



Catholic Social Thought and Economic Security

Once again, in the wake of the economic devastation produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have watched our neighbors lose their jobs and their homes and have seen expanded soup kitchens, homeless populations, and bankruptcies. With these realities here and abroad, our faith calls us to respond with what the Catechism calls “a preferential love on the part of the Church” for those oppressed by poverty.¹ This response is rooted in the Old Testament love of the LORD for the *anawim* (widows, orphans, strangers, and the poor) and what Jesus teaches in Matthew’s Gospel about identifying Himself with the “least of our sisters and brothers” and that we shall be judged by our treatment of them (Mt 25:31-46).

The implications drawn out over two millennia of Catholic theology are immensely rich and should help us greatly in fashioning a wider and deeper economic security shaped by human dignity, the common good, and social justice. As the U.S. bishops put it, “*The first line of attack against poverty must be to build and sustain a healthy economy that provides employment opportunities at just wages for all adults who are able to work.*”² In this they highlight the tradition’s emphasis on a “family wage” going back at least to the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.³ The Catechism explains, “Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for his life and that of his family, and of serving the human community.”⁴

Related emphases in Catholic teaching over the past 130 years stress the importance of: (1) unions as a means to assure a fair wage, protect workers, and allow them to exercise their rights to participate in society and in the workplace; (2) employee benefits such as retirement funds, unemployment compensation, workers’ compensation, and so forth; (3) rights to emigrate to find work; (4) fighting workplace discrimination; (4) care for those unable to work due to age, disability, or care of children; and (5) the right to health care.

However, when widespread economic dislocation affects tens of millions of workers and their families, or even when a “normal” economy leaves millions unemployed or underemployed and unable to

support themselves or their families, “we the people” are called upon to provide a common good framework of economic security to allow all people to live dignified lives. This includes traditional systems of income support, nutrition, housing, and healthcare coverage for children, families, and even single adults. Such programs have been shown in this country to substantially reduce overall poverty and well-documented racial and ethnic inequities.⁵ However, they still have been grossly inadequate in past decades, acutely failing during the pandemic-induced economic dislocation. Our nation has been reluctant to improve and expand upon such programs to the extent that is needed.

Even more, our Church teaching has placed a special emphasis on society’s care for families and children, especially those children whose families are unable to provide a cushion of financial security and an environment that supports a child’s development and emotional maturity, enabling them to become, in that wonderful Church phrase, “artisans of their own destiny.”⁶

Underlying concern for economic security are three values. First is workers’ dignity in supporting themselves and their families. Second is enabling workers to contribute to the common good by their work, taxes, and other means. Third, according to Saint Pope John Paul II, is how our work makes us co-creators with the Divine Creator: “They can consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator’s work...”⁷

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, No. 2448.
- 2 National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1986). *Economic justice for all*, 196 (emphasis in original).
- 3 Pope Leo XIII. (1891). *Rerum Novarum: On the condition of labor*, 63 and 65.
- 4 *Catechism*, No. 2428.
- 5 Trisi, Danilo and Saenz, Matt. (2021, January 28). *Economic security programs reduce overall poverty, racial and ethnic inequities*. Retrieved from Center on Budget and Policy Priorities website: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/economic-security-programs-reduce-overall-poverty-racial-and-ethnic>.
- 6 Pope Paul VI. (1967). *Populorum Progressio*, 65.
- 7 Saint Pope John Paul II. (1981). *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work*, 25.