



A Just Wage for Employees of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Recommendations by the Voice of the Poor Committee
Council of the United States

A Message From Our President

Dear Brother and Sister Vincentians,

May the peace of Jesus be with you always!

Please join me in commending the Voice of the Poor Committee for preparing this document. I urge you to study, embrace, and implement it.

As followers of Jesus Christ and His disciples, St. Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam, we believe in living gospel values. We are the largest Catholic lay organization in the United States and it is essential that we support Catholic social teachings. I urge you to ensure that those employed by the Society in the United States be afforded the greatest possible respect and a just wage.

Yours in Christ,

Eugene B. Smith, National President
Council of the United States

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

In Catholic thought, work is more than a way to make a living; it is a way of expressing and realizing our dignity, and it is an opportunity to collaborate with God in the development of creation. Therefore, workers should participate in the workplace in a manner reflecting their responsibilities and dignity. Employers should treat workers with respect. They cannot be reduced to mere commodities. People have the right to productive work, to fair wages, and to private property and economic initiative. The Church has a long tradition of supporting workers' rights to form and join unions and worker associations of their choosing. In Catholic teaching, the economy exists to serve people, not the other way around.

*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching
Challenges and Directions
Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*

Situation

The gap between rich and poor grows ever wider. In many parts of the nation, people are working but are still not earning enough to live a dignified life. Employers have a moral obligation, and a practical responsibility, to insure that their workers receive a fair wage for fair work.

Recommendation

The Voice of the Poor Committee recommends to Councils throughout the United States that they investigate and implement a just wage for all employees. The just wage is defined as a salary that will allow workers to at least earn more than the poverty level in their city; should be commensurate with other employers in similar industries; and recognizes the dignity and respect that should be accorded to all workers.

Definition of Just Wage

- A just wage is one that recognizes the value of the service provided by the employee; takes into account the prevailing economic conditions in which the business operates (but is not drive solely by market forces); allows employees to live above the poverty level in their city; and respects the whole person (e.g. recognizes that work is the normal way to provide for oneself and one's family, but is only part of a balanced life.)
- The term *living wage* is derived from the effort by municipalities to contract out services to vendors, e.g., janitorial, data entry, etc. To make their bids competitive, vendors cut back on labor costs. Unions and others concerned with workers' rights brought attention to this trend and began the fight for a living wage. Since that term is a political construct, we prefer the term *just wage*. Not only does it express the crux of the issue, but it highlights the need for justice in the world.
- By consulting a variety of sources (see below), a reasonable wage level can be determined. This should be considered only a minimum and Councils are urged to seek ways to go beyond these levels. (This might include provisions for part-time work, flexible benefits, generous leave allowances, and other avenues that allow employees to cope with the heightened pace of modern life.
- Of course, economic conditions vary from city to city and state to state. Various organizations provide well-researched estimate of the cost of living in a certain locale. Others provide wage and benefit information from which to estimate appropriate wages. For information on determining a just wage the following sources may be useful:
 - Council of Churches
 - Union representatives
 - Arch/Diocesan officials
 - State and Federal studies
 - Non-profit development and assistance organizations

Other factors to consider:

- Local economic conditions, especially the local cost of living.
- Current and potential employees' benefits, including health care, child care, long- and short-term disability, vacation time or Paid Time Off (PTO), retirement, etc.

Economic Viability

SVDP Thrift Stores, Councils, and special works, like all good businesses, have the responsibility to remain economically viable. While it may not be essential that they make a profit, they must be able to generate sufficient income to defray expenses or they will become an unsustainable burden on the council/conference operating them. When the decision is made, for whatever reason, to hire employees, the Store Manager, or Board, must be fully committed to dealing with the implications of that decision – from economic sustainability of the enterprise to fair wages for employees.

Some of the considerations that Councils and others within the Society who are responsible for employees should consider and discuss include:

- The ends never justify the means. The Society's help for the poor cannot be based upon injustice to employees.
- There is no question that increased labor costs will impact the revenue/proceeds of thrift stores and other Society operations. However, acting justly with our own employees significantly strengthens our morale authority.
- While the Society has always been a volunteer-focused organization, the moment a person is hired, we assume all the inherent responsibilities and duties of any employer. If we are to hold other employers accountable, we must set the standard.
- Serious consideration needs to be given to trade-offs in budgets and in the use of Society funds. God is calling us to justice, are we offering excuses?
- If donors, members and others object to higher wages for St. Vincent de Paul employees, then it is up to us to educate them regarding the principles of economic justice and challenge them to adopt those principles in their own lives.

Basic Principles

1. Paying a just wage -- especially by a non-profit, Catholic institution -- is not only a requirement of our faith, but will also be a powerful witness to employers, donors, government officials, church leaders and others who are -- or should be -- concerned with economic justice for all people.
2. Work is a principal way for individuals to fulfill material needs and contribute to the larger community.
3. Fair and equitable treatment of employees is a requirement of all employers as expressed by Catholic social teaching. While work is necessary, employers should also recognize the needs of the complete individual -- e.g., for parents to spend time with children, workers to engage in leisure activities, and every person to have time to revitalize the spirit.
4. Traditionally, non-profit organizations have taken advantage of employee commitment to a cause and paid lower wages than private industry.
5. Motivating employees through a just, equitable wage will improve morale, working conditions and economic return for thrift stores, special works and other employment offered



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10 Points for Economic Life by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops

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 for 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.