

The Reality for Low-Wage and essential Workers in America

One of the most important revelations since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic is the staggering income inequality that exists in the United States. The wealth inequality now is even worse than during the Great Depression. Wealth inequality has increased dramatically since the 1980s, with a top 1% wealth share around 40% in 2016 vs. 25%–30% in the 1980s (1). The wealth gap between America's richest and poorer families more than doubled from 1989 to 2016. The pandemic has made this reality even worse. In fact, nearly 50 million workers have filed for unemployment since the beginning of the pandemic (2). Evidence to date suggests that black and latinx workers face much more economic and health insecurity from COVID-19 than white workers. These workers face the most lethal pre-existing conditions for coronavirus: racism and economic inequality (3).

As more data becomes available, one thing is clear: Covid-19 has only magnified the systemic inequalities that persist in the United States. And nonwhite Americans, especially African Americans and Latinx, have been hit hard on nearly every front.

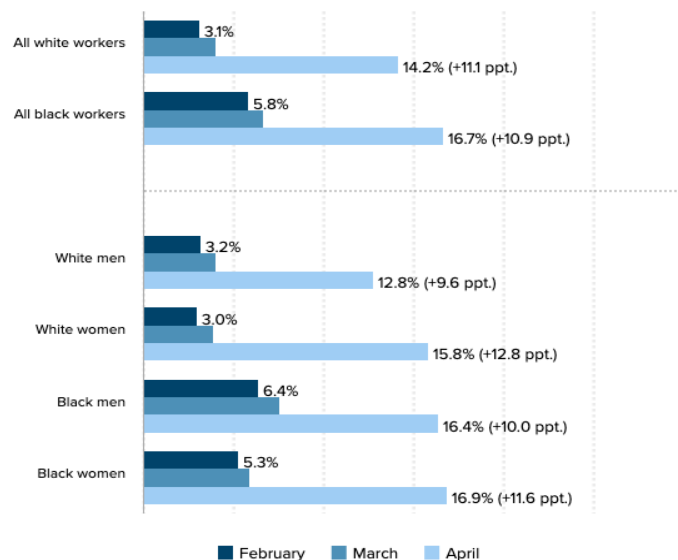
The [country has lost a net 20 million payroll jobs](#) since COVID-19 burst out in the U.S. in March. Those losses wiped out nearly all the gains made over the decade since the Great Recession. About half of the layoffs have been in lower-wage, personal-service jobs.

Many workers are being called heroes in the economy, especially essential workers. But too many of them work are minimum wage jobs with little to no health care or safety protections. They are not heroes by choice, but are forced to work to pay their bills.

Here is a graph that illustrates the economic and health disparity by race from Covid-19 :

While unemployment skyrocketed for black and white workers in the COVID-19 labor market, the unemployment rate is higher for black workers

Unemployment rates by race, and by race and gender, February–April 2020



1: <https://fortune.com/2019/02/13/us-income-inequality-bad-great-depression/>

[2:https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/07/09/nearly-50-million-americans-have-filed-for-unemployment-heres-whats-really-happening/#376c284a27d3](https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/07/09/nearly-50-million-americans-have-filed-for-unemployment-heres-whats-really-happening/#376c284a27d3)

3: [Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus—racism and economic inequality](#)

Prayer of Blessing the Work of Our Hands

Blessed be the works of your hands, O Holy One.

Blessed be these hands that have touched life.

Blessed be these hands that have nurtured creativity.

Blessed be these hands that have held pain.

Blessed be these hands that have embraced with passion.

Blessed be these hands that have tended gardens.

Blessed be these hands that have closed in anger.

Blessed be these hands that have planted new seeds.

Blessed be these hands that have harvested ripe fields.

Blessed be these hands that have cleaned, washed, mopped, scrubbed.

Blessed be these hands that have become knotty with age.

Blessed be these hands that are wrinkled and scarred from doing justice.

Blessed be these hands that have reached out and been received.

Blessed be these hands that hold the promise of the future.

Blessed be the works of your hands, O Holy One. Amen.

A Prayer for All Workers

Loving, Working God, on this Labor Sabbath we ask your special blessing on all people who labor, either for pay or as volunteers, in jobs or at school, in the workplace or at home, in the U.S. and around the world.

We especially pray for your blessings on workers who do not have jobs and for those whose inadequate pay does not allow them to live the full life you intend for each of us.

Creator God, help us to build a new world in the midst of the old.

A world where all workers are valued. A world where those who clean houses are also able to buy houses to live in.

A world where those who grow food can also afford to eat their fill.

We pray for the coming of a world where all workers everywhere share in the abundance that you have given us.

We ask these things knowing that you give us the courage and strength to live out our faith in the workplace and the marketplace, as well as in the sanctuary.

Amen.

Responsive prayer

For all those who work, that they will be treated with dignity and respect on the job. Let us pray,
Holy One, hear our voice.

For all those who work in unsafe or hostile environments, for those who have suffered an illness or injury as a result of dangerous working conditions. Let us pray,
Holy One, hear our voice.

For those who are forced to work two or three jobs in order to feed and shelter their families, for those who must sacrifice greatly to pay for gasoline to get to work. Let us pray,
Holy One, hear our voice.

For all those who are not provided workplace health care coverage, for those lacking paid sick leave, for those not able to retire at a proper age due to inadequate pensions. Let us pray,
Holy One, hear our voice.

For those who must leave their homeland to prevent their families from starving, for those who experience exploitation, stolen wages, and hostility. Let us pray,
Holy One, hear our voice.

For all of us who benefit from the labor of strangers, may we be mindful of each other as being created in God's image and may we join God's desire that all share the wealth created by everyday people like us. Let us pray,
Holy One, hear our voice.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION:

We pray for all who labor. May You, O Magnificent God, fill us with the spirit of creative imagination and a ready willingness to help the world around us through the work of our minds and hands. We remember all those who are unable to work because of disability or illness.

Bless them, O Lord, with a reminder of your abiding presence through their suffering and provide for them means of continued service to their neighbors and communities. We remember those who are willing to work but unable to find meaningful employment. Grant them persistence and hope, and encourage all efforts to bring jobs to struggling communities.

We remember all employers. May they realize the dignity of their employees and give them healthy, safe and sustainable wages.

We ask Your blessings on all workers. Lord, fill them with honesty that they may give a full day of work for a full pay and may they be dedicated to the work that they do. We honor and salute all who labor. Lord, help us to always remember that all types of labor are important and is dignified in Your eyes

PRAYER FOR THE SPIRIT OF WORK

Glorious St. Joseph, model of all who pass their life in labor, obtain for us the grace to work in a spirit of penance to atone for our many sins; to work conscientiously, putting the call of duty above our own inclinations; to work with gratitude and joy, considering it an honor to use and develop by our labor the gifts we have received from God; to work with order, peace, moderation, and patience, without ever recoiling before weariness or difficulties. Help us to work, above all, with purity of intention and with detachment from self, having always before my eyes the hour of death and the accounting which I must render of time lost, talents wasted, good omitted, and vain complacency in success, which is so fatal to the work of God. All for Jesus, all after your example, O holy Joseph! This shall be our watchword in life and death. Amen.

Some Scripture References to Work:

Genesis 2:1-3 God rests on the seventh day.

Genesis 2:15 God settles humanity in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and care for it.

Deuteronomy 5:13-15 The Sabbath is for everyone—all are allowed to rest from their work.

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 God blesses our work so that we may share its fruits with others.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15 Do not withhold wages from your workers, for their livelihood depends on them.

Sirach 34:20-22 To deprive an employee of wages is to commit murder.

Isaiah 58:3-7 To observe religious practices, but oppress your workers is false worship.

Jeremiah 22:13 Woe to him who treats his workers unjustly.

Matthew 20:1-16 All workers should be paid a just and living wage.

Mark 2:27 The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.

Luke 3:10-14 Practice integrity in your work.

Luke 12:13-21 One's worth is not determined by an abundance of possessions.

James 5:1-6 Those who become rich by abusing their workers have sinned against God.

God Almighty, maker of the universe,
You continue to work moment by moment to sustain your glorious creation and
You invite us to be co-creators with You.

We give you thanks.

For the work you give each of us to do,
And the enrichment we find
through working for your purposes,
and not for our own selfish desires,

We give you thanks and praise.

Bless those whose unseen and unrewarded labor eases our lives.
And those who work for the sake of people they will never see,
May we always be mindful of their hard work and sacrifice,
And be grateful for their diligence.

For their faithful service we give you thanks.

For those whose labor is forced, without rest, or freedom or dignity;
And those who are prevented by their disabilities whether of body or mind,
or by their society because of color or creed from meaningful work.

We ask your merciful blessing.

For those who risk life and suffer hardship,
Especially in fire and flood and disaster,
To accomplish their work.
For those who seek labor
and who find none.

We ask for your protection.

For those whose work is demeaning,
whose conditions are poor,
whose pay is unfair,
and for all who are coerced, endangered, enslaved,
exploited or abused:

We pray for justice.

We give thanks for all who labor,
and pray that all may know the blessing
of your Sabbath gift of rest.

**Holy One, you who labor for our life,
bless our work, that it may serve you
and the mending of the world.**

Amen.

Good and gracious God,
We pray for all people who are migrating
particularly those who are forced from their homes
or separated from their families
because of threats of violence and persecution.
We ask that you protect and keep them safe.
Although we come from different countries,
and have our origins in different cultures,
we were created by you, and are made in your image
and therefore we all share an inalienable dignity
that is deserving of respect.
Lord we ask that you give us the strength
to defend those who are marginalized,
to give aid to those in need,
to come to the defense of those
who are poor or vulnerable,
and to welcome those who are on the move
into our homes and into our hearts.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God,
forever and ever.
Amen

Dios bueno y clemente,
Oramos por todas las personas que inmigran,
especialmente, por aquellas que son
forzadas a dejar sus hogares o
amenazadas de violencia y persecucion.
Te pedimos que las protejas y las pongas
a salvo.
Aunque vengamos de distintos paises,
y nuestro origen se encuentre en
diferentes culturas,
todos hemos sido creados por ti y hemos
sido hechos a tu imagen y semejanza,
por lo tanto, todos compartimos una
dignidad inalienable que merece respeto.
Senor, te rogamos que nos des las fuerzas
para defender a los marginados
para ayudar a los necesitados,

para salir en defense de los mas pobres y vulnerables,
y para acoger a aquellos que llegaran a nuestros hogares y a nuestro corazon.
Por nuestro Senor Jesucristo, tu Hijo,
que vive y reina contigo,
en la unidad del Espiritu Santo, un Dios,
por los siglos de los siglos.
Amen

<https://socialjusticeresourcecenter.org/prayers/immigration/>

Roman Catholic:

A Prayer For Uncertain Times

God of infinite mercy, hear our prayer!

In this time of bewilderment and fear, we ask you to give us the courage to take care of one another as Jesus did. For those who are ill, especially those who are frightened and alone, for those who cannot access healthcare, for those who are homeless and lost, hear our prayer!

In the midst of our sadness and grief, we ask you to give us words to comfort one another. For those who are dying, and for those who have already died from this virus, for those who tend them and for those with no one to tend them, hear our prayer!

In the midst of our own anxiety we ask you to give us the courage to support one another as you would.

For those who are unexpectedly unemployed, for employers who share what they can, for our government and financial institutions and those who lead them, hear our prayer!

In the midst of our struggle to ensure a healthy future for all who live on this planet, we ask you to give us the hope that surpasses our current understanding. For healthcare workers, spiritual leaders and our faith communities, for artists and poets, for prophets and teachers, hear our prayer!

In the midst of our growing awareness that all life on Earth is connected, we ask for the heart to respect and cherish all life. That all peoples recognize that we are all your children, hear our prayer!

We trust in you and your power working in us. Please hear and answer our prayers.

Amen!

Amen!

— Sister Cynthia Serjak —

"Lord God look down upon us! Look at this city . . . Look upon our families.

Lord, you were not without a job, you were a carpenter, you were happy.

Lord, we have no work.

The idols want to rob us of our dignity. The unjust systems want to rob us of hope.

Lord, do not leave us on our own. Help us to help each other; so that we forget our selfishness a little and feel in our heart the "we", the we of a people who want to keep on going.

Lord Jesus, you were never out of work, give us work and teach us to fight for work and bless us all. In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

- **Pope Francis, Meeting with Workers, Sept. 22, 2013.** . .

Catholic Social Teaching on Rights of Workers: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/the-dignity-of-work-and-the-rights-of-workers.cfm>

A Catholic Framework for Economic Life

A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops November 1996

As followers of Jesus Christ and participants in a powerful economy, Catholics in the United States are called to work for greater economic justice in the face of persistent poverty, growing income-gaps, and increasing discussion of economic issues in the United States and around the world. We urge Catholics to use the following ethical framework for economic life as principles for reflection, criteria for judgment and directions for action. These principles are drawn directly from Catholic teaching on economic life.

- 1.** The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy.

- 2.** All economic life should be shaped by moral principles. Economic choices and institutions must be judged by how they protect or undermine the life and dignity of the human person, support the family and serve the common good.

- 3.** A fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring.

- 4.** All people have a right to life and to secure the basic necessities of life (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, safe environment, economic security.)

- 5.** All people have the right to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefits, to decent working conditions as well as to organize and join unions or other associations.

- 6.** All people, to the extent they are able, have a corresponding duty to work, a responsibility to provide the needs of their families and an obligation to contribute to the broader society.

- 7.** In economic life, free markets have both clear advantages and limits; government has essential responsibilities and limitations; voluntary groups have irreplaceable roles, but cannot substitute for the proper working of the market and the just policies of the state.

- 8.** Society has a moral obligation, including governmental action where necessary, to assure opportunity, meet basic human needs, and pursue justice in economic life.

- 9.** Workers, owners, managers, stockholders and consumers are moral agents in economic life. By our choices, initiative, creativity and investment, we enhance or diminish economic opportunity, community life and social justice.

- 10.** The global economy has moral dimensions and human consequences. Decisions on investment, trade, aid and development should protect human life and promote human rights, especially for those most in need wherever they might live on this globe.
All of economic life should recognize the fact that we all are God's children and members of one human family, called to exercise a clear priority for "the least among us."

The sources for this framework include the Catechism of the Catholic Church, recent papal encyclicals, the pastoral letter Economic Justice for All, and other statements of the U.S. Catholic bishops.

On the Hundredth Year of the United States Bishops' Program of Social Reconstruction

Most Reverend Frank J. Dewane

Bishop of Venice
Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
September 2, 2019

In the Gospel for this Labor Day, Jesus proclaims in the synagogue the words of Isaiah: that he, like the prophet, has been “anointed” “to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Lk. 4:18). How do we bring glad tidings to the poor today? As Pope Francis said earlier this year, “today’s tendency is toward slowing down the pace of reducing extreme poverty and increasing the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. . . . Many do not have food to eat and live adrift while a few drown in excess. This perverse current of inequity is disastrous for humanity’s future.”¹

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the “Bishops’ Program for Social Reconstruction,” published by an early predecessor of the current U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.² Following World War I, the bishops recommended a series of “practical and moderate” reforms because “the only safeguard of peace is social justice and a contented people.” Today’s economy, if measured by the stock market, has the most money and wealth it has ever had, and unemployment is around the lowest it has been in fifty years. And yet, roughly four in ten Americans cannot afford an unexpected \$400 bill, and would fall below the poverty line after three months without income. More than one in five jobs in the United States is in a low-wage occupation where the median wage pays below the poverty threshold for a family of four. Real wages have been largely stagnant for decades, and workers’ share of the fruits of the economy has been declining for decades. Why does this situation persist? It is worth revisiting the “Bishops’ Program,” which presented three themes from Catholic social teaching that, as recent research suggests, may help explain the present.

1. Subsidiarity, Monopoly Power and Wage Suppression

In 1919, the “Bishops’ Program” committed an entire section to the “Abolition and Control of Monopolies.” They stated unequivocally that “human beings cannot be trusted with the immense opportunities for oppression and extortion that go with the possession of monopoly power.” The Church teaches that monopolies undermine the principle of subsidiarity, and the State has a right to intervene when monopolies obstruct development.³ The bishops have highlighted the problem of over-concentrated ownership in the context of farming, noting that although prices for food go down, it has led owners to “underpay farm workers, and oppose farmworker unionization.”⁴

New research suggests that anticompetitive behavior from employers has resulted in lower wages in many labor markets, particularly for lower wage workers. To be clear, Catholic social teaching holds wages to the standard of a just wage, which is not synonymous with a merely competitive labor market.⁵ In theory, low unemployment should raise wages, but recent research suggests that this may be offset by the increasing concentration of employers—in other words, fewer numbers of employers are employing larger shares of the labor force, giving employers greater power to keep wages down. Making matters worse, a majority of the largest franchise chains in the United States have historically used “no poach” clauses to prevent even low-wage workers from trying to get a higher wage at another franchise. Many others are subject to “non-compete” clauses that prevent them from seeking higher wages, even when proprietary information or trade secrets are not involved. State and federal law enforcement is starting to crack down on this, and there is a now vigorous scholarly debate on the over-concentration of labor markets.

How to respond? State and federal law enforcement agencies should continue working to prevent anticompetitive behavior by employers that lowers wages. Worker centers and unions can assist by keeping track of this activity and reporting it. Government agencies and lawmakers should strongly consider measures to prevent corporate consolidation from lowering wages. Business leaders should consider the effects on workers when contemplating a merger. Lawmakers, legal advocates, unions, and

worker centers may wish to explore mechanisms for workers to recover wages that were lost to anticompetitive behavior.

2. The Universal Destination of Goods and Employee Ownership

The 1919 “Bishops’ Program” put its section on employee ownership next to the anti-monopoly section, and for good reason. In contrast to monopoly power, employee ownership gives workers access to the fruits of private companies, and in the best instances, gives meaningful ways to participate in management. In 1986, with *Economic Justice for All*, the bishops reaffirmed this theme, noting that “profit sharing by the workers in a firm; enabling employees to become company stockholders; granting employees greater participation in determining the conditions of work; cooperative ownership of the firm by all who work within it . . . can enhance productivity, increase the profitability of firms, provide greater job security and work satisfaction for employees, and reduce adversarial relations.”⁶ The bishops wrote that their “judgment” from the 1919 “Plan of Reconstruction” “remains valid” such that “the full possibilities of increased production will not be realized so long as the majority of workers remain mere wage earners. The majority must somehow become owners, at least in part, of the instruments of production.”⁷ Recent research has shown the great benefits of employee ownership to workers, including higher wages than otherwise comparable firms, more stable employment, more job training opportunities, opportunities to participate more in firm decision-making, better benefits, and much more wealth over the course of one’s career (this holds true for low- and moderate-income workers as well). The advantages of worker ownership are especially pronounced for young people, women, and people of color. One model for employee ownership, which can function in companies of all sizes, is called an Employee Stock Ownership Plan or “ESOP.” Tax incentives can make it very attractive for a business owner to sell the company to the workers. Companies with ESOPs have shown greater worker productivity and have greater ability to weather economic downturns.

Another model for worker ownership is the cooperative. Cooperative enterprises are expressly favored in the Church’s teaching,⁸ and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development has a rich history of helping workers form new co-ops so they can own the means by which they make a living.⁹ In fact, what is arguably the largest and most successful worker cooperative in the world was started by a Catholic priest.¹⁰ New research and startup efforts are going towards so-called “platform cooperatives,” which bring cooperative ownership to digital platforms and the gig economy.

How can Catholics encourage more worker ownership? Federal and state law-makers should continue to explore the best ways to incentivize worker ownership through tax policy and other means. Consumers can research which companies have various forms of employee ownership and can choose to support them. Business owners should consider the benefits of workers having ownership stakes in the company. Individuals and faith communities can support the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and other organizations that help workers start new companies or achieve ownership in existing ones.

3. Solidarity and Unions

Unions are a way for workers, whether or not they are owners, to negotiate for just wages, benefits, and working conditions, and to look after the rights of vulnerable workers, including those with injuries and disabilities.¹¹ Again, in 1919, years before the National Labor Relations Act, the “Bishops’ Program” asserted the “right of labor to organize and to deal with employers through representatives.” Here, the “Bishops’ Program” was solidly in line with Pope Leo XIII and his successors.¹² As Pope Francis has said, “[t]here is no good society without a good union . . .”¹³ The declining share of labor’s access to the wealth of the country cannot be explained by any one model or concept alone. Nevertheless, that story must include the dramatic decline of worker unionization rates: now, only about 10.5% of workers belong to a union, including only 6.4% of the private sector. A complex set of policies and decisions over decades have led to the present state of things. A better arrangement will require careful and nuanced thinking in processes over time. From the Church’s perspective, progress must include the expression of solidarity that unions strive to embody, as well as the respect for the priority of labor over capital, which is nothing less than the primacy of human beings over “things.”¹⁴

Conclusion

As the “Bishops’ Program” concluded 100 years ago, “[c]hanges in our economic and political systems will have only partial and feeble efficiency if they be not reinforced by the Christian view of work and wealth.” In this view, workers and owners both have rights and duties towards each other; a business enterprise must view itself as a “society of persons” rather than a mere commercial instrument.¹⁵ As Pope Francis recently said, “[t]he new course for sustainable economic development needs to set the person and work at the center . . .”¹⁶ To this end, no merely technocratic policy changes will bear the fruit that is so desperately needed today. Rather, with consideration for the treasury of the Church’s social teaching, let us consider “new processes” that can build up justice in the workplace over time.¹⁷ Let us then proceed as a people who, through Baptism, share in Christ’s anointing “to bring glad tidings to the poor.”