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A 'Living Wage'

There is recognition today about the challenges facing low-wage earners. These challenges are linked to a lackluster economy that is not producing employment opportunities that pay sufficient wages. Thus, what is the just and moral response when many are experiencing difficulties just making ends meet? It was stated in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops publication, *Economic Justice for All* (1986), "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."

Some of the recent focus has been on wages. Questions like: What is a living wage? Should there be a minimum wage? If so, what should that minimum wage be?

We do not have answers to all these questions. As teachers of faith, our responsibility is to articulate the principles of Catholic social teaching. The application of those principles in the development of a wage structure is best left to lawmakers, economists, employers and others to determine. In our reflections about these principles we offer the following and conclude with a request for action.

Part of our dignity as a human person is an awareness that work is more than just a job; it is a reflection of our human dignity and a way to contribute to the common good. We recall that the dignity of every human person and the common good must be included in deliberations about work and wages. Here, we refer to employers, small businesses in particular, and workers. As employers ourselves we are aware of the potential impact that changes in wage policies can have on the ability to hire and retain employees as well as on broader economic considerations. Small businesses, which employ a significant portion of the overall workforce and represent the financial foundation on which many household budgets are built, are especially sensitive to the effects of increased employment costs.

St. John Paul II called work "probably the essential key to the whole social question" (*Laborem Exercens*, No. 15), and wages earned from work are the primary way people meet their material needs and contribute to the common good.

Wages needed to provide for material need varies in society and is different for individuals versus for a family. The family is the fundamental cell of society and where we first learn, love, and develop. A living wage is a fundamental right of workers and a moral imperative of employers because it provides workers with means and resources to form and support a family. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* points out, “In order to protect this relationship between family and work, an element that must be appreciated and safeguarded is that of a family wage, a wage sufficient to maintain a family and allow it to live decently. Such a wage must also allow for savings that will permit the acquisition of property as a guarantee of freedom. The right to property is closely connected with the existence of families, which protect themselves from need thanks also to savings and to the building up of family property.” (No.250)

We urge the Illinois General Assembly, the employer community, labor unions, and all people of good will to examine our laws and regulations with the goal of a living wage in mind. We need moral and just changes to our tax policies, we need enhanced economic incentives to create better paying job opportunities, and we need a review of the laws governing wages so employers can move toward a living wage. There is not one silver bullet to address these challenges, but continuing the status quo is no longer option. As *Economic Justice for All* reminded us back in 1986 – economic decisions do have moral consequences. We fear that continuing the present path only weakens family life and diminishes the quality of justice in our land.
