

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. 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. 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 meet and required food stamps to survive.

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.

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. 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." 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. 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. 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." 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 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 whenever 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. 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." 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.