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***A Pastoral Letter for the  
Feast of St Joseph the Worker***

**1 May 2017**

**The Right to Work: Our shared responsibility**

There have been profound changes in Australia's labour market over the past three decades. The decline of full-time permanent work, increasing casualisation of jobs and the entrenched disadvantage of people who are excluded mean that the two issues of insecure employment and unemployment have been constant themes on each Feast Day of St Joseph the Worker.

Thirty years ago, Pope Saint John Paul II visited Australia, travelling extensively and speaking to all sections of our community. Of great relevance on this Feast Day (1st May) are the words he spoke to workers at the Transfield factory in the Diocese of Parramatta and to unemployed trainees at the Archdiocese of Hobart's Willson training centre.

The Pope praised the long and proud tradition of Australia's industrial relations system, which had for many years defended the rights of workers and ensured equity and solidarity, 'especially in difficult times'. He emphasised that industrial relations should be conducted in a spirit of understanding and cooperation, recognising that 'the worker is always more important than both profits and machines'.<sup>1</sup>

He described the experience of unemployment as a 'human problem of vast dimensions' and warned of the evils of social and economic inequality. To those without work, the Holy Father stressed that 'their unemployed status is not a matter of personal failure' but rather a systemic failure that must be addressed through a reordering of the economy and particularly through the creation of new jobs.<sup>2</sup>

**The Gospel of Work**

Pope John Paul II's message to Australia was prophetic. The issues he raised concerning vulnerable and unemployed workers are as relevant now as when he visited.

He drew from what he called the 'Gospel of Work' in his ground-breaking Encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* ('On Human Work').

The Gospel of Work looks to scripture, recognising the sacred and deeply human nature of work and standing against narrow materialistic valuations that would reduce the person to a mere factor of production or regard those who are unemployed as surplus to requirement and a burden on society.

There are three fundamental attributes of work that serve human dignity and maintain the common good.

- We are made in the image and likeness of God and are called to share in the great work of creation and to continue the work of the Creator.<sup>3</sup> The dignity of work is not to be found in the kind of work being done, but in the fact that 'the one who is doing it is a person'.<sup>4</sup>
- Work is essential for personal development. The individual applies talents and develops skills, fashions resources and produces goods and services. The feeling of a job well done and a career developed is essential to the individual's self-fulfilment.<sup>5</sup>
- The world of work has a broader social context, for it unites people. Far from being isolated units in the production process, colleagues and friends share in the common enterprise of their workplace. They are parents providing for their families, they are neighbours contributing to their local communities and they are part of a generation adding to the efforts and dreams of previous ones.<sup>6</sup>

These key attributes are so essential to the health and justice of our society. The last three decades have shown that where decent work is unavailable, either through the lowering of wages and conditions or through persistent unemployment, the true meaning of work is undermined, and individuals, their families and communities suffer.

### **The anti-social trend of lower wages and conditions**

Pope John Paul II emphasised that 'a just wage is the concrete means of *verifying the justice* of the whole socioeconomic system and, in any case, of checking that it is functioning justly'.<sup>7</sup> Over recent decades, low-paid and vulnerable workers have suffered significant losses in terms of lower wages and conditions and job insecurity.

The wage was always regarded as the primary means workers could provide for their families and stay out of poverty. Now, however, around eight per cent of full-time workers and up to 25 per cent of part-time workers experience poverty.<sup>8</sup> Australia's minimum wages are falling further behind average wages and household disposable income. The annual minimum wage reviews are failing to protect hundreds of thousands of low-paid and insecure workers and their families from poverty.<sup>9</sup>

The recent decision of the Fair Work Commission to cut back Sunday and public holiday penalty rates in the retail, hospitality and fast-food sectors is another blow for vulnerable workers. It will have a big impact on women, young people and immigrants, who have a higher level of participation in these sectors. Some could suffer reductions of \$10 an hour. Many will need to work additional irregular hours away from their families or suffer the loss.<sup>10</sup>

## The social disaster of unemployment

If the low wages and poor conditions of vulnerable workers are judged as being anti-social according to the three key attributes of the Gospel of Work, then the lot of unemployed workers can be judged as 'a real social disaster'.<sup>11</sup>

Pope John Paul II spoke of unemployment as '*the privation of all the values that work represents and contributes to individuals, families and society*. Work is a right and a duty'.<sup>12</sup>

The cost of unemployment cannot be borne solely by unemployed workers and their families. Society has an obligation to provide unemployment benefits to meet the basic needs of these individuals and families, keeping them out of poverty. For many years now, the Newstart Allowance has been woefully inadequate, with around 70 per cent of recipients experiencing poverty and hardship, often for prolonged periods.<sup>13</sup> The payment is poverty-inducing and actually undermines people's capacity to seek work.

We face an unemployment crisis – one that is as much moral as it is economic. It is unacceptable that three-quarters of a million Australians are in need of work, while the market is offering only 185,000 vacancies.<sup>14</sup> Australia has one of the toughest compliance and work test regimes for jobseekers. Allowance recipients are being pushed harder to find jobs that in many cases are just not there. The indignity of unemployment is then compounded by being poorly assisted or hounded by a system that was intended to serve them. The current failures of Centrelink's automated debt recovery system have seen many recipients issued with false debt notices and intimidated by the threat of debt collectors and even prosecution.<sup>15</sup>

Against a rhetoric that casts people as 'dole-bludgers', 'job snobs' or as rorting the system, it is worth recalling again the words John Paul II spoke to trainees in Hobart:

All are encouraged to use their abilities to the full, and to realise that their unemployed status is not a matter of personal failure. Above all, *efforts must be made to create new jobs*.<sup>16</sup>

It is the system that has failed to ensure the availability of adequate employment.

## The right and duty to work – our shared responsibility

There are immediate steps that can improve the lot of low-paid and unemployed workers. In the current Annual Wage Review, the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations is calling for the National Minimum Wage to be increased by \$37.30 per week and for Award rates of pay to be lifted by \$30.70 per week. And as Budget night approaches, the Australian Council of Social Service is calling for the basic rate of the Newstart Allowance to be increased by \$54 per week.

In addition to the immediate financial security of low-paid and unemployed workers, there needs to be a renewed commitment to protecting basic conditions of work, increasing investment in education and skills training, and to creating real jobs, particularly in areas and among groups for whom the market has failed to provide.

It is unfair that low-paid workers are carrying the cost of the purported creation of jobs through reduced wages and the loss of entitlements such as Sunday penalty rates. It is unjust that the unemployed are told constantly that they owe something to society in return for unemployment benefits when our economy fails to provide the real jobs they deserve. We must move beyond a situation where the poorest groups in our society carry economic burdens that the entire community should shoulder.

As St John Paul II said all those years ago:

Every partner in this common endeavour should act on the conviction that everyone has a basic right to work in order to have a fair share of the world's goods. It must be stressed that all the partners have a duty to work for solutions that respect the dignity of the individual and the common good of society.<sup>17</sup>

Most Rev. Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFMConv STL DD  
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## Notes

1. Pope John Paul II (1986), 'Address to Industrial Workers', in *The Pope in Australia: Collected Homilies and Talks*, St Paul Publications, pp.63–64.
2. Pope John Paul II (1986), 'Address on Unemployment', in *The Pope in Australia: Collected Homilies and Talks*, St Paul Publications, pp.102–104.
3. Pope John Paul II, (1981), *Laborem Exercens*, Encyclical Letter of Human Work, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, n.25.
4. *Ibid*, n.6.
5. *Ibid*, n.9.
6. *Ibid*, n.16.
7. *Ibid* n.19.
8. Australian Council of Social Service (2016), *Poverty in Australia 2016*, ACOSS & SPRC, p.13.
9. Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (2017), Living Wage Claim and Submission, Annual Wage review 2016–17, ACCER, pp.2, 9, 17.
10. Jim Stanford (2017), *A Transition to Nowhere: On the impossibility of avoiding the social costs of reduced penalty rates*, The Australia Institute, pp.1, 2; The Australia Institute (2017), *Women's Wages and the Penalty Rate Cut*, Fact Sheet, p.1.
11. Pope John Paul II (1981), n.18.
12. Pope John Paul II (1986), 'Address on Unemployment', p.100.
13. Australian Council of Social Service (2016), pp. 13, 28.
14. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017), *Labour Force, Australia, Mar 2017*, 6202.0; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017), *Job Vacancies, Australia, Feb 2017*, 6354.0.
15. Australian Council of Social Service (2017), *Design, scope, cost-benefit analysis, contracts awarded and implementation associated with the Better Management of the Social Welfare System initiative*, Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs, pp.1, 3–4, 10.
16. Pope John Paul II (1986), 'Address on Unemployment', p.103.
17. Pope John Paul II (1986), 'Address to Industrial Workers', p.63.