

Healing Economy

The Catholic Review

Earlier this month, we celebrated Labor Day, a national holiday to honor working people. But for millions of Americans, there has been little cause for celebration.

Over nine percent in the nation are looking for work and millions who actually have jobs fear losing them, so precarious is the economic situation. Sadly, unemployment is significantly higher among African-American and Hispanic workers.

Our elected officials are squarely focused on but deeply divided over the matter of the creation of jobs as a means of pulling the country out of the economic malaise in which we've been mired for too long. There are few visible signs that progress is on the horizon.

And it's not just politicians who are voicing their concerns. The nation's Catholic bishops are speaking out about the alarming impact of such chronic unemployment, especially on American families and children.

"Widespread unemployment, underemployment and pervasive poverty are diminishing human lives, undermining human dignity, and hurting children and families," wrote Archbishop Timothy Dolan, president of our Bishops Conference, in a letter sent this past week to the nation's Catholic bishops. "I hope we can use our opportunities as pastors, teachers and leaders to focus public attention and priority on the scandal of so much poverty and so many without work in our society."

Archbishop Dolan's pleas come 120 years after Pope Leo XIII's groundbreaking encyclical "Rerum Novarum," considered by many to be the cornerstone of Catholic

social teaching because it insisted upon the inherent dignity of the worker in the midst of the Industrial Revolution.

Today, with wages (for those fortunate enough to have jobs) lagging behind the rising costs of everyday necessities, and millions of Americans having lost their homes and countless more owing more on theirs than they are worth, the wounds inflicted by unemployment are deepening.

This sad reality was confirmed by the latest U.S. Census data. Released this past week, the census showed that residents of our own city have been among the hardest hit, as one in four Baltimore residents is living in poverty, an increase of more than 20 percent since just last year! Baltimore's poverty rate - at 25.6 percent - is 15 percent higher than Maryland's and 10 percent above the national average. The poverty rate among children in Baltimore exceeds 37 percent.

Not surprisingly, the demand for services and charitable resources in our area has jumped sharply. Our Catholic Charities - the best in the nation, I believe - is the Church's local leader in providing such assistance to those impacted by the scourge of unemployment.

Many of the agency's 80-plus programs provide emergency assistance to families and individuals impacted by the lack of employment, such as temporary housing and hot meals. Catholic Charities also boasts several programs designed to get people back into the workforce.

- Christopher Place Employment Academy, an intensive 18-month residential program, provides education and training as well as emotional, spiritual, and addiction-recovery support to formerly homeless and/or incarcerated men. In fiscal year 2011, 93 men were placed in a job; 88 percent with average starting wages of \$9.50 or higher.

- Our Daily Bread Employment Services provide poor, homeless and disadvantaged persons with a graduated transition back into the workforce. In FY '11, 213 people were placed in jobs with an average starting wage of \$9.00 an hour.
- Families that Work assists women who are temporary cash assistance recipients starting in their third trimester of pregnancy with attaining the life skills and employment skills necessary to secure employment and maintain a healthy, balanced life following the birth of their child. In FY '11, 25 women were placed in jobs with an average starting wage of \$8.00 an hour.
- Senior Community Service Employment Program helps low-income individuals who are age 55 and older with their search for employment by placing individuals in a non-profit agency training position where they are paid minimum wage for 19 hours a week. In FY '11, 111 seniors participated in the training program and 51 percent received employment as a result.
- Project Fresh Start provides 35 families with safe and appropriate housing, while engaging children and parents in intensive, focused case management and support services, thus supporting the head of house in securing or maintaining employment.
- My Sister's Place Women's Center, a comprehensive resource center for homeless and impoverished women and children in Baltimore, provides emergency support, education support, and referral for housing and job placement. In FY '11, 51 women were placed in jobs earning an average wage of \$8.00 an hour.

Once seen primarily as an agency for the disadvantaged few, Catholic Charities is serving an increasing number of "newly poor," a phrase that has recently come into existence to describe a new and growing segment of our society.

"Seventy percent of all low-income families in Maryland, while employed, are not earning enough to get themselves out of poverty," Catholic Charities Executive

Director Bill McCarthy said. “The backgrounds of individuals seeking services are becoming ever more diverse in terms of educational background, work history, geography and other circumstances. They are our neighbors. Our services must continue to evolve to meet the diverse needs of those seeking help.”

During the past three years, more than 145 employers have partnered with Catholic Charities in hiring individuals who are transitioning back into the workforce. These kinds of grassroots partnerships – people helping other people in need to help themselves – are integral to breaking the cycle of poverty in our community.

Catholic Charities and its partners are living out the examples on display in both the Old and New Testament. From them, we learn that God cares for the poor and vulnerable and he measures the faith of the community by its treatment of those on the margins of life. Jesus during his time on earth taught us about the dignity of work and said we would be judged by our response “to the least of these” (Mt 25).

In Catholic teaching, work has an inherent dignity because work helps us not only to meet our needs and provide for our families, but also to complement God’s creation and contribute to the common good. People need work not only to pay bills, put food on the table and stay in their homes, but also to maintain their human dignity and to enrich and strengthen the larger community (Gaudium et Spes, no. 34).

As our government leaders consider ways of addressing our own economic problems, it would be unfair to make any cuts that would undermine poverty-focused international assistance, an essential tool in promoting human life and dignity, advancing solidarity with poorer nations and enhancing global security.

As we continue to pray for all those who suffer on the margins of life because of the current economic crisis, might each of us think of ways, one-on-one, to help a neighbor or family in distress? In doing so, might we keep before us these words of

our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, as we look with prayerful hope to the future:

“The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future” (Caritas in Veritate, no. 21).