

Justice

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All must be involved

The bishops' document states that every Catholic has a responsibility to work for justice. Entire sections of the bishops' statement are devoted to common workers; owners, managers and investors; families; and consumers.

"Catholics are called by God to protect human life, to promote human dignity, to defend the poor and to seek the common good," the document said. "This social mission of the church belongs to all of us."

Kathy Dubel, justice and peace coordinator for Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier, said she hopes that "Catholic CEOs, stockbrokers and corporate board members read this (statement) and really pray and reflect." This process, she said, could perhaps keep a corporation from "downsizing and moving a production site to Haiti or somewhere else where there's sweatshops."

Karen Rinefierd said that the bishops' statement applies to people of all economic backgrounds — from a worker who has just been laid off, to a corporate president.

"It asks all of us to use the same mechanism in all parts of our life," said Rinefierd, the diocesan coordinator of young adult, adult and family faith formation.

That mechanism, according to the bishops, is rooted in family life.

"Our families are the starting point and the center of a vocation for justice," the statement said. "How we treat our parents, spouses and children is a reflection of our commitment to Christ's love and justice. We demonstrate our commitment to the Gospel by how we spend our time and money, and whether our family life includes an ethic of charity, service and action for justice. The lessons we teach our children through what we do as well as what we say determines whether they care for the 'least among us.'"

Catholic parishes, also, are called to greater responsibility, the bishops declared.

"Our culture often suggests that religion is a private matter, to be tolerated as long as it is detached from our lives as workers and citizens," the document said. "Catholic men and women look to our parishes and find the support, tools and concrete help they need to resist this tendency."

Scott, from the National Center for the Laity, emphasizes that parishioners, not just pastors, play vital parts in this process.

"There is a failure on the part of Christians to assume adult roles in the church. There is a tendency to rely on clergy, rather

than take roles," Scott said. "It is ultimately up to adult lay leaders to assume responsibility for action. It cannot be left to the hierarchy."

Unfortunately, McMahon said, parish social ministry committees are often strapped for members.

"It's a small core group of people that are called upon to do everything," he commented.

As a result, Emerson said, consciousness about social justice can be lacking.

"A lot of times, we don't see the needs. We have a vague understanding, but we don't want to know," Emerson said.

"People go about their business and everything's fine — if it doesn't affect them," McMahon remarked.

For instance, he said, many Livingston County residents may be unaware of the large number of families served by his office who live below the federal poverty line because they work for minimum wage. A number of their employers, he added, do not offer health benefits.

"You're in a no-win situation already, and then something could happen to a family and they can't afford health care," McMahon said.

What you can do

One way for Catholics to put the bishops' vision into action, McMahon suggested, is by petitioning state legislators to raise the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$6.15 per hour. He explained that the federal government does not have immediate plans to raise the minimum wage, but several states have passed legislation instead — largely through citizens' petitions.

In the Finger Lakes, Emerson said, residents can work for justice by appealing for laws that ensure dignity for the many migrant workers who live in the area.

And in the Southern Tier, Dubel noted, several parish social ministry committees have petitioned state lawmakers to pass legislation to join the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact, a six-state coalition that works to stabilize milk prices so that hard-pressed family dairy farms can stay in business. (New York is not yet a compact member.) Dubel pointed out that many of the petitioners aren't directly affected by this issue, but have helped out nonetheless.

The bishops' statement offers several suggestions as well: "The Catholic social mission is also carried forward by believers who join unions, neighborhood organizations, business groups, civic associations, the pro-life movement, groups working for justice, or environmental, civil rights or peace groups."

Scott, from the National Center for the Laity, said that Catholics may even consid-

er switching jobs to protest injustices.

"I don't know how anybody can work in the tobacco industry without raising questions about respect for life, or be a prison worker without raising questions about capital punishment," Scott said.

Dubel and Rinefierd said that consumers, also, can work for justice through their purchasing decisions at holiday time.

"Are we going to buy a gift made in Haiti, where people are working for nine cents per hour?" Dubel remarked.

"How much are you spending toward gifts for your loved ones, and what percentage is for those who are obviously more in need?" Rinefierd said.

Rinefierd added that justice can also be pursued through giving of time — "for the lonely and grieving, those going through a divorce or a breakup of a relationship," she said.

A timely reminder

The bishops' document is consistent with Pope John Paul II's longstanding desire to view the new millennium as a time for renewal.

"It's another opportunity to raise our general consciousness. Anything that brings that to the forefront, I think that's a positive," McMahon said.

Scott noted that the National Center for the Laity will act on the bishops' wishes by hosting a workshop in Chicago in April 1999, "Monday into Sunday: A Gathering

of Pastoral Staff and Experienced Lay Leaders in the Work to Faith Movement." This will kick off a five-year plan, Scott said, for the National Center for the Laity to establish regional centers for lay formation.

Whatever initiatives are taken toward justice, Rinefierd said, we should be sincere about following through.

"The calendar helps us make sense of our lives, but we might make resolutions every January and stop doing them a week later," she remarked. "The church is asking us to make more significant changes as we approach the millennium, and to be daring — selling the second car, getting along with less, redoing the personal budget so you can tithe."

Dubel said it's important to implement initiatives quickly — to "keep the ideas alive, in little or big ways" — so they don't get pushed to the back burner.

Although the document was only recently adopted, the bishops said that its message is timeless.

"This call takes on renewed urgency as we approach the Great Jubilee, but it is not new," the document said.

McMahon agreed, commenting, "It is firmly in the tradition of Catholic social teaching."

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EDITORS' NOTE: The full text of "Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice" is available on the national bishops' Web site, www.nccbuscc.org.

A millennium pledge for justice

The "Jubilee Pledge for Charity, Justice and Peace — A Catholic Commitment for the New Millennium" was approved Nov. 17 at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops gathering in Washington, D.C. The pledge responds to Pope John Paul II's designation of 1999 as a "year of charity," and will be distributed to every parish across the country in early 1999. It reads as follows:

The jubilee of our Lord's birth calls us "to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners." (Luke 4:18)

As disciples of Jesus in the new Millennium, I/we pledge to:

Pray regularly for greater justice and peace.

Learn more about Catholic social teaching and its call to protect human life, stand with the poor, and care for creation.

Reach across boundaries of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and disabling conditions.

Live justly in family life, school work, the marketplace, and the political arena.

Serve those who are poor and vulnerable, sharing more time and talent. Give more generously to those in need at home and abroad.

Advocate public policies that protect human life, promote human dignity, preserve God's creation, and build peace.

Encourage others to work for greater charity, justice, and peace.

The pledge concludes with a quote from the pope's 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*:

Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice.

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