

MASSACHUSETTS CATHOLIC CONFERENCE WEST END PLACE

150 Staniford Street, Suite 5, Boston, MA 02114-2511
Phone (617) 367-6060
FAX (617) 367-2767
staff@macathconf.org

February 9, 2011

Standing in Solidarity with All

We begin the second decade of a still new century as a country of complexity and contrasts. Even after the financial crisis of three years ago, the United States remains a society capable of producing great wealth, a center of scientific discovery and innovation. For some the financial crisis appears finished; in technical terms, the recession may be described as over. But the contrasts remain and are riveting in human terms. For many residents—a great many—the reality of the financial crisis, its initial impact and its continuing turmoil, is all too evident.

In Massachusetts, the unemployment rate ranks below the 9 percent national average, but at 8.2 percent¹ it still poses stark consequences for individuals and families across the Commonwealth. Over 12,000 foreclosures were reported in our state in 2010,² creating untold suffering in our communities. In many cases, the neighborhoods hit hardest by the economic recession are located in the parts of our cities already suffering the most from violence, and even loss of life—but the rural areas have not escaped the pain either.

As Bishops, we know about and are most concerned with the human dimensions of these economic hard times. From our pastors and most poignantly from our social service agencies, we see and hear of the recession's impact on families, and especially on the children. The statistics from just one agency alone highlight the dramatic escalation in human need occurring in our midst. At a food pantry in Boston the customary assistance is 5,000 pounds of food a month; in the past year, in just *one week*, the same pantry distributed 12,000 pounds of food.

We have learned also from our Catholic Charities offices that hundreds of families are doubling-up in inadequate housing or are being squeezed into already overwhelmed shelters and motel rooms. We cite these facts while fully aware that the hardship is not unique to our agencies; other religious communities and other nonprofit organizations share similar stories. We all face a punishing intersection of rising human needs and declining resources that threatens the dignity of the human person and the stability of family life.

We all have been heartened by individual acts of charity, especially as witnessed over the holidays. Yet we as citizens cannot ignore the ominous and complicated decline in resources stemming from the tightly intertwined relationship between our major social service agencies and our government—at city, state and federal levels. It is here that we have experienced two consecutive years of deep cuts, and are preparing for a third. An additional half-billion dollars in total cutbacks have been proposed by Governor Deval Patrick for the FY 2012 budget.

We note this as a report, not as a critique. In the devastation of shrinking city and state budgets across the country, all face excruciating choices. But we caution that while the temptation to turn away from the growing social needs confronting our cities and towns may seem attractive—especially when our own personal budgets are squeezed—our capacity to move beyond the many complex problems we face today depends on our willingness to overcome that temptation. Only then can we provide a secure pathway for the Commonwealth's children and grandchildren.

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, News Release: The Employment Situation-January 2011 (Feb. 4, 2011) (reporting national unemployment rate for January 2010), available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>; Bureau of Labor Statistics, News Release: Regional and State Employment and Unemployment-December 2010 (Jan. 25, 2011) (reporting states' unemployment rates for December 2010), available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/laus.pdf>.

² The Warren Group, News Release: More Bay State Residents Lost Homes to Foreclosure in 2010 (Jan. 19, 2011), available at <http://www.thewarrengroup.com/portal/Solutions/PressReleases/tabid/190/newsid751/2446/Default.aspx>.

The challenge is to sustain our social safety net in the most efficient manner, not by risking the quality or type of services we need, but by maximizing our effectiveness in providing good programs. Programs that are rooted in the protection and nurturance of the dignity of the human person are the ones most likely to provide long-term benefits. Housing, health care, proper nutrition, education, and employment all help to ensure a decent quality of life for our residents. As a society, our shared moral commitment to these social goods equates to security for all because it protects and promotes the common good.

We see then that the consequences of the recession have destabilized the provision of essential services, especially for the poor. We realize the unyielding pressures facing public officials. Thus we recognize the responsibility we have as Church to stretch our resources to the limit as we collaborate with others on behalf of the most vulnerable in our midst. Pope Benedict XVI, addressing the whole Church in his letter *God is Love* (2005), stressed that the work of charity is an imperative, not an optional choice for us. In words that carry unique gravity for us as Bishops, the Pope affirmed: “Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practice love.” We take seriously this call to love, and it is for this reason we are offering this statement of solidarity.

In light of the extraordinary challenges our state faces and in view of our religious and moral responsibilities, we use this occasion to make a pledge and to issue a plea. Our pledge is that we will do all we can as Bishops to enable our institutions—parishes, Catholic Charities, health care facilities and schools—to continue to do their best in extending help to our neighbors in need. The persons we must serve include not only those defined statistically as poor, but also those recently unemployed who once enjoyed stability, and who constitute the newly fragile as a result of the recession’s impact.

Our plea is that in the decisions facing our elected officials, and in the discussions and actions of all citizens, there be preserved, for the sake of human dignity, a special place and regard for the vulnerable—those forced to choose between heat and food, and between shelter and clothing—those for whom the destination of every dollar is now so consequential.

The tradition of our Commonwealth and our country offers an inspiring record of our ability to recover from tragedies of multiple kinds. We as a people have responded to military attacks, to economic crises, and to natural disasters, and have done so with determination and ingenuity. The religious and moral values that were rooted in this Commonwealth’s early settlers have sustained us through past difficulties and will continue to strengthen us going forward.

Our present economic crisis is now three years old and does not promise easy or rapid resolution. But the memories of the past, the values of the present, and the decency of our citizens and public officials offer hope and light for the road ahead. We pledge our Church to this project of recovery and renewal; it is the work of God in human hands.



Cardinal Seán P. O’Malley O.F.M. Cap.
Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Boston



Most Rev. George W. Coleman
Bishop of the Diocese of Fall River



Most Rev. Timothy A. McDonnell
Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield



Most Rev. Robert J. McManus
Bishop of the Diocese of Worcester