

SALT *and* LIGHT

Labor Day Statement 2016

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In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.

– Psalm 90:1

This Labor Day, we draw our attention to our sisters and brothers who face twin crises—deep trials in both the world of work and the state of the family. These challenging times can pull us toward despair and all the many dangers that come with it. Into this reality, the Church shares a word of hope, directing hearts and minds to the dignity of each human person and the sanctity of work itself, which is given by God. She seeks to replace desperation and isolation with human concern and true solidarity, reaffirming the trust in a good and gracious God who knows what we need before we ask him (Mt. 6:8).

A World of Work in Disarray

We behold signs that have become too familiar in the years following the Great Recession: stagnant wages, industry leaving towns and cities behind, and the sharp decline in the rate of private-sector organized labor, which fell by more than two-thirds between 1973 and 2009 down to 7%. Millions of families still find themselves living in poverty, unable to work their way out. Poverty rates among children are alarmingly high, with almost 40 percent of American children spending at least one year in poverty before they turn eighteen. Although this reality is felt nation-wide, this year new research has emerged showing the acute pain of middle and rural America in the wake of the departure of industry. Once the center of labor and the promise of family-sustaining wages, research shows these communities collapsing today, substance abuse on the rise, and an increase in the number of broken families.

Family in Crisis

The family is bent under the weight of these economic pressures and related cultural problems. Pope Francis, at the conclusion of his address to Congress last September, spoke of the consequences for families:

How essential the family has been to the building of this country! And how worthy it remains of our support and encouragement! . . . In particular, I would like to call attention to those family members who are the most vulnerable, the young. For many of them, a future filled with countless possibilities beckons, yet so many others seem disoriented and aimless, trapped in a hopeless maze of violence, abuse and despair. Their problems are our problems. We cannot avoid them. We need to face them together, to talk about them and to seek effective solutions rather than getting bogged down in discussions. At the risk of oversimplifying, we might say that we live in a culture which pressures young people not to start a family, because they lack possibilities for the future. Yet this same culture presents others with so many options that they too are dissuaded from starting a family.¹

Economic and political forces have led to increasingly lowered economic prospects for Americans without access to higher education, which is having a direct impact on family health and stability. For example, over half of parents between the ages of 26 and 31 now have children outside of a marriage, and research shows a major factor is the lack middle-skill jobs – careers by which someone can sustain a family above the poverty line without

¹ Pope Francis, Address to U.S. Congress, September 24, 2015.

a college degree – in regions with high income inequality. Divorce rates and the rate of single-parent households break down along similar educational and economic lines. Financial concerns and breakdowns in family life can lead to a sense of hopelessness and despair. The Rust Belt region now appears to have the highest concentration in the nation of drug-related deaths, including from overdoses of heroin and prescription drugs.

The Church weeps with all of these families, with these children, whose homes and worlds are broken. As Pope Francis has said: “There are many unjust situations, but we know that God is suffering with us, experiencing them at our side. He does not abandon us. Jesus not only wanted to show solidarity with every person. He not only wanted everyone to experience his companionship, his help, his love. He identified with all those who suffer, who weep, who suffer any kind of injustice. He says this clearly: ‘I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’ (Mt. 25:35).”²

“So That They May All Be One” – John 17:21

When we begin to look for answers to these realities, we gain less confidence from many of our political leaders these days. Instead of dialogue and constructive solutions that bring people together, we see increasing efforts to divide as a means to gain support. But more divisions are never the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:19-21). When our leaders ought to be calling us toward a vision of the common good that lifts the human spirit and seeks to soothe our tendencies toward fear, we find our insecurities exploited as a means to further partisan agendas. Our leaders must never use anxiety as a means to manipulate persons in desperate situations, or to pit one group of persons against another for political gain. For our dynamics to change, we must replace fear with a fuller vision that can be powerfully supported by our faith.

The Good News is Still Good

Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light” (Mt. 11:28-30). Let us begin by going to the Lord, laying our burdens at the foot of His cross and giving over our hearts that we might find rest.

Pope Francis paints a picture of a lasting answer to the growing isolation and desperation that we see all around us. To counter hopelessness, he tells us that the Christian community gets involved “by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances . . . and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.”³ In the face of endless, hectic activity and self-concern, the Church “is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance,” as well as “patience and disregard for constraints of time.”⁴ The kind of encounter that we offer can be transformative, fill others with a sense of their God-given dignity, and help them to know they are not alone in their struggles. The Church’s history is filled with communities that took seriously the call to be their “brother’s keeper” (Gen. 4:9), faced challenges together, and lifted up the “cry of the poor” (Psalm 34:7). For those who feel left behind today, know that the Church wants to walk with you, in the company of the God who formed your “inmost being” and who knows that you are “wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139:13-14).

Dignified work is at the heart of our efforts because we draw insight into who we are as human beings from it. Saint John Paul II reminded us that human labor is an essential key to understanding our social relationships, vital to family formation and the building up of community according to our God-given dignity. He wrote “. . . man’s life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity.”⁵ We know work has dignity because Jesus “devoted most of the years of his life on earth to *manual work* at the carpenter’s bench. This circumstance constitutes in itself the most eloquent ‘Gospel of work,’ showing that the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person.”⁶ Poverty therefore appears “as a *result of the violation of the dignity of human work*: either because the opportunities for human work are limited as a result of the scourge of unemployment, or

² Pope Francis, Address to St. Patrick in the City, Washington, DC, September 24, 2015.

³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Laborem Exercens*, no. 1.

⁶ *Laborem Exercens*, no. 6.

because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family.”⁷

In our call to rebuild community on a firmer foundation, we must rely upon the sister principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. Solidarity recognizes that each of us is connected, and that we all have the responsibility to care for one another, particularly those who are poor and vulnerable. The principle of subsidiarity recognizes that issues facing human beings should be addressed at the appropriate level of society with the capacity to do so, and often in concert with others.

The first response, then, is local, to look to our neighbors in need, our brothers and sisters who may be without sufficient work for their families, and offer them help. That help may take the form of food, money, counsel, friendship, spiritual support or other forms of love and kindness. We ought to expect this kind of engagement from Christians in the midst of our difficulties, and we should pray to find ways to provide it as members of the Church. If you are an employer, you are called to respect the dignity of your workers through a just wage and working conditions that allow for a secure family life.

As we engage with our neighbors and our communities, we quickly find ways to deepen solidarity in a broader way, and to act on the structures and policies that impact meaningful work and family stability. The mystical body of Christ is alive across our nation and world, and our response in Christ looks to our larger society as well. “Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also ‘macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones.’”⁸ Simply put, we must advocate for jobs and wages that truly provide a dignified life for individuals and their families, and for working conditions that are safe and allow for a full flourishing of life outside of the workplace. Unions and worker associations, while imperfect, remain an essential part of the effort, and people of faith and goodwill can be powerful leaven to ensure that these groups, so important in society, continue to keep human dignity at the heart of their efforts.

As the fruits of solidarity and our care for one another increase, as we begin to make real impacts toward policies that help individuals begin stable families and live in accord with their dignity, the tired paradigm that fuels our national politics will be challenged. As Pope Francis has written “[e]very economic and political theory or action must set about providing each inhabitant of the planet with the minimum wherewithal to live in dignity and freedom, with the possibility of supporting a family, educating children, praising God and developing one’s own human potential.”⁹ With time, we will begin to restore a sense of hope and lasting change that places our economic and political systems at the service of the human person once more.

Let us always remember in these difficult times the Lord’s offer of “rest” for “all you who labor and are burdened.” As Pope Francis writes, the Sabbath Day “proclaims ‘man’s eternal rest in God.’”¹⁰ As we advocate for all who are struggling to find sufficient work that honors their dignity, we should also affirm in society the need of all people to rest, and finally to “rest in God.” In times of restlessness and discouragement, let us recall the beautiful prayer of St. Augustine, who wrote: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

There is much to be done! Let us go forth with the hopeful expectation of the Psalmist:

***Fill us at daybreak with your kindness,
that we may shout for joy and gladness all our days.
And may the gracious care of the LORD our God be ours;
prosper the work of our hands for us!
Prosper the work of our hands! (Psalm 90:14-17)***

⁷ *Laborem Exercens*, no. 8.

⁸ *Laudato Si*, no. 231, quoting *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 2.

⁹ Pope Francis, Letter to H.E. Mr David Cameron, British Prime Minister, on the Occasion of the G8 Meeting (17-18 June 2013)

¹⁰ *Laudato Si*, no. 237, quoting *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2175.