

# **A Decade After “Economic Justice for All”:**

*Continuing Principles, Changing Context, New Challenges*

1995

United States Catholic Bishops



In November 1986, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*. To mark the document's tenth anniversary, the U.S. Catholic bishops have issued two documents. *A Decade After "Economic Justice for All": Continuing Principles, Changing Context, New Challenges*, which was approved in November 1995, is a pastoral reflection applying the message of *Economic Justice for All* to the economy of the '90s. *A Catholic Framework for Economic Life*, which was approved in November 1996, outlines ten key principles of Catholic social teaching on the economy.

This anniversary publication, which includes all three documents as well as updated suggestions for action, is authorized by the undersigned.

Monsignor Dennis M. Schnurr  
General Secretary  
NCCB/USCC  
(1997)

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# A Decade After “Economic Justice for All”: Continuing Principles, Changing Context, New Challenges

A Pastoral Message of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Tenth  
Anniversary of the Economic Pastoral

November 1995

The challenge of this pastoral letter is not merely to think differently, but also to act differently. A renewal of economic life depends on the conscious choices and commitments of individual believers who practice their faith in the world. . . . This letter calls us to conversion and common action, to new forms of stewardship, service, and citizenship. The completion of a letter such as this is but the beginning of a long process of *education, discussion, and action*.

—*Economic Justice for All* (nos. 25, 27, 28)

## Introduction

Almost ten years ago our bishops conference adopted the pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*. This letter was an effort to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of our complex and powerful economy. 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. We emphasized that 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. Our letter was not an economic blueprint, but a moral challenge and a call to action. We called for a “New American Experiment” of participation and collaboration for the common good that has yet to be really tried in our land.

Ten years after *Economic Justice for All*, the nation needs to hear its message once again and respond to its continuing challenges. At a time of great national debate, the Catholic community must continue to speak for poor children and working families. 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. 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.

Therefore, at this time of national choices, we ask the Catholic community's help in

assessing how far we have come and where we need to go to realize the promise of our nation and to be faithful to our Catholic teaching on economic life. Much has changed in this decade—in our economy and our world, our churches and our communities. But much remains the same—there is still too much poverty and not enough economic opportunity for all our people.

In this anniversary message, we renew our call to greater economic justice in an economy with remarkable strength and creativity, but with too little economic growth distributed too inequitably. The power and productivity of the U.S. economy sometimes seem to be leading to three nations living side by side:

- One is prospering and producing in a new information age, coping well with new economic challenges.
- A second is squeezed by declining real incomes and global economic competition. They wonder whether they will keep their jobs and health insurance, whether they can afford college education or Catholic schools for their children.
- A third community is growing more discouraged and despairing. Called an American underclass, their children are growing up desperately poor in the richest nation on earth. Their question at the end of the month is whether they can afford the rent or groceries or heat.

As people of faith, we believe we are one family, not competing classes. We are sisters and brothers, 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, expand a stable middle class, create decent jobs, and reduce the level of poverty and need in our society. We need to strengthen our sense of community and our pursuit of the common good. 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.

We believe the best way to prepare for this anniversary is not to develop a major new document, but to offer an urgent call to renewed Catholic dialogue and action in pursuit of a more just, productive, and human economy. As we mark this anniversary, we ask the Catholic community in its ongoing activities to

- *Look back* at the economic justice letter and its major themes
- *Look around* at the U.S. economy a decade later, noting progress and continuing problems
- *Look ahead* at future challenges in light of our developing Catholic teaching

## A Look Back

The economic justice pastoral was an enormous undertaking. Years in preparation, it generated wide discussion, occasional controversy, and much activity. But it produced remarkable consensus and unity—all but nine bishops voted for the final letter. The process of consultation, listening, and dialogue strengthened the letter and enriched the Church. In parishes, schools, universities, think tanks, and a wide variety of ad hoc efforts, the Church's teaching was shared and discussed and its implications debated. In the years after the pastoral, nine of every ten dioceses conducted education sessions in parishes; 60 percent strengthened legislative advocacy; more than half held

sessions with businesses, labor, or farm representatives; and a majority assessed their personnel policies.

While much of the news coverage focused on policy directions, the heart of the letter remains its scriptural roots and Catholic principles. The greatest contribution of our economic justice pastoral was to remind us that the pursuit of economic justice is a work of faith and an imperative of the Gospel. For some Catholics this message was an affirmation of long-held principle. For others, it was a jarring exposure to part of the Catholic tradition they had never encountered. The call to economic justice is not a political preference or ideological choice, but a response to the Scriptures and a requirement of Catholic teaching.

We hope this anniversary period will be a time of increased focus on economic justice in our parishes, institutions, families, and society. A brief resolution cannot communicate the full substance of the letter, but its central message might be summarized in this way:

- The economy exists to serve the human person, not the other way around.
- Economic life should be shaped by moral principles and ethical norms.
- Economic choices should be measured by whether they enhance or threaten human life, human dignity, and human rights.
- A fundamental concern must be support for the family and the well-being of children.
- The moral measure of any economy is how the weakest are faring.

In the last decade, the Church has continued to share and apply its social doctrine. Pope John Paul II continues to be a powerful voice for solidarity and justice in a world often lacking both. His defense of the poor, workers, family life, and the victims of injustice is a constant theme of his travels and teaching. In his 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, our Holy Father offered a sweeping moral analysis of the economic and global challenges of our times, reaffirming the principles of our tradition, and developing new themes. This encyclical offers particular challenges for U.S. Catholics. While it recognizes the vital contributions of democratic values and market economics, it insists that these be guided by the common good and be at the service of human dignity and human rights. He reviewed the failed, empty promises of communism, as he warned against a capitalism that neglects the human and moral dimensions of economic life. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reaffirms the Church's teaching that economic life must be directed to the service of persons and be subject to the limits of the moral order and the demands of social justice.

Our own conference has sought to apply Catholic principles in a variety of statements and initiatives that build on our economic pastoral. Our reflections on children and families, environmental justice, international responsibility, stewardship, welfare, health care, and violence in our land offer examples of our commitment to continuing education and advocacy on issues of economic justice.

Our economic justice pastoral and the broader Catholic social teaching that shaped it are complex and nuanced. They do not lend themselves to simple ideological identification. Some in our own community welcome the traditions teaching on private property, the limits of the state, the advantages of free markets, and the condemnation of communism, but resist the focus on the poor, the defense of labor unions, the recognition of the moral limits of markets, and the

responsibilities of government. Others welcome the teaching on the “option for the poor,” the duties of government to protect the weak, the warnings against unbridled capitalism, but seem to ignore the centrality of family, the emphasis on economic initiative, and the warnings against the bureaucratic excesses of a “social assistance” state. Our social tradition is a moral framework, not a partisan platform or ideological tool. It challenges both right and left, labor and management to focus on the dignity of the human person and the common good rather than their own political or economic interests.

In the words of *Centesimus Annus*, we promote “a society of free work, of enterprise and of participation. Such a society is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied.”<sup>1</sup>

## A Look Around

In this brief message, we do not offer an overall assessment of our economy, but we need to acknowledge that some things have changed and some have not. As reported in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*:

- Americans living in poverty have increased from 33 million to almost 37 million, even though our economy has been growing in recent years. Economic forces, family disintegration, and government action and inaction have combined to leave more than a fifth of our children growing up poor in one of the richest nations on earth.
- Joblessness, hunger, and homelessness still haunt our nation. Millions of people are actively looking for work and cannot find it. Over the past ten years there has been a sharp increase in the percentage of people who work full-time but cannot lift their family out of poverty. At present this represents 18 percent of all workers.
- The poor and the middle class face growing economic insecurity. Wages are stagnating despite recent gains in productivity, and companies seeking to cut costs are turning to part-time and temporary workers, often at the expense of family income.
- In the past ten years, some 234,000 family farms have been lost, and the overall poverty rate for farmers continues to hover around 20 percent.
- Some rural towns are disappearing, and agricultural land and food processing have become increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.
- Discrimination, lack of jobs, poor education, and other factors have left African Americans and Hispanics far more likely to be jobless and poor.
- Forty-four percent of African American children and 36 percent of Hispanic children are growing up poor.
- Over the past 15 years, the gap between rich and poor in America has grown wider. In 1993, it is reported the highest earning 20 percent of households saw their income increase by about \$10,000. In contrast, the 20 percent of households at the bottom of the income range saw their income decrease by \$1,200. At a time of modest economic growth, many families are experiencing declining real wages.
- Family and social factors continue to contribute to poverty and economic stress. It is reported that a child born to a mother who is married, with a high school

diploma, whose husband works or has a job herself has an 8 percent chance of growing up in poverty. A child born to a mother who is not married, without a high school education, and without a job in the family has an 80 percent chance of growing up in poverty. Clearly, the disintegration of families, the absence of fathers, high divorce rates, the failures of education, and the reality of joblessness are crucial factors in our economic problems. And just as clearly, strong families contribute to the economic, social, and moral health of our nation.

- The nation continues to pile up debt, burdening both our economy and our children. Government deficits, corporate speculation, and excessive consumerism contribute to an ethic of “buy now—pay later” that violates principles of stewardship and responsibility. The gross federal debt has grown from \$1.8 trillion in 1985 to \$4.7 trillion in 1994.
- Economic issues are increasingly global issues with growing foreign competition, interdependence, and trade. In a post-Cold War world, much has changed, but for many it is still a world of too much poverty and not enough development. The number of chronically hungry people has risen from 500 million in 1985 to 800 million in 1995. Almost 1.3 billion people, many of them children, live in desperate poverty around the world.

Our current economy is marked by considerable paradox. Profits and productivity grow, while many worker's real income and sense of security decline. Parents, of even modest means, wonder whether their children will live as well as they do.

Some businesses cut jobs and prosper while their workers pay the price for downsizing. Government seems to pile up debt, cut programs, and feed public cynicism all at once. At a time of diminishing government help for poor workers and families, congressional spending for new weapons exceeds the Pentagon's request, justified more by employment needs than defense criteria. We seem a very long way from “economic justice for all.”

There is no consensus on what explains these trends. The decline of manufacturing jobs, rapid technological change, the globalization of the economy, the diminished influence of labor and trade unions, the erosion of the minimum wage, and the costs of health insurance all have contributed to the declining real family income. A growing income gap is fed by economic decisions that put profits ahead of people and lead to inadequate wages, reduced benefits, fewer jobs, and less job security. Meanwhile, individual choices and immoral behavior that contribute to increasing out-of-wedlock births, violence, drug use, and the changing family structure are having a significant impact on both families and the economy. We know poverty and economic injustice result from discrimination *and* destructive personal behavior, from unwise decisions of corporations *and* the unresponsive behavior of the public sector.

Our Catholic tradition speaks to these concerns. Ten years after *Economic Justice for All*, our community's greatest challenge is to encourage those with economic power to shape their decisions by how they affect the stability of families and the opportunities of people who are poor, while at the same time calling on all individuals to make personal choices that strengthen their families and contribute to the common good.

## A Look Ahead: Questions for the Future

As we observe this anniversary, we wish to encourage lively dialogue and principled action on a wide variety of issues and concerns, including

- 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?
- How can our community shape the priorities of our culture to promote greater personal responsibility and better economic choices?
- 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?
- How can U.S. workers and enterprises survive and thrive in a world where other nations compete by offering their workers subsistence wages and minimal benefits?
- How can our nation's economic power in the world be used to build a more just global economy? How can trade and development policies offer hope to a still hungry and suffering world?
- How can we address the enormous economic pressures that undermine families and the family factors (e.g., absent fathers, teenage mothers, high rates of divorce) that leave so many children poor? How can we support families in their essential moral, social, and economic roles?
- How can our society make concern for “the least among us” and the common good the central consideration in the development of budget, environmental, and other national policies?
- How can we assess our own work ethic, productivity, consumption, and lifestyles in light of the needs of a hungry world?
- How can the nation address the diverse social and economic forces that leave both inner-city and rural communities as places of disproportionate poverty and discouragement?
- How can we address the racial discord that exists in our nation today?
- How can we overcome the growing racial and ethnic distance between different communities and the continuing impact of discrimination in economic life?
- How can the Church practice in its own life and institutions what it preaches to others about economic justice, human dignity, and the rights of workers?

There are many more questions that could be raised, but these are examples of issues where Catholics can apply the Church's teaching, share our experience, and voice our hopes in civil dialogue and principled action on economic justice. In addressing these and other questions, we believe the Catholic community can be a bridge builder in several ways. Our community crosses

lines of class and race, politics and ideology. Catholics are at the center and fringes of U.S. economic life. We are CEOs and senators, union leaders and small-business owners, migrant farm workers, and homeless children. Ten years after the pastoral, we need to help our Church renew its sense of solidarity and our society rediscover a sense of national community, pursuing the common good rather than our own narrow economic and other interests.

In addition, our tradition 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, government, and voluntary groups. We hope in this anniversary year we can get beyond some of the false choices and ideological polarization in the economic debate and join in a renewed search for the common good. We can be the advocates of a renewed social contract between employers and employees, between recipients and providers of assistance, between investors and managers that seeks long-term progress over short-term gains, that offers respect and security in exchange for responsibility and hard work, and that protects the vulnerable, especially our children.

## A Call to Renewed Commitment

We hope that this anniversary period can be a time of prayer and reflection, discussion and dialogue, advocacy and action. Economic justice begins in our homes and families, in our individual choices and household priorities. Unless we teach our children basic values of honesty, compassion, and initiative they will not be equipped to deal with the “counter values” of selfishness, consumerism, and materialism so prevalent in our society.

We urge Catholic publications to refocus on economic issues and their moral and human implications. We also urge Catholic educational institutions to redouble their efforts to share our teaching, to help their students develop concern for the poor and for justice, and to contribute to the common good by their research and educational activities. We urge national and diocesan organizations to integrate themes of economic justice in their ongoing meetings, publications, advocacy, and other activities. And most especially, we encourage Catholic parishes to continue to weave our teaching on economic life into their prayer and preaching, their education and formation, their outreach and advocacy.

We do not ask Catholic communities to set aside their ongoing ministry to focus on economic justice. Rather, we ask leaders to further integrate these principles and tasks into the worship, formation, and service they offer on a daily basis. The pursuit of economic justice is not an option or add-on for Catholics; it is part of who we are and what we believe.

The Catholic community will continue to carry out the message of the pastoral in many different ways—in the service and advocacy of Catholic Charities, the relief and development efforts of Catholic Relief Services, the empowerment and education of the Campaign for Human Development, to cite a few.

Through our own national conference, our state and diocesan structures, the Catholic community is to continue to educate and advocate for children and families on issues ranging from real welfare reform to school choice, the rights of workers to sustainable development. We need to strengthen and build on these and other impressive efforts.

However, it has always been clear that the pursuit of greater economic justice is not carried out primarily by the statements 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. 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 the poor and vulnerable and for greater economic justice. 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. And let us as citizens and believers continue to advocate for people who are poor and vulnerable in our communities, nation, and world.

We renew our pastoral's call for believers to shape their choices in the marketplace and public arena according to the values of the Scriptures and the moral principles of the Catholic Church. 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. In our work and citizenship, our economic, political, and personal choices, we must reach out to “the least among us” and seek the common good.

We may differ on specifics and priorities, but let us come together—across economic, ideological, and ethnic lines—to work for a society and economy offering more justice and opportunity, especially for the poor. Differences over how to move forward will give rise to legitimate debate, but indifference to the need to build a more just and open economy is not an option for Catholics. Every Christian is called to follow Jesus in his mission—and ours—of bringing “good news to the poor, new sight to the blind, liberty to captives and to set the downtrodden free” (Lk 4:18). That was the call of our pastoral letter almost ten years ago and still is our task today.

## Notes

- 1 John Paul II, *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (Centesimus Annus)* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1991), no. 35.