

A Statement on Poverty in New Jersey

by

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November 21, 2011

"Give to the hungry some of your bread, and to the naked some of your clothing. Whatever you have left over, give away as alms; and do not begrudge the alms you give."

Tobit 4:16

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"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Mt 25:35-40

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"What good is it if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also, faith of itself, if it does not have works, is lifeless."

James 2: 15-17

A Statement on Poverty in New Jersey by the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey

The U.S Census Bureau recently confirmed that over 49 million Americans, or 16% of the population, live in poverty.ⁱ Similarly, the Legal Services of New Jersey Poverty Research Institute has documented the alarming depth and breadth of poverty in New Jersey – a state that is frequently ranked as the second or third richest state in the country.ⁱⁱ In 2009, over 799,000 New Jersey residents had incomes lower than the official poverty rate - incomes so low that they were unable to make ends meetⁱⁱⁱ and required food stamps to survive.^{iv}

Sadly, although the poor are in the hundreds of thousands, they are often invisible to us. As the plight of these, our brothers and sisters, continues to spiral downward, we cannot stand by in silence. We cannot ignore children who go to bed hungry, parents who are jobless, families who are homeless, the sick who suffer without medical care, or the elderly who live in infested or unsafe housing.^v

We, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, call upon all people of good will to address the critical needs of the poor who live among us. We must remember that the moral worth of a society is measured primarily by how justly it responds to the most vulnerable. This can be an uncomfortable reminder for a society in which an inordinate amount of wealth is concentrated at the top of the economic ladder but it is a reminder that we ignore our vulnerable brothers and sisters at our moral and societal peril.

What is Catholic Teaching on poverty? The Church's concern for the poor is inspired by the Gospel and Jesus' unequivocal command.^{vi} Jesus teaches us that a sure way to find Him is to serve the poor, the hungry, the ill, and the stranger. "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."^{vii} His command to welcome the stranger, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick and care for the poor is no less relevant today than it was 2,000 years ago.

Catholic social teaching on poverty is based on charity and justice. Charity refers to our duty to provide direct social services to those in immediate need of life's basic necessities. This may include, among other things, serving the poor in soup kitchens, donating food, money or clothing, or mentoring an at-risk family. Justice means that we strive to correct the long standing inequities in our society. This may involve, among other things, advocating for fair public policies on housing, health care and education.

Who are the poor? Poverty has many faces – the young and old, the professional and non-professional, the educated and uneducated, the native born and the immigrant, and those with or without a religious faith. They may live next door to us wherever we live - in cities, suburbs or rural areas. The poor are not a static socio-economic group. Many people who were once self-sufficient now find themselves on the edge of poverty because of a life changing event. Our Catholic Charities agencies report that many donors, who in the past have financially contributed to programs, are now clients in need of services.

The plight of the poor becomes even more desperate if the poor are children, disabled, illiterate, or victims of violence or abuse. We should not be surprised that many stricken by poverty lose hope of any meaningful change in their lives, and become demoralized.

What Must We Do? The poor desperately need financial assistance, but they also need other important things from us. First, we need to pray for the less fortunate and also for ourselves that we have the *will* to fulfill our obligations to our brothers and sisters. Second, we must set aside stereotypes. We must accept those in need as neighbors deserving not only just charity but also justice in the truest sense so that they will have at least the chance to become self-sufficient.

Scripture calls us to act with courage, generosity, justice and love.^{viii} If we fail to act, our faith commitment rings hollow. “What good is it if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”^{ix} Empathy, alone, does not help the poor. We need a firm societal commitment to action – a grass roots movement that begins with individuals, and then expands to family, community, and government.

The efforts of individuals are a critical starting point and even can be noble and life-saving. However, the depth and complexity of the challenges we face are greater than the resources and capabilities of individuals. Our individual efforts alone will not stem today’s tide of increasing poverty; we need collective action. Past failures at collective action should not be used as an excuse to fail to act today, and the current difficult economic times are not an acceptable reason to fail to act on behalf of the poor.

We need an ***Agenda for Action*** by individuals, churches, synagogues, mosques, government and the private sector. To assist in developing an ***Agenda for Action***, the New Jersey Catholic Conference with cooperation from Catholic Charities agencies will convene four task forces to focus on critical issues impacting poverty: the weakening of family life, failing education systems, unemployment and low-paying jobs, and unavailable affordable housing. The goal will be to identify pragmatic recommendations to help strengthen families, improve schools, reduce unemployment, assure living wages, and increase affordable housing. We will provide oversight for this initiative through an Advisory Council consisting of respected leaders.

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors and our enemies. He told us that we must share what we have with those who are without. Following this commandment is a most certain path to peace and true prosperity. We are hopeful that the four task forces we are establishing will provide clear guidance to help strengthen our society’s commitment to reducing poverty which, in turn, would increase peace and prosperity in our communities.

ⁱ <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p60-241.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Current Population Survey, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce.

ⁱⁱⁱ ***Poverty Benchmarks 2011: Assessing New Jersey’s Progress in Combating Poverty***, A Report from the Legal Services of New Jersey Poverty Research Institute, March 2011 (including LSNJ Press Release).

^{iv} <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd>

^v John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*

^{vi} Matthew 11:5; Catechism of the Catholic Church 2444

^{vii} Matthew 25:40

^{viii} Matthew 19:21; Matthew 25:35; Mark 12:40; Luke 4:18; Luke 7:22; Luke 12:33; Luke 14:13; Luke 18:22; Luke 20:46-47; John 12:5; Acts 9:36; Acts 10:4; Acts 24:17; Romans 12:20; Romans 13: 8; Romans 15:26; Galatians 2:10; 1 Timothy 5:3; James 1:27; James 2:2-6; 1 John 3:17-18; Philippians 2:2; 1 Peter 4; Ephesians 4: 32; Exodus 22:22; Exodus 23:6; Leviticus 19:10; Leviticus 23:22; Leviticus 25:25, 35, 39; Deuteronomy 10:18; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Deuteronomy 24:14-21; 1 Samuel 2:8; Esther 9:22; Job 29:12; Tobit 4; Psalms 9; 12; 14; 34; 35; 37; 40; 68; 69; 70; 72; 82; 107; 113; 132; 140; 146; Proverbs 13; 14; 15; 16; 17; 19; 21; 22; 28; 29; 30; 31; Isaiah 1; 3; 10; 14; 25; 29; 32; 41; 58; 61; Jeremiah 5; 7; 22; Ezekiel 16; 18; 22; Zechariah 7; Malachi 3.

^{ix} James 2: 15-17



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For Release
November 21, 2011

Remarks by The Most Reverend John J. Myers, President, New Jersey Catholic Conference, and Archbishop of Newark, On the Statement on Poverty in New Jersey By the Bishops of New Jersey

Today, the Bishops of New Jersey are calling attention to the need for all in this state to work together to address the shocking, growing problem of poverty here in New Jersey.

You may ask why now? It's very simple: 49 million people across this country live in poverty. And almost eight hundred thousand of them live here in New Jersey. In addition, the face of poverty has changed. It is the face of men, women and children in our cities, our suburbs, our rural areas. They need jobs, food, housing, education, and they need it now. They are victims of an economic crisis that needs to be changed immediately.

The Catholic Church follows Christ's command to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. Christ also told us that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we are doing for Him.

We are all God's children and, consequently, we have a responsibility to help anyone in need. The Church has a tradition of helping the poor – whether it be on the other side of the world, or in our neighborhoods.

Equally important, we have helped the poor whether or not they are Catholic.

But we know we cannot do it alone.

The current economic crisis and its effect on the poor require collective collaboration. Individual efforts alone will not stem the tide of increasing poverty. Today, we encourage everyone – individuals, families, churches, synagogues, mosques,

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businesses and government -- to address the issue of poverty. It is no coincidence that, even as we meet here, students from Seton Hall Prep are across the street at the offices of La Casa de Don Pedro, helping them prepare much needed food baskets for families to not only enjoy Thanksgiving dinner, but daily meals to sustain their lives. That's cooperation, and the start of the solution.

We must come together to work to reduce poverty – past failures and the current difficult economic times are not an acceptable reason to fail to act on behalf of the poor.

Today, it is even more critical that we work together to end poverty. Our State and federal lawmakers are facing huge deficits, which has prompted some to suggest drastic cuts including reducing or eliminating programs that have provided the poor with a safety net.

This can not, must not, happen.

Our statement on poverty is not just words. Rather, it is a call to action. We need to think “outside the box.” For this reason, we will be establishing four task forces, designed to study issues adversely impacting poverty: the weakening of family life, the lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and failing educational systems.

Our goal will be to identify pragmatic recommendations to help strengthen families, improve schools, reduce unemployment, assure living wages, and increase affordable housing.

We stand here today to call on everyone to pray for wisdom and strength to end poverty. We call on everyone in New Jersey today to be part of this effort.

There is much to be done. Every day, the media brings to us the voices of those who need help. These voices cry out to us from the depths to fix the problems we can fix, and to end joblessness, homelessness, lack of food, poor education – to end poverty.

We do not have all of the answers.

We do know this: Jesus told us to have faith in Him, and to follow His commandments. “Love one another as yourselves” is one of those commandments.

Thank you.

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For Release
November 21, 2011

Remarks by The Most Reverend Edgar M. daCunha, SDV, Chair, Public Policy Committee of the New Jersey Catholic Conference, On the Statement on Poverty in New Jersey by the Bishops of New Jersey

More than a year ago, the Public Policy Committee of the New Jersey Catholic Conference brought to the bishops' attention the need to speak out on the problem of poverty in this state, and to invite Catholics and non-Catholics alike, church and state alike, business and non-profit alike, to work together to find a solution before it is too late, for some of the residents of this great state.

The members of the Public Policy Committee are everyday people. They are laypeople, clergy and Religious who understand very clearly that Catholic teaching on the subject of helping the poor is very specific and very critical.

The Church's work may be described as "Two Feet of Social Action." One foot is charity, and the other is justice. The metaphor is appropriate because both "feet" are needed in order to move forward. "Charity" refers to our duty to provide direct social services to those in immediate need of life's basic necessities. This may include, among other things, serving the poor in soup kitchens, donating food, money or clothing, or mentoring an at-risk teen. "Justice" means that we strive to correct the long-standing inequities in our society. This may involve advocating for fair public policies, developing community organizations, and participating in community self-help projects.

The Committee members also knew, however, that despite this deep-rooted belief and commitment of the Church, we needed to learn more about poverty, its causes and its cures, before we acted. We are thankful for the Public Policy Institute for their hard work in making us even more aware of the need for action now. We are grateful for the men and women in our parishes, for the students in our schools, for embracing the call to action to help the poor. Even with this help, we are still not experts. We need and want more advice, support, collaboration to ensure that poverty begins to end here in New Jersey, and the time to begin is now.

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Today the Bishops stand ready to work together with others to solve this problem, just as we always have done.

Our statement is an invitation for all people of good will to come together and to recognize the plight of the poor – their lack of food, housing, medical care, and preparation for jobs.

For that reason, the statement of the Bishops calls on task forces to look into the root causes of poverty: the weakening of family life, the lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and failing educational systems.

We will identify pragmatic recommendations to help strengthen families, improve schools, reduce unemployment, assure living wages, and increase affordable housing.

The New Jersey Catholic Conference, with assistance from the Catholic Charities Agencies, will organize and manage the task forces with oversight from a blue ribbon advisory committee that we will appoint in the next few weeks.

As the Blessed John Paul II said in his Encyclical *Novo Millennio Ineunte*:

“How can it be that even today there are still people dying of hunger? Condemned to illiteracy? Lacking the most basic medical care? Without a roof over their heads? . . . Christians must learn to make their act of faith in Christ by discerning His voice in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty.” (Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 50)

This is a time of prayer, a time of action. To everything, there is, indeed, a season. We are sowing the seeds today to reap a harvest that will end poverty tomorrow.

Thank you.

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**For Release
November 21, 2011**

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TRENTON -- The Catholic Bishops of New Jersey today called on all people of good will to address the critical needs of the poor. The Bishops indicated that the moral worth of a society is measured primarily by how justly it responds to the most vulnerable. The Bishops also have called for a grass-roots Agenda for Action and task forces to steer the Agenda to address this societal problem concretely and humanely.

In a Statement on Poverty in New Jersey, the Bishops stated: “As a society we cannot ignore children who go to bed hungry, parents who are jobless, families who are homeless, the sick who suffer without medical care, or the elderly who live in infested or unsafe housing.”

The Bishops warned that an inordinate amount of wealth is concentrated at the top of the economic ladder and that “we ignore the poor at our moral and societal peril.”

The U.S Census Bureau recently confirmed that over 49 million Americans, or 16% of the population, live in poverty. Similarly, the Legal Services of New Jersey Poverty Research Institute has documented an alarming depth and breadth of poverty in New Jersey – a state that is frequently ranked as the second or third richest state in the country. In 2009, over 799,000 New Jersey residents had incomes lower than the

**Representing the Archdiocese of Newark, Diocese of Camden, Diocese of Metuchen,
Diocese of Paterson, Diocese of Trenton, Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic and
Our Lady of Deliverance Syriac Catholic Diocese**

official poverty rate - incomes so low that they were unable to make ends meet and required food stamps to survive.

The Bishops called for an Agenda for Action by individuals, churches, synagogues, mosques, government and the private sector to offer concrete and attainable measures to address the causes and symptoms of poverty in New Jersey.

To assist in developing an Agenda for Action, the New Jersey Catholic Conference, with cooperation from Catholic Charities agencies throughout the state, will convene four task forces to focus on critical issues impacting poverty: the weakening of family life, failing education systems, unemployment and low-paying jobs, and unavailable affordable housing. The goal will be to identify pragmatic recommendations to help strengthen families, improve schools, reduce unemployment, assure living wages, and increase affordable housing. The Bishops will provide oversight for this initiative through an Advisory Council consisting of respected leaders.

The Statement on Poverty also stressed that, just as the stigma of poverty hurts flesh and bone people, the critical starting point for eradicating poverty also must begin with people. “However, the depth and complexity of the challenges we face are greater than the resources and capabilities of individuals. We need collective action,” the Bishops state. “Past failures at collective action should not be used as an excuse to fail to act today, and the current difficult economic times are not an acceptable reason to fail to act on behalf of the poor.”

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