

Prayers for a Healing Economy

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.

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