

Catholic Bishops of Indiana

Poverty at the Crossroads



The Church's Response to Poverty in Indiana

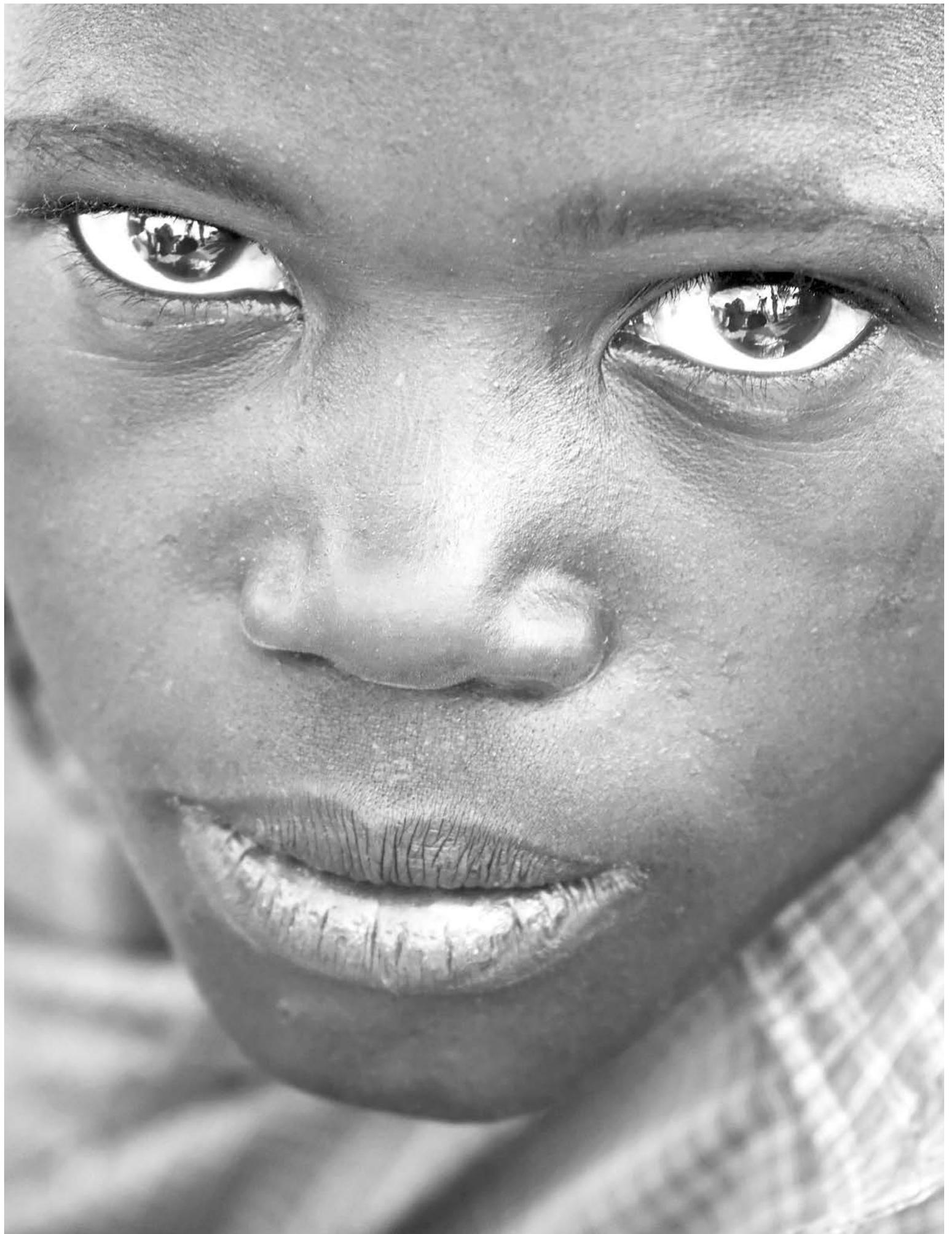




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A graphic at the top of the page features a sunburst of light rays emanating from a central point on a horizon line, set against a background of blue and green geometric shapes. The word "INTRODUCTION" is written in white, bold, uppercase letters on a green rectangular background that overlaps the bottom of the sunburst.

INTRODUCTION

Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society's most neglected members.

*—Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, n. 186*

As bishops who serve the people of God, our concern is for everyone, regardless of their religious affiliation, race, ethnic background, economic or social status. Christ came to save all humankind. As his ministers, we have been given the responsibility to carry on Christ's work in service to all our sisters and brothers here in the state of Indiana.

At the same time, we bishops have a particular obligation to care for the most vulnerable members of God's family. That is why we pay special attention to the unborn, to the sick and the elderly, to prisoners, to those who suffer from various forms of addiction or mental illness, and to the education of people from many different backgrounds and circumstances. That is also why we care, in a very special way, for those brothers and sisters of ours who are poor.

With this particular responsibility in mind, we bishops address this pastoral letter to faithful Catholics as well as to all people of good will here in Indiana. We want to call attention to the poverty that exists right here within the state that calls itself the "Crossroads of America." We hope to help all of us better understand the many challenges facing our brothers and sisters here in Indiana and consider with you how our Church should respond.

The Gospels insist that God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that God himself has "become poor" (2 Cor. 8: 9). Jesus recognized their suffering, and he had compassion for their loneliness and fear. He never looked away from their plight or acted as if it did not concern him. Always, our Lord stood with the poor—comforting their sorrows, healing their wounds and feeding their bodies and their souls. He challenged his friends to recognize the poor and not remain unmoved.

All disciples of Jesus Christ are called to love the poor as he did. As people of faith, we are invited to see the poor, to allow the Word of God to illuminate the reality of poverty, and to respond with transformed hearts.

Using the simple formula of SEE, JUDGE, ACT, we invite and challenge everyone, beginning with ourselves, to be more attentive to the poor in our communities, to identify the systemic issues that keep individuals and families poor, and to take concrete steps to reduce the long-term impact of poverty in our state, even as we reach out and help those who, here and now, suffer from its devastating effects.







I. SEE

There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table.

—*Luke 16:19-21*

Jesus tells the powerful story of a poor “street person” named Lazarus, and the rich man who passed by him each day without noticing him. It is apparent that the rich man could not—or would not—see the poverty that was right in front of his eyes. As a result, he was blind to the poor man’s need and—just as tragic—to the opportunities God gave him day after day to share his abundant gifts. At the conclusion of the story, we learn that this blindness cost the rich man a place in the company of Abraham.

How does this parable of Jesus speak to us today here in the state of Indiana? What are we not seeing as, day after day, we go about our busy lives? Are we incapable—or worse—have we chosen not to see our sisters and brothers who are poor? Are we blind to the impact poverty has on families, neighborhoods and entire communities, and unquestioning as to its causes?

We may not encounter poor people as we go about our daily business, but they are there just the same. As an appendix to this letter, we include some sobering statistics regarding poverty, homelessness, unemployment and hunger right here in the Hoosier State. Most of us have no idea how serious—and widespread—this problem is. Like the rich man in Jesus’ parable, we fail to see what is right before our eyes. In addition, we miss the opportunities our Lord gives us to recognize him in the face of the poor.

Statistics can appear cold and impersonal. If those facts do not help us to “see” the poor in our midst, we might want to consider a definition of poverty in terms of its impact on everyday life. Father Larry Snyder, former president of Catholic Charities USA, draws upon the experience of Catholic Charities workers throughout the country to explain that individuals are poor if:

- they cannot afford housing that is clean, safe, and in good repair;
- they cannot afford nutritious food for themselves and their family on a regular basis;
- they cannot consistently pay their utility bills even though it is a priority;
- their children are not adequately clothed for school with clean clothes that fit and are in good repair, and they do not have proper clothing for work; or,
- they cannot afford to go to the doctor for any kind of illness for fear that the visit will be beyond their means to pay for it.¹

¹Rev. Larry Snyder, *Think and Act Anew: How Poverty in America Affects Us All and What We Can Do about It*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y. 2010), 42.

Many Hoosiers live in these circumstances. What are some of the realities that we are challenged to see clearly as citizens of Indiana concerned about human dignity, family life and the social and economic health of our state?

We believe it is important to point out that the consequences of the severe economic downturn that began in 2008-2009, a period that some call the “Great Recession,” caused many more Hoosiers to face the despair of poverty. A growing number of our small towns and rural communities, which had been the backbone of our state, have seen crucial industries disappear. The social and economic conditions caused by poverty in these communities as well as in our larger cities have had serious consequences, including the breakdown of family life, an increase in the manufacture, sale and use of drugs; violence in our homes and in our streets and the resulting increase in our state’s prison population.

Multigenerational poverty, measured by the number of individuals in economic distress whose parents, grandparents and perhaps great-grandparents also suffered severe economic instability, is a reality whose impact on human dignity, family stability and healthy communities is immense. Members of families in the grip of multigenerational poverty are far less likely to possess the internal, intangible resources that would encourage them to acquire the education, life skills and employment opportunities that are available to other members of their communities and that are critical to breaking the cycle of poverty. Without the skills and experiences necessary to make positive personal and employment decisions, poor choices appear predetermined and the vicious cycle of poverty remains intact.

Catholics in the five dioceses of Indiana remain committed to serving those who are in immediate need through our charitable agencies, parishes, schools and health care organizations. The generosity of our people is extraordinary and evident through thousands of hours of loving service every week across the length and breadth of our state. As bishops, we recognize the goodness of diverse people and institutions throughout Indiana, and we thank God for the love and compassion shown to so many of our brothers and sisters in their time of need.

Yet, this compassionate response does not absolve us from asking hard questions. We believe it is essential that we make a prayerful, honest assessment of how we arrived at where we are today. If we truly are going to identify the causes and manifestations of poverty and create a pathway for positive, long-term and sustainable change, we must strengthen the foundations upon which individuals and families build economic stability and realize their hopes for the future.

As Christians, we are called to recognize Jesus in the face of the poor. Seeing our brothers and sisters as they are—members of God’s family who have gifts to share with us and whose need compels us to share our gifts in return—is an essential element of Christian charity. Seeing ourselves as stewards of all God’s gifts is integral to authentic Christian discipleship.

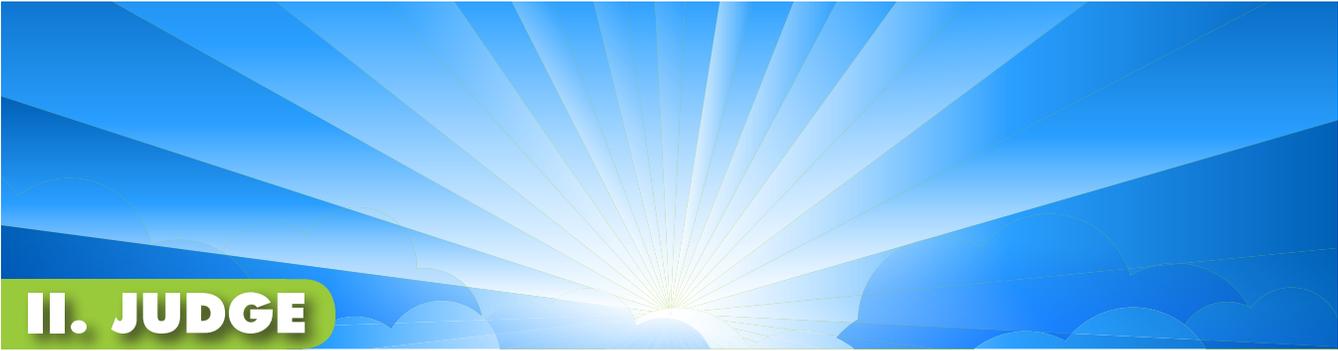
In the account of the Final Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 25: 31-46), both the good and the evil people are surprised at how closely the glorified Lord identifies with the poor. Hence they ask: “Lord, when did we see you ...?” If we truly seek to follow Jesus and to live as he lived, we will clearly acknowledge the poverty of those around us, and we will respond with open and generous hearts to their immediate and long-term needs.

Questions for reflection

1. Have you been surprised to discover relatives, friends or neighbors in distress as a result of changes in our state’s economy over the last five to ten years?
 2. Where do you see the reality of poverty in Indiana?
 3. How is your parish, school and diocese now responding to the poor in its midst?
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II. JUDGE

*Both Christian preaching and life are meant to have an impact on society.
—Pope Francis, The Joy of the Gospel, n. 180*

In his apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis observes: “No one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions.” He makes it clear that the Church “cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice,” but must work with all people of good will to build a better world (cf. “*Evangelii Gaudium*” n. 183).

The root causes of poverty are complex, and must be addressed effectively by a holistic and multifaceted approach to social, economic, cultural and spiritual development. While we may be tempted to direct our attention and charitable resources toward addressing the immediate needs of the poor for food, shelter and health care, in justice we cannot neglect the more thorny public policy issues. We need to face these, if we wish to address the fundamental causes of poverty here in Indiana, as well as in our nation and global community.

As bishops, we claim no expertise in the practical details of political theory, economics or the social sciences. We must, however, emphasize some universal truths—such as the dignity of every human person, the basic human rights that apply to all, regardless of their economic, social, racial or cultural circumstances, and the importance of religious freedom for individuals and communities. As pastors, we wish to speak with and for those who suffer from the dark effects of poverty here in Indiana, including victims of multigenerational poverty as well as those who more recently have found themselves without work and struggle for the basic necessities of life.

We see the following areas as meriting careful reflection and study by Catholics and all Hoosiers. We do not advocate an empty academic exercise but rather a necessary step towards making decisions that will lead to substantive change. These key areas are Family Life, Employment, Education and Health Care. Although it is not possible for us to address these issues in detail in this letter, we will offer some observations that we hope would stimulate discussion and lead to positive action.

FAMILY LIFE

We Catholics believe that a crucial element in God’s plan for humanity is marriage, which we understand as the union of one man and one woman who make a commitment to each other for life and become “one flesh” (Gn 2:24). This sacred union forms the family, the basic unit of society, which is dedicated to the transmission of new life (children) and to stewardship of all God’s creation. The Church teaches that the family is a kind of “school of deeper humanity,” love and hope for society (Vatican II, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” n. 52). Our families teach us who we are as individuals and as members of human society. The family is also where we first learn how to live—how to take care of ourselves, how to share our gifts and talents with others, and how to collaborate and live in harmony with our neighbors whether close to home or far away.

Without the family, children cannot grow beyond a sterile isolation. Without the family, unity among people and nations loses its most basic catalyst, and coexistence deteriorates into a pragmatic sort of commerce—“conceivable only on the basis of utility, on a calculus of fear, but not on the goodness of living together, not on the joy that the mere presence of others can give” (Pope Francis, “*Lumen Fidei*,” n. 51).

Family teaches us that we are God’s children, brothers and sisters called to participate in the life of God himself. This is where we learn to recognize the sacredness of every human life as well as the beauty and necessity of living together in peace. This is where we discover the fundamental principle that grounds all human rights and dignity: that every person, regardless of sex, race, religion or economic or social status is deserving of our respect. Experience teaches us that the family is the only lasting, solid foundation on which healthy societies can be built.

Family teaches us how to live. In the family, we learn the basics of economy, the value of work, the meaning of sexuality, the joy of self-giving, the importance of breaking bread together and having fun with family members and friends. These are not small things. They have a huge impact on our quality of life and on our ability to interact with others —extended family, neighbors, fellow citizens and even strangers (including “aliens” or “enemies” who are unlike us and whose differences appear to threaten our security).

We are keenly aware that this understanding of the meaning of the family represents an ideal that rarely is achieved in its fullness. A significant brokenness can exist in families today (as in every age), and each of us can name the ways that families fail to live up to the grand vision that our Church proposes for marriage and family life. Our own experience of brokenness teaches us the value of compassion and forgiveness.

We believe that it is worth fighting for the family. We are convinced that our individual lives and our world are enriched by “the sanctuary of life and love” that good families provide. We believe that every child should grow up in the warmth and protective care of a loving family. We deeply regret that the challenges facing families today threaten the health and happiness of individuals and the common good of human society.

As pastors, we witness the struggle that young families, especially single-parent families, have in breaking out of the cycle of poverty in order to provide food, clothing, shelter, education and health care for their children. Finding (and keeping!) good jobs is much more difficult for teenage parents, especially if they are not married, because they frequently lack the necessary education, skills and experience to compete in today's job market. Add to this handicap the costs associated with transportation and health care, and the challenges can be overwhelming.

In addition, as the number of underage and single-parent families continues to grow, the number of fathers who are unable or unwilling to support their children also increases. Strong marriages and healthy families provide an environment that can help overcome the most severe economic challenges. Unfortunately, the stress of economic instability, substance abuse and domestic violence, combined with other social and cultural factors, contributes to the disintegration of marriages, disrupts stable families and often results in substance abuse and other addictive behaviors.

Our society today permits—even encourages—behavior that works against a healthy family life. Consumerism can promote reckless spending and unsustainable debt. Promiscuity is fueled by attitudes that disrespect the beauty of human sexuality and the sanctity of marriage and family life. All segments of our society suffer from the effects of cultural and economic threats to the health and vitality of families, but the poor, especially multigenerational poor, are especially vulnerable to negative social and economic influences that undermine family life. It has even been said that stable marriages are increasingly the luxury of the rich.

To address the long-term effects of poverty in our society, we must strengthen marriage and family life. As St. John Paul II wrote in his apostolic exhortation on the family, *“Familiaris Consortio,”* “The future of humanity passes by way of the family” (n. 86). When families are strong, society is strong. When families are broken and unstable, all human communities suffer. At the same time, we recognize that instability of marriage and family life is intensified by poverty, which can produce an intolerable stress that limits human development. And, since single-parent families are increasingly the norm for the poor, the Church must make a special effort to understand their circumstances and offer the wisdom of her tradition.

EMPLOYMENT

“The economy must serve people, not the other way around” is a succinct paraphrase of a crucial statement by St. John Paul II in his encyclical, *“Laborem Exercens”*: “In the first place, work is for man and not man for work” (n. 6.6). Work is more than simply a way to make a living; it is a continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected. These include the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize, to private property, and to economic initiative.

For St. John Paul II, this powerful statement—work is for man; man is not for work—is the principle that governs the success or failure of all economic systems. The human person is what is most important, not economic theory or social structures. The human person, the one who works, is not a means to an end, but the primary beneficiary of his or her own labor.

Every worker has a fundamental dignity because he or she is made in the image and likeness of God. Workers are co-creators with God in building the human community. Workers are not commodities. They are not instruments of production or tools in the hands of owners or managers, who are entitled to use them and then set them aside at the end of the day or the completion of a particular project.

Indiana is home to thousands of the so-called “working poor.” These are women and men who have jobs but whose income is not enough to sustain them or to cover the necessities of life, including food, housing, health care, transportation and childcare. For these families, full-time, year-round work by itself is not enough to lift them out of poverty.

St. John Paul II teaches, “A just wage is the concrete means of verifying the justice of the whole socioeconomic system” (“*Laborem Exercens*,” n. 19). Why? Because the laborer truly is worthy of his or her wage (cf. Lk 10:7). And because a society that cares for the least of its citizens—including the unemployed, the underemployed and uninsured—is a society that will flourish in the sight of God and in its material and spiritual well-being.

EDUCATION

There is an intimate connection between family, employment and education. Parents are the first and principal educators of their children. As we noted above, it is in the family where we first learn the value of work, the importance of collaboration and teamwork, and the moral principles that are key to a faithful, productive and successful work environment.

The Catholic Church is strongly committed to education and, particularly, the education of the poor. More than two centuries of experience convince us about the powerful role that education plays in breaking the cycle of poverty and helping families, producing thriving citizens, workers and professionals.

We also attest to the effect that poverty has on a family’s ability to provide children with a quality education. Poor children are often hungry, undernourished and prone to limited attention spans. Crying for attention, they frequently exhibit inappropriate behaviors. They may live in cars or temporary shelters and seldom find sufficient physical rest. Recurrent moves mean that regular school attendance is difficult, if not impossible. No wonder poor children struggle to learn, develop and test their skills and abilities, and recognize the importance of completing their education in order to compete with others in demanding job markets.

Our Catholic tradition commits us to the education of the whole person —mind, body and spirit. We refuse to be fatalistic about the future hopes and dreams of families and children who are poor, including the multigenerational poor. We have seen with our own eyes the difference that a quality education can make in the lives of children and their families.

As Pope Francis reminds us, to be truly “with and for the poor,” we must provide all children—but especially those who are poor—“with an education that teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values” (“*The Joy of the Gospel*,” n. 64). This is the way out of poverty for individuals and families, and the best way to build a society that is just, economically productive and dedicated to promoting and defending the human dignity of all its citizens.

HEALTH CARE

For decades, the Catholic bishops of the United States have been unswerving advocates for comprehensive reforms that will lead to health care for all, especially the weakest and most vulnerable. We believe that health care is fundamental to human life and dignity. It is also a critical component of our Church's ministry. In collaboration with professionals throughout Indiana, the Catholic Church provides health care, purchases health care and tries to enhance the health care system. The Catholic community serves the sick and uninsured in emergency rooms, homeless shelters and on the doorsteps of our parish churches. We bring both strong convictions and practical experience to the challenge of health care.

Many lower-income individuals and families in our state lack the resources to meet the expense of their health care. For these families, significant premiums and cost-sharing charges can serve as barriers to obtaining coverage or seeing a doctor. Therefore, we believe that existing cost-sharing protections should be maintained, and new health insurance coverage options must protect the lowest income enrollees from burdensome cost sharing. We also call for much-needed funding for safety-net clinics, hospitals and other facilities that provide health care to the poor and vulnerable members of our communities.

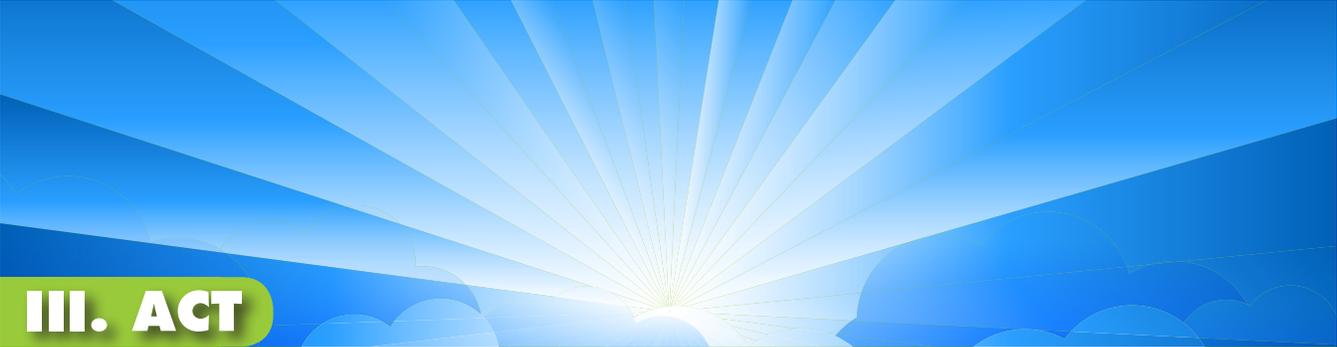
We believe that health care is not a privilege, but a right and a requirement to protect the life and dignity of every person. All people, regardless of their circumstances, should have access to comprehensive, quality and affordable health care. It should not depend on where they were born, their stage of life, where or whether they or their parents work, how much they earn or where they live.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you agree that the Church has a responsibility to speak on behalf of the poor?
 2. Is there an issue that is more important for the Church's consideration than the four mentioned in this section (Family Life, Employment, Education and Health Care)?
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III. ACT

It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric. Realities are greater than ideas

*—Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, n. 231*

This letter is a call to act with justice and charity. We invite all who read these words to join us in reaching out to the poor members of our state. We challenge everyone, beginning with ourselves, to engage the leaders of business, government and voluntary organizations throughout our state in effecting meaningful changes in the policies and practices that perpetuate poverty in all its manifestations.

Actions do speak louder than words, especially when we intend to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give shelter to the homeless, and provide employment, education and health care to all members of our community. Together with women and men of good will, we want to offer hope to all who suffer, and we seek to build a just society that can alleviate the long-term effects of poverty here in Indiana and throughout our nation and the world.

Through institutions and organizations such as Catholic Charities, Catholic hospitals, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, parish social ministries, elementary and secondary schools as well as colleges and universities, our Church responds to an increasing number of people who are in desperate need of housing, medical care, food, transportation, education and other necessities. The Catholic Church in Indiana is a leading advocate for just social structures that will preserve families while addressing the systemic problems of poverty. The challenges are formidable, but with transformed and hopeful hearts, we must act.

At the same time, we join all people of good will in calling for the development and implementation of strategies that address the root causes of poverty here in the “Crossroads of America.” Our response intends to provide for the immediate needs of our sisters and brothers and, at the same time, take seriously the underlying issues that prevent our state’s employment, educational and health care systems from effectively meeting the needs of individuals and families in all corners of Indiana.

The call to act justly demands an organized and systematic response to the issues of poverty in Indiana. Direct service of the poor at the level of our parishes and other communities is necessary and should be esteemed as a means of practicing Christian charity. However, isolated action alone will not suffice. Only a multifaceted, community-wide approach will truly reduce the debilitating and demoralizing effects of long-term, multigenerational poverty throughout our state.

FAMILY LIFE

We invite the Catholic faithful and all people of good will to work to reduce poverty by intentionally focusing on one of the root causes of poverty in Indiana. Grounded in our Catholic faith and tradition we recommend that we:

- strengthen and support Indiana’s families by assigning the highest priority to the wellbeing of children in the family and society.

Strengthening families requires that we support marriage and the ideal of families with two parents who live together and share responsibility for their children. Today, many families are broken, and most struggle under significant stress. All families need our loving support and assistance now, even as we work for a future in which healthy families can thrive. Therefore, we propose that a single question guide us in all service and program decisions made by government agencies, private institutions and Church ministries regarding families:

- Do programs and policies place a primary emphasis on child welfare and enhance—not detract from—strong marriages and family life?

The task of strengthening support for Indiana’s families is formidable. In order to be successful, organized and sustained efforts are needed throughout the state. We propose that every Catholic diocese, parish, educational institution and health care organization in our state serve as a catalyst for local, grassroots efforts focused on mitigating poverty in its community. All people of goodwill, regardless of their religious tradition, should be invited to join in a collaborative and systematic effort to attend to the needs of Hoosier children and their families.

We propose that we set clear, measurable goals for our efforts to alleviate poverty by meeting the needs of married couples and families in our state. While not all outcomes can be easily calculated, clearly defined goals will assist us in setting and accomplishing objectives that are ambitious but achievable with the help of God’s grace.

As we have already observed, there are undeniable links between family life, employment, education and health care. Poverty brings intolerable stress on the family’s ability to carry out its mission as the fundamental unit of society. Families are called to be stewards of all God’s gifts, and this requires an environment of stability and peace that can provide each family member with opportunities to exercise his or her responsibilities for the common good. A supportive family environment results in healthier, happier and more hopeful individuals who are more likely to work for the common good and participate in community activities.

EMPLOYMENT

To address the serious challenges facing our economy in the state of Indiana today, we must look carefully at the impact of policies, legislation and governmental regulations on real people—the women and men who struggle to earn a living, support their families and make ends meet. We cannot fix the economy by employing abstract theory that is detached from those whose lives are at stake. As St. John Paul II tells us, we cannot simply look at material needs (food, shelter, clothing, health care, etc.), as important as these are for individuals, families and communities. We should also foster a spirituality of work, which recognizes its profound impact on the intellectual, social, cultural and religious life of individuals, families and communities.

The Church does not propose detailed programs aimed at creating jobs or promoting economic development. However, the Church does remind governmental, business and community leaders that the only truly effective measure of sound economic policy and practice is the extent to which real people thrive and grow as persons and as workers.

In addition to the economic benefits of stable employment, work offers individuals increased opportunities to enhance their personal dignity. Work should be the primary means by which parents provide for their families and contribute to a healthy community. Governmental programs should exist principally to provide an adequate safety net for individuals who are in transitional situations or suffer from incapacitating illness or injury.

- Therefore, we propose that the state of Indiana dedicate resources toward improving the opportunity for Hoosier families to find meaningful, economically rewarding work.
- Plans for economic development ought to include strategies aimed at breaking the cycle of multi-generational poverty.

EDUCATION

A good, well-rounded education that begins as early in life as possible establishes a foundation for a promising future for children and encourages the formation of productive, contributing citizens and healthy families. Every child should have the opportunity to develop his or her full potential, and it is the responsibility of parents and the wider community to help make possible the growth and success of all children.

With this in mind, we bishops commit our dioceses, parishes, schools and social services agencies to working with state and local governments as well as business and civic leaders to achieve the following objectives:

- Strengthening marriage and family life by supporting the role of parents as the primary educators of their children (including programs that make it possible for parents to choose schools for their children and to engage them more effectively in their children's education);
- Encouraging the state of Indiana to dedicate the resources needed to provide for early childhood education, especially among underserved populations;
- Reducing *de facto* segregation or isolation by race, ethnicity or income in order to provide all students with opportunities to learn with and from peers from diverse social and economic backgrounds;

- Achieving “best practices” and effective policies for teaching and learning, including class size, length of school days, number of school days per year, tutoring and mentorships;
- Attracting, retaining and rewarding teachers and administrators who place the education of children first and who possess the formation necessary to meet the needs of children from economically challenged and/or socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

HEALTH CARE

We bishops in Indiana repeat the call for a genuine reform of health care that is accessible and affordable for all. We invite all Hoosiers to join us in working for health care systems that will:

- Promote and defend human dignity from the moment of conception until natural death;
- Attend to the whole person (body, mind and spirit), while pursuing a genuine pluralism that respects freedom of religion and conscience;
- Care for poor and vulnerable persons, regardless of race, ethnicity, economic or social or legal status;
- Practice a careful stewardship of resources by restraining costs and applying them equitably across the spectrum of those who must pay for health care.

If we give priority to family life, work, education and health care, an economically strong, well-educated and healthy Indiana will have fewer individuals, especially men, in prison. Unwed pregnancy rates will decrease. More young women and men will be able to pursue post-secondary education and training for careers. The number of multiple-family residences and the constant migration from one residence to another will decrease, helping to provide more consistency in educational opportunities for children. Fewer grandparents will be required to assume full responsibility for rearing children because more mothers and fathers will be present and active in their children’s lives.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

What can we do to help alleviate poverty in Indiana, now and in the future? What actions can we take that will make a difference in the lives of our fellow Hoosiers who suffer from the immediate and long-term effects of poverty?

First, we can “storm heaven” with confidence that our prayers will be heard and answered. As a community of faith, we believe in the power of prayer. We trust that our cry for our “daily bread,” is heard and answered by our heavenly Father. However, prayer is also attentively listening to what God has to say to us. If we ask God to help us better serve the needs of the poor, whom he loves, surely he will show us the way.

Next, we can work to strengthen families. Starting with our own families —our spouses, children, grandchildren and extended families—we can show that family comes first. We can work to set aside some of the whirlwind of distractions promoted in contemporary culture in order to spend time with family, supporting and encouraging those whom we love most in the world. Reaching beyond the limits of our own families, we can share our time and talent with our neighbors, our fellow parishioners and members of our communities. We can support legislation and public policies that are pro-marriage and pro-family life. We can work to elect public officials whose actions really do speak louder than their words when it comes to protecting and enhancing family life.

Then, we can advocate for economic vitality and for access to affordable, quality education and health care. As we have tried to demonstrate, employment, education and health care are critical means for alleviating the long-term effects of poverty in our state. To this end, we bishops strongly urge all individuals, families and Catholic institutions to speak on behalf of comprehensive and just legislation and social policies in these crucial areas. We invite all people of good will to join us in finding and implementing both immediate and long-term solutions to the problems faced by those who are poor and vulnerable in our communities.

Finally, we all can support Catholic Charities and other social service agencies in our state through generous stewardship of our time, talent and treasure. As stewards of all the gifts we have each received from a generous and loving God, we are invited and challenged to respond to the Lord with increased gratitude and generosity.

Questions for reflection

1. How does my community (parish, school, institution) directly serve the needs of the poor?
 2. How could my community unite with others in a strategy to alleviate the most fundamental causes of poverty in Indiana?
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CONCLUSION

In the Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the great King, who sends his servants to “the highways and hedgerows” to invite everyone to his feast (cf. Lk. 14:23). Today, Jesus sends us, his disciples, to the “Crossroads of America,” to extend his loving care for the least of his brothers and sisters.

Loving care for the poor and vulnerable is a consistent theme in Sacred Scripture. Our Lord’s teaching about the last judgment is quite specific. We will be judged worthy or unworthy of eternal life based on how we treated Christ himself in the “least” of his sisters and brothers —especially the hungry and thirsty, the naked and homeless, the prisoner and the stranger. Jesus’ admonition about how our lives will be judged is pointed and unequivocal: what we do to the poor and the destitute—“the least of these my brothers and sisters”—we do to the Lord himself.

This is a sober warning. Most of us think mainly about ourselves and about our families and friends. The poor? We may feel a vague sense of moral obligation to them, but too often the poor are distant, anonymous and invisible. That is why Catholic social teaching insists that the needs of the poor must take priority. Otherwise, we might not see them or quickly forget about them as we go about our daily business.

We do not mean the publication of this letter to be the final word about the Church’s response to poverty in our state. We hope that every Catholic community will consider this letter, and the five dioceses of Indiana intend to collect this reflection and continue the conversation.

Such reflection is crucial for our mission in the world today. Pope Francis invites us to see the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement, which must necessarily find expression and develop in every effort of evangelization (“The Joy of the Gospel,” n. 178). We look forward to working with you to proclaim the Good News by strengthening family life, promoting just employment and ensuring a quality education and comprehensive health care for all Hoosiers, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Given on Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015

+ *Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.*

Most Rev. Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archdiocese of Indianapolis

+ *Donald J. Hying*

Most Rev. Donald J. Hying
Diocese of Gary

+ *Charles C. Thompson*

Most Rev. Charles C. Thompson
Diocese of Evansville

+ *Timothy L. Doherty*

Most Rev. Timothy L. Doherty
Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana

+ *Kevin C. Rhoades*

Most Rev. Kevin C. Rhoades
Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend



POVERTY



- **1,015,127 Hoosiers are living in poverty**

(Indiana Institute for Working Families)

- **22% of Hoosier children live in poverty**

(American Community Survey, 2012)

- **17.3% were poor in 2007**

(American Community Survey, 2012)



EMPLOYMENT



- **2,275,546 Low-income Hoosiers**
(Indiana Institute for Working Families)
- **Indiana's unemployment rate was 5.6%**
(Indiana Department of Workforce Development, October 2014)
- **69% of all jobs in Indiana pay less than \$20 per hour** (\$40,000 per year if full-time) (United Way ALICE report, 2014)
- **51% pay less than \$15 per hour**
(\$30,000 per year if full-time) (United Way ALICE report, 2014)



HUNGER



- **1 in 6 Hoosiers struggle with hunger – defined as those missing meals due to insufficient financial resources** (Feeding America Hunger Study, 2014)
- **40% of public school children in Indiana receive free lunches** (Indiana Youth Institute, 2012)



HOMELESSNESS



• 5,971 individuals were homeless

(Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority, January 2014)

• 654 households with dependent children were homeless

(Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority, January 2014)

FAMILY

- **42.7% of children born in Indiana are born to unwed parents**
(National Center for Health Statistics, 2011)
- **The percentage of Indiana children living in single-parent families increased from 25.7% to 32.8% in 2013** (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013)
- **Although on the decline over the past few years, there were 8,027 abortions performed in Indiana in 2013** (Indiana State Department of Health)

EDUCATION

- **47% of adults aged 25 and over in Indiana have no post-secondary education or training**
(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012)
- **11.9% of adults between 18-64 do not have a high school degree or GED** (American Community Survey, 2012)

HEALTH

- **71,000 Indiana children live with serious mental health issues**
(National Survey of Children's Health, 2013)
- **31% of Hoosier adults are obese**
(Center for Disease Control, 2013)
- **11% of high school students in Indiana attempted suicide in the past year**
(Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2012)

Resources for additional poverty data

Indiana United Way Association of United Ways, ALICE Report, 2013: www.iauw.org/ALICE

Indiana Institute for Working Families: www.incap.org

United States Census Bureau: www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/

Indiana Youth Institute Kids Count Data Center: www.iyi.org/reports/search.aspx



Archdiocese of Indianapolis



Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana



Diocese of Gary



Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend



Diocese of Evansville