

Restoring the Covenant

A
PASTORAL
LETTER
ON SOCIETY'S
RESPONSIBILITY
TO THE POOR
AND VULNERABLE

BY THE
CATHOLIC
BISHOPS
OF
NEW YORK STATE



NEW YORK STATE CATHOLIC CONFERENCE



INTRODUCTION:

WHY WE ARE WRITING THIS PASTORAL LETTER NOW

THIS IS A CHALLENGING AND CRUCIAL TIME for the people and leaders of New York State. Many people are struggling, while escalating demands and claims on both our private and public resources create painful and difficult choices for us as we set our social, economic and fiscal priorities for this year. We know that sacrifices will be required from all. We also believe that a commitment to the common good requires that the benefits and burdens, the gains and sacrifices be shared equitably, with special attention to how these decisions impact our poorest and most vulnerable people. We are writing this pastoral letter because our faith calls us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to express our deep conviction that New York State's historical covenant with people who are in need and struggling must be maintained, not weakened, and even strengthened where necessary as we set these priorities.

We are writing to our sister and brother Catholics and to all of the people of New York to share our experience, recall our social teaching, recommit our resources to the service of this covenant, and to urge vigilance and action by all New Yorkers as we undertake these challenges, to safeguard the vitality of the common good, the protection of our poorest and most vulnerable members, and the solidarity of all our people with each other. This pastoral letter is grounded, as is all of our social teaching, on our belief in the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the human person made manifest in relationships with family and community.

We are writing because as pastors we know the people of our state. From Montauk to Buffalo, from Syracuse to Plattsburgh, we have been present at their weddings and their funerals, at their baptisms and confirmations. We have worked together with the leaders and peoples of other faiths, both locally and statewide. We have talked with families who are prospering and able to maximize society's opportunities for themselves and their children. We have also talked with people who are homeless or out of work, the undocumented, people who come to our parish food pantries, who sleep in our parish shelters. We know the people who come to our hospitals, seek help at our social service agencies, and enroll their children in

our schools. Together with our parishioners and social service and health care staffs, we have listened to their stories.

These stories have raised significant questions for us. How are the poorest among us faring? How well are all our schools, public, independent and religious, serving our students? What is happening to even middle income people who are encountering increasingly exorbitant housing costs? What does a family do when they have a health crisis and no medical insurance? How will we determine how the benefits and burdens of our economy are equitably shared? What affect does the growing gap between rich and poor in our state have on the quality of our life together? How do we keep all these concerns at the center of public debate?

We do not write as social policy experts, but rather as pastors who wish to offer our perspective on the moral dimensions of these questions. We do not claim to have all the answers to the myriad and complex social and economic dilemmas facing our state. New York is gifted with many dedicated men and women in both the public and private sectors who bring their expertise, dedication and values to these questions. We know also however that sound public policy most often results from dialogue among people with diverse ideas and interests. We wish to add our voice, and the moral concerns that are paramount to us, to this dialogue.

We write this pastoral acknowledging the tradition of generosity New York's people have shown in helping the least advantaged and in supporting social programs. We are grateful to our own parishioners for supporting our parishes, our schools and our social and health care services. The recent outpouring by the people of our nation and state to relieve the suffering caused by the tsunami in southern Asia is only the latest instance of this generosity.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, which reaffirmed the Church's "duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times in light of the Gospel."² This seminal document begins:

*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties
Of the men of this age, especially those who are
Poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and
Hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of
Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to
Raise and echo in their hearts.*³

It is in the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes* that we write this pastoral letter, observing the signs of our times, committed to solidarity with all of the people of New York, and dedicated to ensuring that "those who are poor" are both protected, and provided opportunity to participate fully in the bountiful benefits and blessings of our state.

the Covenant

THE COVENANT THAT GOD MADE AT SINAI with the people of Israel defined the relationship of God with the community. God would be present and help the people if they followed the commandments and fulfilled their responsibilities to God and neighbor. Such practices as the celebration of the Jubilee Year reminded the people that the goods of the earth are a gift from God and must be equitably shared. When the prophets spoke of a threat to this Covenant, it was because the people had turned away from God and had forgotten their responsibilities to each other, especially to the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger. The prophets called the community to remember that the quality of the society's relationship with God depended upon how they treated the least powerful members. In Luke 4, Jesus begins his public ministry announcing his mission in fulfillment of this Covenant,

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me,
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*⁴

The Gospel and our social teaching require special concern and attention toward people who are struggling with poverty. One test of that covenant strength is the priority in which these special concerns are held by state and society, and how that priority is expressed in our public policy choices.

OUR SOCIAL TEACHING NOT ONLY RECOGNIZES RIGHTS but also insists on responsibilities. For example, we believe that people have a right to work and a responsibility to work. It is of paramount importance that we recognize the crucial role that persons have in realizing their dignity. People struggling with poverty every day show courage, resourcefulness and determination to fulfill the potential of their lives, often against great odds. Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), community groups of people who are poor have come together to improve their neighborhoods, build affordable housing, initiate economic development and protect worker rights. Our focus in this pastoral is on the integrity of the Covenant that we make to assist them.

The Catholic Church is one of the largest providers of health, education and human services in New York State. Each year Catholic Charities provides help to more than 1 million people of all faiths and ages. More than 600,000 people are served meals from Catholic Charities food pantries and kitchens. Thirty-four Catholic hospitals provide care through nearly 6 million inpatient admissions and emergency room and outpatient visits. The New York State Catholic health plan (Fidelis Care New York) has enrolled about a quarter of a million low-income people for health coverage. More than 750 elementary and secondary schools provide education for nearly 300,000 children, many of whom live in the state's poorest neighborhoods. Our Catholic parishes are in every rural, suburban and urban community of the state. Many of these parishes provide help to people in need of emergency food and shelter, clothing and other assistance. Religious communities throughout our state are committed to educating our children and serving those most in need.

The presence of our health, charitable, educational and pastoral care in every area in the state provides an opportunity for us to partner with state government, non-profits, private philanthropic efforts and other faith groups in ministering to the needs of the people of New York. This presence also enables us to know those who are asking for help and to learn about their anxieties and struggles.

We know the mother of three children in Buffalo who is working 30 hours a week for her public assistance grant and caring for her children while trying to find time for education to enhance her work opportunities. We have witnessed her courage amidst the financial and psychological stress she faces daily.

We know the parents, distraught with anxiety and fear, who appear at the emergency rooms of our Catholic hospitals in Albany and Manhattan with a sick child whose condition has worsened because of a delay in seeking medical care because they had no health coverage or ready access to care.

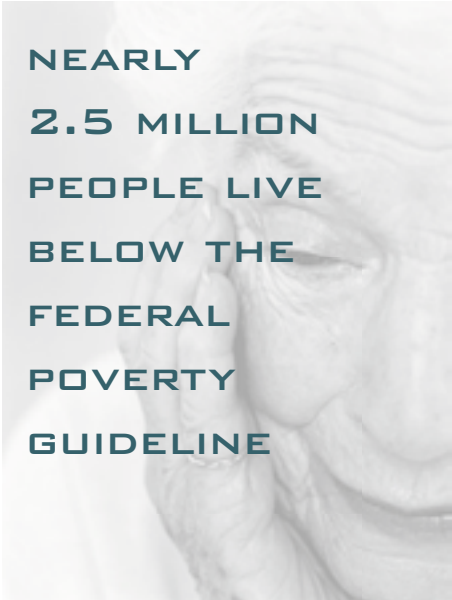
We know young married couples and middle-class families throughout our state who cannot find decent affordable housing. Teachers, civil servants, police and firefighters often cannot live in the locality where they work. In many urban parts of our state, we have witnessed

wholesale replacement of housing once affordable to low and moderate-income people with luxury residences.

We know agricultural workers in the Dioceses of Rochester, Syracuse and Ogdensburg, undocumented landscape workers in Rockville Centre, and factory workers in the Diocese of Brooklyn, who harvest our food, tend our flowers and lawns, and make our clothing. We see them often unable to support their families and often living doubled and tripled up in small apartments and houses.

THIS ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE PUTS
A HUMAN FACE ON
THE FOLLOWING POVERTY STATISTICS:

- more than 13 percent, nearly 2.5 million people, live below the federal poverty guideline of \$15,670 for a family of three in New York State;⁵
- 7.5 percent of working families earn wages below the federal poverty guideline;⁶
- more than 26.5 percent of working families earn less than 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline (\$31,340 for a family of three);⁷
- 3 million New Yorkers live without health insurance, two thirds of whom are in working families. (One million New Yorkers are eligible for coverage but have not been enrolled.)⁸



NEARLY
2.5 MILLION
PEOPLE LIVE
BELOW THE
FEDERAL
POVERTY
GUIDELINE

We are concerned that, in spite of the prevalence of these stories and the evidence of these statistics, poor and vulnerable people are in danger of being forgotten. Our social and moral teaching requires that we never turn our eyes and our help from those who are hurting, those who are living on the margins. The Covenant demands that we always reach out to them. Scripture tells us in Matthew 25 that what matters in the end is our ability to answer the question “When did we see you Lord?”:

*For I was hungry and you gave me food.
I was thirsty and you gave me drink.
A stranger and you welcomed me.
Naked and you clothed me.
Ill and you cared for me.
In prison and you visited me.*⁹

When did we see you Lord?

What we see.

THERE IS MUCH THAT WE SEE FOR WHICH ALL OF US MUST BE GRATEFUL, much that is joyful and hopeful both in the benefits of our state's economy and in its provision for people who are poor and struggling. Many people in our state are working hard and achieving a high, even affluent, standard of living. Many of our state's families, through the dedication and sacrifice of parents, are able to educate their children, meet their health needs and afford housing and other necessities of life.

During the past few years, New York has raised its minimum wage, provided a safety net as part of welfare reform, established health care programs for working poor adults and their children, and increased its Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for working families. New York has often been a leader in creating imaginative and successful approaches to alleviating poverty. New York's legacy of welcoming immigrants remains a standard for our nation. New York State's legal mandate to care for its most vulnerable members is embodied in Article XVII of the state Constitution that requires provision for the needy. We once again reiterate that we recognize the challenges faced by our state in maintaining this commitment in the face of rising demands and limited resources.

However this is not all we see. For along with great promise and opportunity for some, many others must struggle daily to survive and confront anxiety and grief in their lives. What the U.S. Bishops identified in the pastoral statement *A Place at the Table*¹⁰ as the presence of three economies in our nation, we find applicable to New York State. Many people are *pulling ahead*, benefiting from the power of the state's economy, their own hard work, and the development of their own gifts. Others are *struggling*. Even though they too work hard at agricultural, landscaping, restaurant, and other low-paying jobs, their income is often inadequate to feed and support their families and pay for adequate housing and health care. Many other families at much higher incomes live paycheck to paycheck and share with them the anxiety that injury, illness or loss of their job could send their family into a tragic downward spiral.

Finally, many people and families are being *left behind* because they often lack education and job skills and the support of family and community networks. They encounter barriers to finding work and advancing in the jobs they do find. In some cases, problems with alcohol and substance abuse must be overcome. Under the demands of the Covenant, we must ensure that those *left behind* are not forgotten. We must maintain the commitment to a safety net and to the supports necessary for them to move out of poverty.

Unless they are unable to work, the people described above are working hard, making sacrifices and trying to fulfill their responsibilities to their families. Catholic teaching affirms that all people deserve basic human rights including economic rights to what is necessary for a life lived in dignity. These include the right to work and support a family, to housing, to health care and to education.¹¹ The Covenant requires that we guarantee the same protection and opportunities for the people who wait on our tables, clean up our yards, harvest our food, care for our elderly relatives, clean our offices and work for their public assistance as we do for those who are working in more secure higher paying jobs. These just claims must be met even when times are difficult.

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE NEW YORK STATE CATHOLIC CONFERENCE, which is the public policy advocate for the Catholic Church in New York, has developed a public policy agenda which includes our recommendations for protecting human life, meeting basic human needs and providing education and health care. We hope that this agenda will be read in conjunction with this pastoral so that people can consider the full range of the Church's concern for people in New York. What follows are policy directions that we believe must continue to guide us as we set our economic, social and fiscal priorities for this year and the years ahead.

WORK

Catholic teaching emphasizes both a right to work and a responsibility to work. Our experience tells us that people want to work especially when they can look hopefully forward to fair wages, benefits and opportunity for advancement. We know that the enactment of a minimum wage increase and a state Earned Income Tax Credit have given a major lift to low-income working families. We urge continued consideration of these and other ways, compatible with a healthy economy, to enhance workers' incomes.

We realize that the state's economic health is interdependent with international, national and regional economies. However, even with significant growth in the state's economy, many people will not be able to compete because they lack job readiness and the skills necessary for work and advancement. We urge the continuation and, where possible, an increase in the state's commitment to both prepare people for work and to equip them with skills necessary for the job market. For families on public assistance, working for their benefits or transitioning to work, we urge an increase in benefit levels and the strengthening of the housing, day care and health care supports necessary for their move to work.

HEALTH CARE

We are grateful for the presence in New York of a safety net health care system. People on public assistance and families making up to 250 percent (\$39,175 annually) of the federal policy guidelines, are eligible to receive the protection of health care through Medicaid, Child Health Plus and Family Health Plus. We know that in all programs economies can be found. However we believe that the integrity of these programs must be maintained, for to weaken or withdraw them will place many families at risk. Further, outreach to assist families to apply for health benefits for which they are eligible and to maintain their coverage must be intensified. Health care is a fundamental human right. We urge the people of New York to continue to work toward the goal of extending health care to all.

● EDUCATION

Our Catholic schools have been educating children in New York for more than 200 years. We understand the challenges faced by all public, independent and religious schools. Adequate funding for education in our state is a top priority, since it is only through education that our most disadvantaged children will have a chance to fulfill their potential. We support enabling all parents, especially those who are poor and/or have children with special needs, to access schools and programs that most appropriately meet the needs of their children.

● HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING

Across our state, the lack of affordable housing for homeless, low-income and even some middle-income families has become a crisis. The need for decent affordable housing spans every locality and most income groups. People who are homeless, some of whom may never be able to work, require transitional and supportive housing. Others who may be moving from public assistance to work or from a shelter to permanent housing need the support of government subsidies like the federal Section 8 program to be able to afford market rents. (We urge all the people of our state to work with their congressional representatives to resist funding cuts in the Section 8 program, which is vital to so many of the people of our nation and state.) In many areas of our state, a concerted effort must be made to preserve low-income housing and to develop and build decent affordable housing for all of our people. Like the urgency and scale of the commitment required to extend health care to all, the crisis of housing will not be overcome overnight and will require substantial federal assistance. From our viewpoint, we must intensify our commitment and efforts now.

WHAT SHALL WE DO?

THE RECOMMENDATIONS ABOVE ARE A MIX of policy directions which can be concretized in the short term, e.g. preserving a safety net for people at risk, and some longer-term objectives for housing and health care. Again we reiterate that in fiscally difficult times sacrifices must be made by all and not unfairly borne by those most in need. We understand that to honor this Covenant will require both reallocation and enhancement of public and private resources.

Although our focus has been largely on what state government can do, responsibility to fulfill this Covenant does not rest with one sector of our society. *A Place At The Table*,¹² using the image of the four legs of the table, describes mutual responsibilities: for families and individuals to work hard to support themselves and fulfill their responsibilities to themselves and their community; for local community organizations and faith based institutions to foster bonds of solidarity through acts of compassion and justice; in the market place, for institutions of business, commerce, and labor to reinvent their responsibility to the social good and ensure that employees have decent wages and benefits; and for government to be the final guarantor of the Covenant when the actions of other sectors are inadequate to ensure the common good. Without government fulfilling its role, all legs of the table are in jeopardy.

Conclusion:

THE IMPERATIVE OF THE COVENANT

WE ARE ISSUING THIS STATEMENT TODAY, March 8, 2005, on the occasion of our statewide Public Policy Forum day, when Catholics from across the state will gather together in Albany to pray, to learn about the issues discussed in this statement and dialogue with their legislators.

We also are in the midst of the Church's Holy Season of Lent when we are asked to examine our lives and to reflect on how we are living the Gospel call to love and care for each other, and not to forget the least of these. Isaiah 58 reminds us of our Covenant responsibilities especially in this time of prayer, almsgiving and fasting,

*This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke;
Setting free the oppressed,
breaking every yoke;
Sharing your bread with the hungry,
Sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;
Clothing the naked when you see them,
And not turning your back on your own¹³*

As we gather together today, we will remind ourselves of the centrality of this Covenant with poor and vulnerable people to the achievement of the common good, and to the strengthening of the bonds of solidarity among all the people of New York State.



ENDNOTES

¹ Data from 2001, the latest year for which data is available, indicates that through the late 80's and 90's, average income for the two lower fifths of families with children (40% of all people in families with children in New York) fell by 2%. The middle fifth (20% of families) grew by 2% while the top two fifths experienced average income gains of 21%. Cited in: Fiscal Policy Institute report *The State of Working New York, 2001 Working Harder, Growing Apart*, Executive Summary January 2002.

²Vatican Council II, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 4.

³ *Pastoral Constitution*, 1

⁴Lk 4: 18-19

⁵ Center for an Urban Future and the Schuyler Center, *Between Hope and Hard Times: New York's Working Families in Economic Distress*, 2004

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ United Hospital Fund, *Health Insurance Coverage in New York*, 2002

⁹ Mt 25: 35-36

¹⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Place at the Table: A Catholic Recommitment to Overcome Poverty and to Respect the Dignity of All God's Children* (Washington, D.C.: United State Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002) 9-10

¹¹ John XXXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, nos. 11, 13, 16., 18, 20

¹² *A Place at the Table*, 15-18

¹³ Is 58: 6-7

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