

Economic Justice for All

Pastoral Letter of the United States Bishops, 1986

This document is available on the web site of the Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis: http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx .

OVERVIEW

Economic Justice for All attempts to apply the major principles of Catholic social teaching to the structure of the U.S. economy. The Bishops write to provide moral perspective on the economy and to assess the economy's impact on the poor. The Bishops begin their letter with a description of the economy today and develop a moral vision, based on biblical teachings and the tradition of Catholic social thought, of a just economy. They then apply this vision to several policy areas: employment, poverty, agriculture, and international development. They end by calling for cooperation in a "New American Experiment" and a commitment by all sectors of the economy to a future of solidarity.

HISTORICAL NOTE

The U.S. Bishops issued this pastoral letter on the economy in 1986, three and one-half years after their Peace Pastoral. In drafting the letter, the Bishops consulted widely among business leaders, academicians, government officials, and other segments of American society, as well as among theologians and Church leaders. They held several hearings at various locations throughout the United States and received almost twenty thousand written suggestions as they circulated three preliminary drafts. The pastoral is significantly influenced by Vatican II's call to read the "signs of the times," the social teaching of the Council, and the social teachings of Pope John Paul II.

DOCUMENT OUTLINE

The Church and the Future of the U.S. Economy

- Introduction
 - Three questions to shape economic perspective (#1):
 - What does the economy do *for* people?
 - What does it do *to* people?
 - How do people *participate* in it?
 - U.S. economy has many successes but also many failures (#'s 2-3).
- U.S. Economy Today: Memory and Hope
 - U.S. has high standard of living, productive work, vast natural resources (#6).
 - Economy has involved serious conflict and suffering, and has been built through creative struggle of many (#'s 7-8).
- Urgent Problems
 - Sign of the times: Preeminent role of U.S. in increasingly interdependent global economy (#10).
 - Mobility of capital and technology affects jobs worldwide (#11).
 - Pollution and depletion of resources threaten environment (#12).
 - Promise of American dream remains unfulfilled for millions in U.S., with high unemployment and harsh poverty (#'s 14-16).
 - Economic life does not support family life (#18).
 - Investment of so many resources into production of weapons increases the problems (#20).
 - Culture/value questions are a deeper challenge to the nation (#21).

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DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- The Need for Moral Vision
 - Service of the poor: fundamental criterion of economic policy (#24).
 - Pastoral based on Catholic social thought tradition that honors human dignity in community with others and whole of creation (#'s 32-34).
 - Bishops write to (#27):
 - provide guidance for formation of Catholic consciences;
 - add voice to public debate on direction of the economy.

The Christian Vision of Economic Life

Economic life is to support and serve human dignity (#28).

- Biblical Perspectives
 - Humans are created in God's image, possess intrinsic dignity, and enjoy gift of creation (#'s 32-34).
 - God's covenant with Israel calls for loving justice which promotes human dignity (#'s 35-40).
 - Jesus proclaims compassion and call to discipleship (#'s 43-47).
 - The preferential option for the poor calls the church "to see things from the side of the poor" (#52).
 - Action for justice proceeds from hope and emphasizes new creation (#'s 54-55).
 - Catholic life and thought about economics are enriched through history and learn from other traditions (#'s 56-59).
 - Concerns of letter are central, integral to proclamation of Gospel (#60).
- Ethical Norms for Economic Life
 - Responsibilities of social living include:
 - active love of God and neighbor which makes human solidarity and community possible (#'s 64, 66);
 - establishment of minimum levels of commutative, distributive, and social justice and institutions that support justice (#'s 68-73);
 - examination of inequalities of income, consumption, privilege, and power (#'s 74-76);
 - establishment of minimum levels of participation in social institutions (#'s 77-78).
 - Human rights must be respected which:
 - promote the common good (#79);
 - include political-civil and social-economic rights as outlined in John XXIII's *Peace on Earth* (#80);
 - enhance and reflect just institutions (#82);
 - embody new cultural consensus in U.S. (#'s 83-84).
 - Poor have the single most urgent claim on conscience of nation (#86).
 - U.S. moral priorities should be:
 - fulfillment of basic needs of the poor (#90);
 - active participation in economic life by those now excluded (#91);
 - investment of wealth, talent, and energy for benefit of poor (#92);
 - strengthening of family life (#93).

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- Working for Greater Justice
 - Through daily work people make their largest contribution to economic justice (#96).
 - Threefold moral significance of work (#97):
 - principal way for self-expression and creativity;
 - ordinary way to fulfill material needs;
 - way to contribute to the larger community.
 - Principle of subsidiarity gives everyone the task of working for justice (#91s 989799).
 - Workers' right to organize must be respected; just and vital labor unions contribute to the economy's future (#'s 102-109).
 - Business people, managers, owners have a vocation to serve the common good (#'s 110-111).
 - Private property is always at service of common good, and is limited by a "social mortgage" (#'s 114-115).
 - Every citizen has the responsibility to work with others for justice (#120).
 - Government, respecting "subsidiarity," should help groups seeking to promote the common good (#124).

Selected Economic Policy Issues

- Introduction
 - Church is not bound to any particular economic, political, or social system, but asks: What is impact on people (#130).
 - Our approach is pragmatic and evolutionary, accepting "mixed" economic system and urging its reform to be more just (#131).
 - But larger systemic questions do need to be asked about our economy and its values (#132).
- Employment
 - Most urgent priority for domestic policy is creation of new jobs with adequate pay and decent working conditions (#136).
 - Unemployment affects eight million people, disproportionately blacks, Hispanics, youth, at severe human costs (#'s 138-142).
 - Current levels of unemployment, assaulting human dignity, are intolerable (#143).
 - Demographic changes, advancing technology, global competition, discrimination, and increased defense spending all have driven up rate of unemployment (#'s 144-149).
 - The U.S. should:
 - establish consensus that everyone has a right to employment (#153);
 - coordinate fiscal and monetary policy to achieve full employment (#156);
 - expand private sector job-training, especially for the long-term unemployed, to establish more socially useful jobs (#'s 156-165);
 - explore new strategies to improve the quantity and quality of jobs (#'s 167-168).

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- Poverty
 - Poverty, affecting 33 million Americans and dramatically increasing, is “lack of sufficient material resources required for a decent life” (#’s 170-173).
 - Characteristics of today’s poverty include:
 - growing number of children, especially minorities (#’s 176-177);
 - increasing number of women and female-headed families (#178-180);
 - disproportionate number of minorities (#’s 181-182).
 - Great inequality in distribution of wealth and income in U.S. affects power and participation and is “unacceptable” (#’s 183-185).
 - Alleviation of poverty in U.S. will require:
 - fundamental changes in social and economic structures (#187);
 - programs which empower the poor to help themselves (#188);
 - doing away with stereotypes that stigmatize the poor (#’s 193-194).
 - Elements of national strategy to deal with poverty include:
 - sustain an economy that provides just wages for all adults able to work (#’s 196-197);
 - remove barriers to equal employment for women and minorities (#199);
 - foster “self-help” programs for the poor (#’s 200-201);
 - evaluate tax system in terms of impact on the poor (#202);
 - make a stronger commitment to education for the poor in public and private schools (#’s 203-205);
 - promote policies which support and strengthen families (#’s 206-209);
 - reform the welfare system so it respects human dignity (#’s 210-214).
- Food and Agriculture
 - Increased concentration of land ownership and depletion of natural resources threaten farm life (#217).
 - Structures of U.S. agriculture, affected by new technologies and export orientation, have led to trend of fewer and larger farms (#’s 220-223).
 - Diversity and richness in American society are lost with exodus from rural areas; minorities especially suffer (#’s 225, 229-230).
 - Guidelines for action include:
 - protect moderate-sized, family-operated farms (#’s 233-235);
 - safeguard the opportunity to engage in farming (#’s 236-237);
 - provide stewardship for natural resources (#238).
 - Government should:
 - assist viable family farms threatened with bankruptcy (#242);
 - provide more aid to family farms and less to large agricultural conglomerates (#243);
 - reform tax policies which encourage the growth of large farms (#244);
 - adopt research, conservation, and worker protection methods (#’s 245-247).
 - Farmworker unions should be supported (#249).
 - Urban and rural cooperation is needed to solve serious agricultural problems (#250).

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DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- U.S. Economy and Developing Nations
 - In our increasingly interdependent world:
 - The preferential option for the poor focuses our attention on the Third World (#252).
 - Developing countries perceive themselves as dependent on industrialized countries, especially the U.S. (#253).
 - Individual nations, multinational institutions, and transnational corporations are primary actors (#255).
 - The moral task is to work for a just international order in face of increasing interdependency (#'s 256-257).
 - Catholic social teaching emphasizes love, solidarity, justice, respect for rights, and the special place of the poor as key considerations in forming policy (#258).
 - Fundamental reform in international economic order is called for, with preferential option for the poor the central priority (#'s 259-260).
 - U.S. has central role in building just global economy:
 - greater support of United Nations (#261);
 - more attention to human need and less to political strategic concerns (#262);
 - more cooperation in North-South dialogue (#263).
 - U.S. policy should promote greater social justice in developing world through key policy areas of:
 - Development assistance: more aid, more multilateral, less military (#'s 265-266);
 - Trade: fair prices for raw materials and better access for products, while assisting U.S. workers' adjustment needs (#267-270);
 - Finance: dealing with extremely serious debt problem in ways that do not hurt the poor (#'s 271-277);
 - Private investment: encourage it while safeguarding against inequitable consequences (#'s 278-280).
 - World food problems offer case of special urgency:
 - U.S. is in key position and should assist in both long-term and short-term responses (#'s 281-284);
 - Population policies must be designed as part of overall strategies of integral human development (#'s 285-287).
 - U.S. has a special responsibility to use economic power to serve human dignity and rights, pursuing justice and peace on global scale (#'s 288-292).

A New American Experiment

- Preliminary Remarks
 - The founders' attempts to establish justice, the general welfare, and liberty have not been completed (#295).
 - This task calls for new forms of cooperation to create just structures and expand economic participation (#'s 296-297).

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DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- Cooperation within Firms and Industries
 - Workers and managers need to work together(#299).
 - Profit sharing, worker management, and worker ownership can enhance productivity and justice (#'s 300-301).
 - All sectors should accept a fair share of the sacrifices entailed in making a firm competitive (#303).
- Local and Regional Cooperation
 - Development of new business is key to revitalizing depressed areas (#309).
 - Entrepreneurs, government, existing business, and the local churches can work together as partners to support revitalization efforts (#'s 309-311).
- Partnership in Development of National Policies
 - Economy is inescapably social and political in nature(#313).
 - Government and private groups need to work together, planning to form national policy (#'s 314-318).
 - Impact of economic policies on the poor is “the primary criterion for judging their moral value” (#319).
 - Massive defense spending is a “serious distortion” of economic policy (#320).
- International Cooperation
 - Democracy is closely tied to economic justice (#322).
 - Existing global structures are not adequate for promoting justice (#323).
 - U.S. should support the United Nations in alleviating poverty in developing countries (#324).

Commitment to the Future

- The Christian Vocation in the World
 - Conversion of the heart begins and accompanies structural transformation (#328).
 - Eucharist empowers people to transform society (#330).
 - Laity have the vocation to bring the Gospel to economic affairs (#332).
 - Leisure should be used to build family (#338).
- Challenges to the Church
 - Church needs to educate the poor and all its members to social justice (#91~ 34097343).
 - Economic arrangements must promote the family (#346).
 - Church must be exemplary as economic actor (#347):
 - pay just wages (#352);
 - respect the rights of its employees (#353);
 - make responsible use of its investments and properties (#'s 354-355);
 - promote work of charity and justice, such as Campaign for Human Development (#'s 356-357);
 - Church commits itself to be model of collaboration and participation (#358).

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DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- Road Ahead
 - Institutions and ministries of Church will continue to reflect on these important issues (#'s 360-361).
 - Universities and study groups should pursue further research into areas that need continued exploration.
- Commitment to the Kingdom
 - We must include everyone on the globe in our dream of economic justice (#363).
 - We must move from independence through interdependence to solidarity (#365).

Discussion Questions

Has the U.S. economy helped you and your family to live a fully human life? How has the economy hindered your efforts? In what ways do you think the U.S. economic structure helps or hinders those in poverty?

What are some of the major principles the Bishops suggest to help us shape a more just economy? List those principles which you consider to be the most important.

Why do the Bishops become very specific in their policy recommendations to meet economic problems?