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LABOR DAY

This weekend all of us will enjoy a holiday with the first Monday of September. We take time off from busy schedules to relax and to be with family members and friends. We catch our breath as we gear up for what will again be for most of us a busy and hectic fall. Parishes gear up for meetings and such activities as religious education and RCIA programs. Labor Day – time out from work – should remind us of the value of work, which greatly affects our own self-image, self-identity and self-understanding.

Pope John Paul II wrote an important encyclical 20 years ago, titled *Laborem Exercens*, in which he reaffirms Catholic teaching on the dignity of work and the rights of the worker. The fundamental truth of faith is that people are more important than things. Hence, the Holy Father's assertion: "Work is for the person, not the person for work". In the Book of Genesis, we read that human beings are created in God's image and they share in the tasks of the Creator through their own work. As Christians, we see ourselves as collaborators with God. Work, in this sense, defines a person. We identify individuals with their employment, profession or career. Wherever individuals work and at whatever task, their skills and efforts make an important contribution that benefits others. People share their giftedness and apply their talents for the building up of the human community.

Every worker, no matter how menial the task, has an inherent dignity and is worthy of respect, support and affirmation. Unfortunately, even in our own country, many low-wage workers find it difficult to meet their own human needs and those of their families. They seek meaningful employment and try to achieve self-sufficiency so they can enjoy self-respect and self-satisfaction. There are many living among us who struggle to find decent and affordable housing, health care and safe childcare. It's hard to comprehend, but all too true, that many of the homeless in our communities do have jobs, yet they cannot afford decent housing. It's hard to justify that in a country like ours, with so many benefits available, over 40 million Americans are without any health insurance – many of whom are women and children.

Recent efforts have been made to reform the welfare system, which was subject to abuses and exploitation and which also fostered chronic dependency. Yes, the welfare rolls have now been reduced significantly – but at what cost? Our enthusiasm over decreasing welfare numbers should be tempered by the reality of persistent poverty and wages too meager to provide a family's needs. Many might be leaving the welfare rolls, but too few have walked out of poverty.

We also should show concern for those who come to us from abroad and who labor in many important industries. Migrant workers and undocumented aliens are especially vulnerable because they do not have permanent legal status and the protections it provides. I for one am in favor of some type of amnesty for such workers and their families, because they form an important element of our nation's economy. A legalization program for these workers would help protect their basic labor rights and ensure that they are afforded a living wage and decent working conditions.

In Catholic teaching, work should not be viewed as a burden or punishment, but as an expression of one's dignity and creativity. Those who can work should be gainfully employed. I have become conscious of many recently announced plant or business layoffs. This time, many in middle management have become victims of cutbacks. One can easily imagine what terrible effects such firings have not only on the individual, but also on family life. Mergers might please stockholders, but they leave much hurt and potential disaster in their wake for employees.

Our Church has always been on the side of the worker, favoring the right to a decent living wage, to good and fair working conditions, to such benefits as health care and retirement plans and to the right of collective bargaining. Everyone who works fulltime should earn enough to raise a family. In today's economy, both husband and wife are forced to work outside the home just to make ends meet. Some heads of households have to work more than one job just to provide the basic necessities for the family. One can imagine the negative effect and pressures on family life if spouses have little quality time for one another, and for their children, much less for relaxation and refreshment.

I certainly support ongoing efforts to raise the minimum wage. Even the proposed modest increase in the minimum wage will not allow many to escape the hellish cycle of poverty. If we wonder in dismay why 1.8 million people in our country languish in prison, we can point to the impoverishment and the lack of hope in the lives of so many Americans. Without a sense of future, without a freedom from hopelessness and desperation, so many turn to crime

as a solution to impoverishment. Raising the minimum wage is just a beginning, but it is the least we should do.

This Labor Day let us recommit ourselves to the solidarity of workers and to solidarity with workers. In Catholic social tradition, the economy exists to serve the human person and the human community – and not the other way around. The moral measure of any economy is not simply the wealth that it creates, the trade it encourages or the goods it produces. The true measure of a good economy is how the lives and dignity of the poor and vulnerable, the hungry and destitute are protected and promoted. The message is ever clear and ever valid: “Work is for the person, not the person for work.” May we celebrate the true meaning of this Labor Day, the second of this new millennium.

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