

Labor Day Statement

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Families have been receiving a lot of attention recently. In his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis teaches that of all the groups that play a role in the welfare of society and help ensure respect for human dignity, “outstanding among [them] is the family, as the basic cell of society” (no. 157).

Yet, scarcely a week goes by without a news story highlighting that fewer young adults are choosing to start families than ever before in America. Not long ago, jobs, wages, and the economy were on everyone’s mind. Unemployment, poverty, and foreclosures soared as Americans worried, rightly, if we could ever recover. Even with some economic progress, things have not truly improved for most American families. We must not resign ourselves to a ‘new normal’ with an economy that does not provide stable work at a living wage for too many men and women. The poverty rate remains painfully high. The unemployment rate has declined, yet much of that is due to people simply giving up looking for a job, not because they have found full-time work. The majority of jobs provide little in the way of sufficient wages, retirement benefits, stability, or family security, and too many families are stringing together part-time jobs to pay the bills. Opportunities for younger workers are in serious decline.

The continuing struggles of most families to make ends meet are on display before our eyes, both at home and abroad. This Labor Day, we have a tremendous opportunity to reflect on how dignified work with a living wage is critical to helping our families and our greater society thrive.

Our Families Need Help and Support

Labor should allow the worker to develop and flourish as a person. Work also must provide the means for families to prosper. “Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment” (no. 128). Work is meant to be *for the sake of the family*. We do not undertake labor for its own sake, but as a way to grow toward lasting and meaningful realities in our lives and communities. Parents are called to be providers and educators to their children, passing down essential values and creating a home environment in which all members of the family can be fully present to one another and grow. Dignity-filled work and the fruits of that labor nourish families, communities, and the common good.

Is there any question that families in America are struggling today? Too many marriages bear the crushing weight of unpredictable schedules from multiple jobs, which make impossible adequate time for nurturing children, faith, and community. Wage stagnation has increased pressures on families, as the costs of food, housing, transportation, and education continue to pile up. Couples intentionally delay marriage, as unemployment and substandard work make a vision of stable family life difficult to see.

Is there any question that too many children feel the tragic pangs of hunger and poverty commonplace in a society that seems willing to accept these things as routine, the cost of doing business? Millions of children live in or near poverty in this country. Many of them are latch key kids, returning to empty homes every day as their working parents struggle to make ends meet.

Our Human Family is Wounded

Pope Francis continues to rouse our consciences and challenge us to live more thoroughly Catholic lives. *Laudato Si'* is, in large part, about something called “integral ecology,” an idea that our care for and relationships with one another deeply impact our care for the environment, and vice-versa. The Pope

writes extensively about the importance of work in that context. “We were created with a vocation to work” (no. 128), and “the analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others” (no. 141). Reminding us that “called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect,” he calls for a “sense of fraternity [that] excludes nothing and no one” (nos. 89-92).

Labor is one important way we honor our brothers and sisters in God’s universal human family. In the creation story, God gives us labor as a gateway into participation with Him in the ongoing unfolding of creation. Human labor, at its best, is a deeply holy thing that ought to honor our dignity as we help God “maintain the fabric of the world” (no. 124, citing Sir 38:34).

This Labor Day, the violation of human dignity is evident in exploited workers, trafficked women and children, and a broken immigration system that fails people and families desperate for decent work and a better life. How do we participate in this wounding of human dignity, through choices about the clothes we wear, food we eat, and things we buy--most of which is unaffordable to the very workers who make it? Do we give a thought to this truth, that for our wants to be met, economic realities are created that cause others to live in ways that we ourselves would not? How can we advance God’s work, in the words of the Psalmist, as he “secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, [and] sets captives free” (Ps 146:7)? These are difficult questions to ask, yet we must ask them.

Our Path Forward

We share one common home as part of a larger, single family, so the dignity of workers, the stability of families, and the health of communities are all intertwined. The path to a renewed society is built on authentic solidarity and rooted in faith. It rejects the individualism and materialism that make us indifferent to suffering and closed to the possibility of encounter.

Individual reflection and action is critical. We are in need of a profound conversion of heart at all levels of our lives. Let us examine our choices, and demand for ourselves and one another spirits of gratitude, authentic relationship and true concern. Pope Francis reminds us that “Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practise the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship . . . [and] break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” (no. 230). The changes we make to how we live and interact with each other can help change the world.

Yet individual effort should not stand alone. Our faith calling to love one another impels us to share that vision of charity and justice with others, and to go forth and encounter those at the margins. Through collective action and movements, we have to recommit ourselves to our brothers and sisters around the world in the human family, and build systems and structures that nurture family formation and stability in our own homes and neighborhoods. Sufficient decent work that honors dignity and families is a necessary component of the task before us, and it is the Catholic way.

In demanding a living wage for workers we give hope to those struggling to provide for their families, as well as young workers who hope to have families of their own someday. Unions and worker associations, as with all human institutions, are imperfect, yet they remain indispensable to this work, and they can exemplify the importance of subsidiarity and solidarity in action.

This Labor Day and always, let us pray, reflect, and act, seeking to restore our work and relationships to the honored place God has ordained for them.