florida*

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## LIVING WAGE

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### Concerns for Florida's Economy

Despite shrinking unemployment, Florida's poverty rate of 17.1% is among the highest in the United States. 888,965 Florida families live below 200% of the federal poverty level.<sup>i</sup> Of those, 642,885, or 72.3%, have at least one worker. Looking to the future, half of the top 14 new jobs projected to be added through 2019 will be in low-wage occupations.<sup>ii</sup> There is a growing gap in wages between the most affluent Floridians and middle- and lower-income workers.

These trends prompt reflection and the need to promote economic growth for the well-being of individuals, families and our state. A point of departure in many initiatives, including legislation, is wages for workers, particularly minimum wages. As of January 1, 2014, Florida's minimum wage is \$7.93 per hour. Based on reasonable standards, in most of Florida, a minimum wage earner would find it difficult to support oneself, much less family members.<sup>iii</sup>

### Work and a Living Wage Are Keys

In *Laborem Exercens*, Saint John Paul II highlighted the importance of work, and his observation echoes a chord struck by many of Florida's leaders:

...human work is a key, probably the essential key to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man's good. And if the solution – or rather the gradual solution—of the social question, which keeps coming up and becomes ever more complex, must be sought in the direction of making life more human, then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance.<sup>iv</sup>

With due consideration to the complexities of a modern economy, we propose that:

A *just wage* is the legitimate fruit of work. To refuse or withhold it can be a grave injustice. In determining fair pay both the needs and the contributions of each person must be taken into account. "Remuneration for work should guarantee man the opportunity to provide a dignified livelihood for himself and his family on the material, social, cultural, and spiritual level, taking into account the role and the productivity of each, the state of the business, and the common good."<sup>v</sup>

The following principles are offered to support policies that promote a "living" or "just" wage in Florida:

**1. The worker must be returned to the center of concern for economic life.** As work has an inherent dignity, just wages gained from work support that dignity; insufficient wages violate it. Work is the means by which people provide for themselves and their families. The worker must be the center of discussions of economic life. As Pope Francis said:

Man is not in charge today, money is in charge, money rules. God our Father did not give the task of caring for the earth to money, but to us, to men and women: we have this task! Instead, men and women are sacrificed to the idols of profit and consumption: it is the 'culture of waste.' If you break a computer it is a tragedy, but poverty, the needs, the dramas of so many people end up becoming the norm.<sup>vi</sup>

**2. The growing gap in wages, the trend toward low-wage jobs, and steady poverty are a concern.** A just wage can be one component of a plan to rise from ingrained poverty. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in Veritate*, provides a very clear measure of a just economy and highlights a key concern:

The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner...<sup>vii</sup>

**3. Everyone has a role.** Individuals, community organizations, churches, businesses and government have a shared responsibility in promoting the dignity of work and honoring workers and their rights. Most people of good will recognize that it is wrong to pursue profits and business success at the expense of workers' dignity. All have a duty to be in solidarity with workers and the "least among us." The economy must serve people; not the other way around.

**4. Special responsibility of workers.** There is a duty to work when people are able, not only so that families are provided for, but also to contribute to the common good through the fruits of one's work. In turn, workers should give an honest day's work in exchange for their wage and keep in mind the employer's well-being as well as their own. Further, each must not only seek to gain or earn more, but to be more; to participate more fully, exercise talents and grow in virtue.

**5. A living wage is one that is sustainable for an enterprise.** However, if it is not immediately affordable for the business, leaders must not simply defer to market forces. They must re-think their operations and make changes creatively to be in right relationship with employees. If it is not possible for companies to pay a living wage, it becomes the role of all those who affect labor policy and government to supplement the company's efforts. Government has subsidized low-wage workers through various types of public assistance. It follows that higher wages would reduce reliance on such assistance.

**6. Living wages can stimulate growth.** Some propose that wages exceeding market rates lead to higher unemployment and harm economic recovery. However, in addition to decreasing dependence on subsidies, such policies not only alleviate workers' suffering, but may stimulate recovery by enhancing spending.

**7. Family and work.** The family is the basic unit of society; work is the means by which families gain the resources to sustain themselves. If families are the fundamental seed of society, then decent jobs with just wages are the water that allows them to grow. Work should strengthen family life, providing resources and respect, benefits and healthcare for families. Worthy work allows people and families to live in dignity.

### **The Church Embraces this Challenging Endeavor as Well**

As the Bishops of the United States emphasized in *Economic Justice for All* (1988), "[a]ll the moral principles that govern the just operation of any economic endeavor apply to the Church and its agencies and institutions; indeed the Church should be exemplary." The Synod of Bishops in 1971 put this challenge most aptly: "While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence, we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the Church herself."<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Brandon Roberts, PhD, Deborah Povich and Mark Mather, "Low-Income Working Families: The Growing Economic Gap," *Working Families Project Policy Brief*; Winter 2012-13.

<sup>ii</sup> Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, Florida International University Center for Labor Research and Studies, "The Florida Minimum Wage: Good for Workers, Good for the Economy," <http://www.risep-fiu.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/FL-Minimum-Wage.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> See MIT's *Poverty in America: Living Wage Calculator* at <http://livingwage.mit.edu/states/12/locations>.

<sup>iv</sup> Saint John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 3, 1981. Available: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html).

<sup>v</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2434.

<sup>vi</sup> Pope Francis, "General Audience," June 5, 2013. Available: [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/06/05/pope\\_at\\_audience:\\_counter\\_a\\_culture\\_of\\_waste\\_with\\_solidarity/e\\_n1-698604](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/06/05/pope_at_audience:_counter_a_culture_of_waste_with_solidarity/e_n1-698604).

<sup>vii</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 32, 2009. Available: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html)

<sup>viii</sup> *Justice in the World*, Synod of Bishops, 1971, 40.