

The Economic Crisis and Catholic Social Principles

Twenty-five years ago, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a landmark pastoral letter, “Economic Justice for All.” In light of the current economic crisis and to enable us to participate in the political debates concerning the government’s response to the crisis, we should keep in mind the principles of “Economic Justice for All.”

- Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person.
- Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community. In our teaching, the human person is not only sacred but social. ... The obligation to "love our neighbor" has an individual dimension, but it also requires a broader social commitment to the common good.
- All people have a right to participate in the economic life of society. Basic justice demands that people be assured a minimum level of participation in the economy.
- All members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable. From the Scriptures and church teaching, we learn that the justice of a society is tested by the treatment of the poor.
- Human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community. In Catholic teaching, human rights include not only civil and political rights but also economic rights.
- Society as a whole ... has the moral responsibility to enhance human dignity and protect human rights.

In addition to these six principles, other important excerpts from the pastoral letter call us to reflect as we participate in the economy and the political process.

- The commandments to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself are the heart and soul of Christian morality. (no. 64)
- Basic justice also calls for the establishment of a floor of material well-being on which all can stand. This is a duty of the whole of society and it creates particular obligations for those with greater resources. This duty calls into question extreme inequalities of income and consumption when so many lack basic necessities. Catholic social teaching does not maintain that a flat, arithmetical equality of income and wealth is a demand of justice, but it does challenge

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economic arrangements that leave large numbers of people impoverished. Further, it sees extreme inequality as a threat to the solidarity of the human community, for great disparities lead to deep social divisions and conflict. This means that all of us must examine our way of living in the light of the needs of the poor. Christian faith and the norms of justice impose distinct limits on what we consume and how we view material goods. (nos. 74-75)

- "Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute or unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities." Pope John Paul II has referred to limits placed on ownership by the duty to serve the common good as a "social mortgage" on private property. (no. 115)
- The serious distortion of national economic priorities produced by massive national spending on defense must be remedied. ... Moreover, the dedication of so much of the national budget to military purposes has been disastrous for the poor and vulnerable members of our own and other nations. The nation's spending priorities need to be revised in the interests of both justice and peace. (no. 320)

The following table is a snapshot comparison of key economic indicators that compare 1986 (when the U.S. Catholic bishops released their economic justice pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All") with the most current data available (FY2012 defense budget, August 2011 unemployment, and 2010 figures for people living in poverty, those without medical insurance, and union membership).

	1986	Current
U.S. Population	240 million	312 million
Defense Budget	\$276 billion	\$683 billion
Unemployed	8 million	14.0 million
Unemployment Rate	7.0%	9.1%
People Living in Poverty	33 million	46.2 million
Poverty Rate	13.6%	15.1%
Union Membership	17 million	14.7 million
Rate of Union Members	17.5%	11.9%
People Without Health Insurance	31 million	49.9 million
Rate of People Without Health Insurance	12.9%	16.3%

The complete text of "Economic Justice for All" is available on the following USCCB website:
http://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf.