

### ***A Place at the Table:***

***A Catholic Commitment to Overcome Poverty and to Respect the Dignity of All God's Children***  
[Excerpts from an 11/13/02 statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops]

A table is where people come together for food. For many, there is not enough food and, in some cases, no table at all.

A table is where people meet to make decisions—in neighborhoods, nations, and the global community. Many people have no place at the table. Their voices and needs are ignored or dismissed.

When we gather as Catholics to worship, we gather around a table to celebrate the Eucharist. It is at this altar of sacrifice that we hear the saving word of Christ and receive his Body and Blood. It is Christ's sacrificial meal that nourishes us so that we can go forth to live the Gospel as his disciples. Too often, the call of the Gospel and the social implications of the Eucharist are ignored or neglected in our daily lives. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* insists, "The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest" (#1397).

In our world and nation, many of our sisters and brothers live in poverty. The causes are complex, but the results are clear. They cannot find decent work, feed their families, educate their children, secure health care, or find adequate housing. Millions of children live in nations with too much debt and not enough development, in societies with deadly diseases and inadequate health care, in lands where conflict and corruption leave people without a place at the table. Millions of families cannot live in dignity because they lack the conditions worthy of human life.

As Catholics, we must come together with a common conviction that we can no longer tolerate the moral scandal of poverty in our land and so much hunger and deprivation in our world. As believers, we can debate how best to overcome these realities, but we must be united in our determination to do so. Our faith teaches us that poor people are not issues or problems but sisters and brothers in God's one human family.

With our Church under challenge, our nation confronted by terror, and our world haunted by conflict, why focus on issues of poverty at this time?

- *Our faith calls us to it.* The Gospel and Catholic social teaching place our service of the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian witness.
- *Our nation needs it.* A sixth of our children are growing up poor in the richest nation on earth. The blessings and burdens of American life are not being shared fairly.
- *Our world requires it.* More than 30,000 children die every day from hunger, deprivation, and their consequences. Disease and debt, corruption and conflict are threatening the lives and dignity of millions in our increasingly globalized world.
- *Our salvation demands it.* In Jesus' description of the Last Judgment, the critical question is "What did you do for the least of these?" Jesus identified himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, and the stranger, insisting that when we serve them we serve him.
- *Our actions can make a difference.* In the face of these challenges, our community of faith must continue to preach the Gospel and pursue the Church's evangelizing and social mission. We can help shape a world where the lives and dignity of all people are respected and protected.

Our efforts to serve and stand with the poor recognize and build on the essential roles and responsibilities of four institutions. In a sense, the table we seek for all rests on these four institutions, or legs: 1) what families and individuals can do, 2) what community and religious institutions can do, 3) what the private sector can do, and 4) what the government can do to work together to overcome poverty.

A first leg of the table is what ***families and individuals*** are called to do. Every person has a responsibility to respect the dignity of others and to work to secure not only their own rights but also the rights of others. Every day, parents throughout the world make sacrifices for the

well-being of their children. Parents are the guardians of the life and dignity of their children. Support for marriage and family life is at the center of our campaign to restore dignity and to overcome poverty for children.

Public policy and all our institutions must reward, encourage, and support parents, including single parents, who make wise decisions for their children. Their hard work, their love and discipline, and their time and presence within their families are a gift not only to their children, but to our society and to the common good. They are also significant investments in avoiding or escaping poverty.

A second leg of the table is the role and responsibility of *community organizations and faith-based institutions*. These institutions can help families make good choices and overcome discrimination and other obstacles. They can confront structures of injustice and build community, and they can demand accountability from public officials. Faith is a religious commitment; it is also a community resource. On the toughest problems, in the toughest, most desperate neighborhoods and villages, religious and community institutions are present and making a difference. In the United States, the growing attention to faith-based and other community institutions is overdue recognition of the work of Catholic schools, Catholic health care institutions, Catholic Charities, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, and other groups. Here and abroad, our parishes and schools must continue to be clear about their identity and mission and must continue to be beacons of hope and centers of help for poor families and communities.

A third leg of the table is *the marketplace and institutions of business, commerce, and labor*. The private sector must be not only an engine of growth and productivity, but also a reflection of our values and priorities, a contributor to the common good. Examples of greed and misconduct must be replaced with models of corporate responsibility. Both employers and the labor movement must help the poorest workers to have a voice and a place at the table where wages and working conditions are set. A key measure of the marketplace is whether it provides decent work and wages for people, especially those on the margins of economic life.

Parents need to be able to provide a life of dignity for their children by their work. Workers and farmers in this country and around the world need living wages; access to health care; vacation time and family and medical leave; a voice and real participation in the workplace; and the prospect of a decent retirement. Work must be an escape from poverty, not another version of it. The process of globalization must provide opportunities for the participation of the poorest people and the economic development of the poorest nations.

A fourth essential leg of the table is the role and responsibilities of *government*—a means to do together what we cannot accomplish on our own. In the Catholic tradition, government has a positive role because of its responsibility to serve the common good, provide a safety net for the vulnerable, and help to overcome discrimination and ensure equal opportunity for all. Government has inescapable responsibilities toward those who are poor and vulnerable, to ensure their rights and defend their dignity. Government action is necessary to help overcome structures of injustice and misuse of power and to address problems beyond the reach of individual and community efforts. Government must act when these other institutions fall short in defending the weak and protecting human life and human rights.

The debate about how to address poverty in the United States and abroad too often focuses on just one of these four foundations and neglects others. While these four elements work together in different ways in different communities, a table may fall without each leg. Some emphasize family responsibility or the role of religious and community groups. Some insist the market can solve all our problems. Others see a government solution for every challenge, while still others see government corruption as an insurmountable obstacle to development. These narrow positions are not our tradition. The Catholic way is to recognize the essential role and the complementary responsibilities of families, communities, the market, and government to work together to overcome poverty and advance human dignity.