



THE DIGNITY OF WORK

A STATEMENT FROM THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF MARYLAND

January 2014

"It is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labor that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use."

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*

Throughout the history of the social teachings of the Church, the right of all people to fair compensation for their labor has been upheld as an essential element of a just society. As early as the late 19th century, Pope Leo XIII recognized the principle that workers should be paid a wage sufficient to support a family as "a dictate of natural justice more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and man." [*Rerum Novarum*] As Pope Francis continues to captivate the world through his powerful challenges to care for the least among us, he frequently echoes his predecessors in highlighting the importance of providing opportunities for meaningful work as a path out of poverty.

Here in Maryland, measures to support working families through just compensation and a healthy work environment will be prevalent issues during the 2014 session of the Maryland General Assembly. Legislation to raise the state's minimum wage and to allow workers to earn paid sick leave for time worked deserve the serious consideration of our legislature. We urge our lawmakers to support final measures that will treat Maryland's workers fairly while sustaining local businesses and the jobs they provide.

A full-time worker earning the state's current minimum wage of \$7.25 earns little more than \$15,000 annually, hardly enough to pay for food and rent, let alone support a family. More than 80 percent of the state's low-wage earners are adults, and many are parents trying to provide the necessities of life for their children. They deserve the comfort of knowing that their hard work can provide the means they need to achieve economic stability for themselves and their families. Further, the majority of Maryland's low-wage workers have no access to paid sick leave, leaving them to choose between coming to work sick or losing a day's wage. It is in the best interests of all to enact reasonable policies that keep our workplaces healthy by allowing workers to stay home when they or their dependent family members are sick, without undue penalties.

As the state's largest private social service provider, we witness in our Catholic ministries the painful reality of those who struggle to keep up with the basic costs of food, rent, utilities and transportation. This desperate cycle cannot end unless we as a society find a way to give all capable men and women the chance to work at a job through which they can live with true independence and dignity. While we hope one day the issue of raising the minimum wage will be addressed at the federal level, we cannot afford to wait in Maryland. As Pope Francis reminds us, "The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies." May these concerns guide the decisions of Maryland's legislators this year as they debate these important issues.