

Towards a Just Recovery: Paying Attention to the Lives of Workers

MESSAGE FOR INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' DAY, 1 MAY 2021

On the occasion of May Day each year, the *Conseil Église et Société* (“Council on Church and Society”) of the Québec Assembly of Catholic Bishops offers a message of support to workers. This year’s message is marked by the ordeal of the COVID-19 pandemic and is driven by a realization of the challenges that economic and social recovery will pose for our society, seen in the light of Jesus Christ’s Gospel message about solidarity and justice.

Hard-hit employment

Many workers have experienced a loss of work, with all the uncertainty and distress that this entails. The restaurant and cultural sectors in particular have been dramatically affected. A number of dioceses and parishes, deprived of their usual sources of revenue and having suspended many activities, have laid off some of their personnel.

We know that, in this context, where so many jobs have been lost or interrupted, women and young people have been especially hard-hit. For many people, this situation has called into question their career plans and their plans for life, shaking their self-confidence and their hope for the future. The needs of lower-income families have led many of them to turn to food banks, which have been able to meet these growing demands (a 35% to 40% increase has been noted) thanks to the generosity of citizens.

The first priority of any recovery plan must certainly be to foster a return to work with appropriate working conditions in those sectors that were especially affected. This must include an increase to the minimum wage and attention to the urgent need for paid family and medical leaves. These challenges call for commitment from political leaders, employers, unions, citizens, and members of church communities.

“The inalienable dignity of the human person, the roots and guarantee of which are found in God’s design of creation,”¹ consists of more than a person’s socioeconomic situation. Nevertheless, a person’s circumstances have an impact on their capacity to fulfill their vocation completely. Thus, in the world of today, “there is no poverty worse than that which takes away work and the dignity of work,”² as Pope Francis affirms.

1. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, para. 37.

2. *Fratelli tutti*, *Encyclical letter on fraternity and social friendship*, 3 Oct. 2020, para. 162.

Two types of workplace especially affected: the healthcare and education sectors

The pandemic has affected the working conditions of many of our fellow citizens, and in a variety of ways. The duties of healthcare workers have grown broader and more numerous and have required many adaptations: schedules and vacations have been thrown into disarray; stress has increased due to the magnitude of the tasks and the dangers of contamination; constant exposure to death; feelings of shame over having to decide who would be deprived of medical care, should the overburdening of hospitals impose an obligation of load-shedding.

The whole social safety net has been called into question and must be addressed by any plans for recovery: CHSLDs and seniors' residences; the impoverished condition of home-based care; working conditions for nurses; low salaries of orderlies and maintenance workers, and the precarious situation of undocumented migrants working in support roles.

Keeping the primary and secondary school system going as much as possible, which we as a society have understandably sought to do, has demanded considerable efforts from all its personnel to adapt to the conditions that have prevailed since March 2020. Plans for recovery must take into consideration the needs of teachers if they are to support their pedagogical efforts that have been sorely tested, demanding a great deal from their creativity and their ability to support parents and students. Particular attention must be paid to children living with learning or other disabilities.

The transformation of the workplace: mental health and remote working

In businesses and offices, it has been noted that remote working has tripled since the pandemic has begun. This practice has helped combat COVID-19 by reducing close contact and risks of infection. However, reorganizing work in this way can prove very difficult for families, especially when schools and daycares are no longer available.

Teleworking is no doubt here to stay, but measures must be taken to reduce its negative effects. These may include adapted schedules and facilities that will favour mental health by encouraging social interactions. As Pope Francis has recently reminded us, "digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges."³

The many mental-health challenges arising from the pandemic ought to give us pause when we assess the quality of healthcare and social services offered by the community, and when businesses consider whether they approach work humanely and in a way that fosters sociability.

No return to the way it was before

Economic recovery must not by any means signify a return to the pre-pandemic situation, which was marked by growing inequalities. Above all, it must not cause us to forget those who were left without work, without savings, and without hope. Those who were already unemployed benefitted little from additional government assistance offered during the pandemic: for them, there is no light at the end of the tunnel. This is unacceptable.

3. *Fratelli tutti*, para. 43.

Many organizations and researchers have proposed that only a guaranteed basic income will suffice to tackle this problem. Pope Francis has suggested that we should consider “a universal basic wage which would acknowledge and dignify the noble, essential tasks” carried out by popular movements.⁴ We also believe that it is time to consider seriously the implementation of a guaranteed basic income here in Québec. This would be a way for political leaders to exercise the duty that Pope Francis ascribes to them: “politicians are called to ‘tend to the needs of individuals and peoples’.”⁵

Key priorities for a just recovery

A just recovery must start from a real recognition of the dignity and the work of those – mainly women – upon whom our public services rely at all levels (healthcare, education, social services, community services...).

Economic recovery must involve a rapid move towards an energy transition that will favour environmental justice (respect for the rights of Indigenous peoples, and protection of land, forests, and waters) and that will be based on respect for the rights of workers whose jobs will be affected.

The recovery of our collective life together must involve maintaining and developing a strong social safety net that will allow our communities to face the crises ahead. Only an overhaul of our taxation structures can assure, over the long term, a better sharing with the less affluent.

A recovery that takes heed of the dignity of persons, of communities, and of our Common Home must be the fruit of a collaborative effort with all stakeholders in civil society. In particular we invite parish communities to develop partnerships in their own milieux and to participate actively in this collaboration to prepare the future.

In this year which the Catholic Church has dedicated to St. Joseph, husband of Jesus’ holy Mother and companion of workers, we can make our own this prayer which Pope Pius XII addressed to St. Joseph: *Accompany us in times of prosperity when the opportunity is given for an honest enjoyment of the fruits of our labors; sustain us in our hours of sadness, when Heaven seems to be shut in our regard, and even the very tools with which our hands toil appear to rebel against us.*

*The time to act is now -
together!*

4. *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Popular Movements*, 12 Apr. 2020.

5. *Fratelli tutti*, para. 188.

