

# Labor Day Statement

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## A Dream for a Better Economy

Brothers and sisters, a year and a half after the country started shutting down due to COVID-19, we see signs of both encouraging recovery as well as ongoing trials. There are still many uncertainties around this pandemic; however, we do know that our society and our world will never be the same. In this time, Pope Francis has given us much to reflect on in relation to Labor Day, including his latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, and the initiative with young economists and entrepreneurs known as the *Economy of Francesco*. As Pope Francis has said, “We never emerge from a crisis unaffected: either we end up better or worse.”<sup>1</sup> What do the signs of the times tell us, and how can we apply what the Holy Father is offering to inspire us towards a better economy?

### **Recovery for Some; For Others, Difficulties Persist**

On this Labor Day, I express my gratitude to the many workers who have kept our country functioning during these trying times and worked under difficult and often underappreciated conditions. We also pray for those who lost or continue to lack resources or income, as research indicates that 47% of adults experienced employment income loss between March 2020 and February 2021. Recent reports of increases in personal income and spending give us hope that the economy is recovering in meaningful ways. Compared to March of last year, when the unemployment rate had increased by the largest over-the-month increase since 1975, the unemployment rate today is considerably lower. However, it remains higher than it was prior to COVID; even before the pandemic, nearly 40% of Americans struggled to cover an unexpected \$400 expense.

As is, sadly, common with economic crises, COVID increased people’s vulnerability to exploitation. The national human trafficking hotline handled a 40% increase in emergency trafficking cases in the month after shelter-in-place orders. Communities of color have been particularly vulnerable to human trafficking and have been disparately impacted by income loss and job loss. Adults in lower-income households were more likely to experience employment income loss than those from higher income households. And women accounted for more than half of the job losses during the first seven months of recession, even though they make up less than half of the workforce.

Of course, this is all in the context of grieving for the more than 600,000 people who have died due to COVID in the U.S. alone. It is especially heartbreaking that up to 43,000 minor children in the U.S. have lost a parent as a result of the pandemic. The families who lost a breadwinner are now more financially vulnerable, with a projected 42 million people in the United States experiencing food insecurity this year, including 13 million children.

## **Imagining A Better Economy and a More Fraternal World**

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis shares a vision for a post-COVID world that aspires to a global fraternity which leaves no one at the margins of society. He decries the reality that women are not yet recognized as having the same dignity as men, that racism shamefully continues, and that those who are poor, disabled, unborn, or elderly are often considered dispensable.<sup>2</sup> In response to this throwaway culture, the Holy Father invites us all to, "...dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home..."<sup>3</sup>

Pope Francis reflected that such a universal fraternity can only be accomplished when our social and economic systems stop producing victims.<sup>4</sup> Rejecting a neoliberal vision, Francis writes that markets cannot solve societal problems on their own; therefore, proactive policies centered on the common good must be created.<sup>5</sup> In an effort to "'re-animate' the economy" with a new economic model based on fraternity and equality, last year Pope Francis launched the Economy of Francesco event, rooted in Saint Francis of Assisi's example of embracing the poor and an integral ecology.<sup>6</sup> In his video message to participants, the Holy Father shared with participants, "Once the present health crisis has passed, the worst reaction would be to fall even more deeply into feverish consumerism and forms of selfish self-protection..."<sup>7</sup>

Instead, Pope Francis promotes a new *ethos* around economic thinking, as he writes of the thinking of economists Mariana Mazzucato and Kate Raworth:

I see ideas formed from their experience in the periphery, reflecting a concern about the grotesque inequality of billions facing extreme poverty while the richest one percent own half of the world's financial wealth. . . . I see thinking that is not ideological, which moves beyond the polarization of free market capitalism and state socialism, and which has at its heart a concern that all of humanity have access to land, lodging, and labor. All of these speak to priorities of the Gospel and the principles of the Church's social doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

It is our task not only to reflect on the present ills of our economy, but also to build consensus around human dignity and the common good, the bedrocks of Catholic social teaching, and to answer the Pope's call to propose new and creative economic responses to human need, both locally and globally.

## **The Church's Ministries Respond**

From theory to practice, Catholic parishes and ministries have been working during this crisis to fulfill Pope Francis' vision that, "all those places where the Church is present, especially our parishes and our communities, may become islands of mercy in the midst of the sea of indifference!"<sup>9</sup> In the first six months of the pandemic, Catholic Charities agencies distributed nearly \$400 million in emergency assistance including food, personal protective equipment, baby supplies and quarantine housing for the homeless. Additionally, the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has been more vital than ever during the pandemic. For example, the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center hosted Covid-19 Safety Awareness Worker & Community Training in order to keep essential workers safe. The Chicago Workers' Collaborative protected workers by monitoring and reporting safety violations by factories and warehouses, and worked to increase essential workers' access to vaccines.

Throughout the pandemic, the bishops have advocated in favor of nutrition programs, an eviction moratorium, income and employment support, safety measures for those who are incarcerated, and access to health care.<sup>10</sup> During consideration of legislative proposals on infrastructure, the bishops shared with members of the U.S. Congress that Pope Francis considers employment to be the “biggest issue” in politics as it relates to reducing economic inequality. We emphasized the importance of creating jobs for those who are poor and marginalized, prioritizing organized labor and continued protection of workers’ rights. We also called for the legislation to support working families and address the ecological crisis that impacts all workers.<sup>11</sup>

## **Going Forward**

This Sunday’s second reading instructs us to show no partiality as we adhere to the faith. St. James tells us that we become judges with evil designs when we remain distant from the poor (James 2: 1-5). Pope Francis has made a similar point as he observes that we sometimes justify our indifference for the poor by looking the other way and living our lives as if they simply do not exist.<sup>12</sup> Not only are our actions insufficient, but our sight as well, when we ignore the poor and do not allow their pleas to touch our hearts. Let us accept together the challenge of reemerging from this crisis with an economy that works for all of God’s children. Let us first pray for those who have died, their loved ones, those who are ill, those who have lost their jobs, and for an end to this crisis. Let us do what we can to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities from rising infections. We also invite all who are able to volunteer and donate at your local parish, Catholic Charities site, or CCHD-supported organization in rebuilding our communities. Finally, let us engage in building “a better kind of politics” by entering into dialogue with elected officials, calling them to an authentic politics that is rooted in the dignity of the human person and promotes the common good.<sup>13</sup>

The pandemic has universally presented us with many shared experiences. May we build on this moment with a global fraternity that transcends partisanship and eradicates injustices in all its forms.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Meeting (Nov. 21, 2020). [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201121\\_videomessaggio-economy-of-francesco.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201121_videomessaggio-economy-of-francesco.html) (hereinafter Economy of Francesco Video Message).

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 23, 20, 18. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html#\\_ftnref104](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html#_ftnref104) (hereinafter *Fratelli Tutti*)

<sup>3</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Letter Sent by the Holy Father for the Event “Economy of Francesco” (Mar. 26-28, 2020).

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190501\\_giovani-imprenditori.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190501_giovani-imprenditori.html) (hereinafter Economy of Francesco Letter).

<sup>5</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 168.

<sup>6</sup> Economy of Francesco Letter.

<sup>7</sup> Economy of Francesco Video Message.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream* (2020), 64-65.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for Lent 2015 (Oct. 4, 2014).

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141004\\_messaggio-quaresima2015.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco_20141004_messaggio-quaresima2015.html)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/resources/background-19-relief-meets-needs-poor-vulnerable-january-2021>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/resources/letter-congress-concerning-legislation-infrastructure-april-22-2021>

<sup>12</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 73.

<sup>13</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 154.