

## Common Good: We are One in the Body of Christ

Diocese of Rochester Public Policy Initiative

"A society that wishes and intends to remain at the service of the human being at every level is a society that has the common good- the good of all people and of the whole person as it's primary goal." (#1912) The common good therefore involves all members of society, no one is exempt from cooperating, according to each one's possibilities, in attaining it and developing it."(#1913) - Catechism of the Catholic Church

For the past three decades, rising income inequality has negatively affected the common good. In contrast to the three post-WWII decades when wages grew for the lower and middle classes, the gap between the top and the bottom of society is widening at an accelerating pace, while the middle is stagnating and growing more insecure. Here are some disturbing facts and trends:

- In 2009, the top 1% of U.S. households owned 35.6% of the nation's private wealth, more than the combined wealth of the bottom 90%. (Institute for Policy Studies)
- From 1979 to 2007, income for the top 1% increased 275%, income for the middle

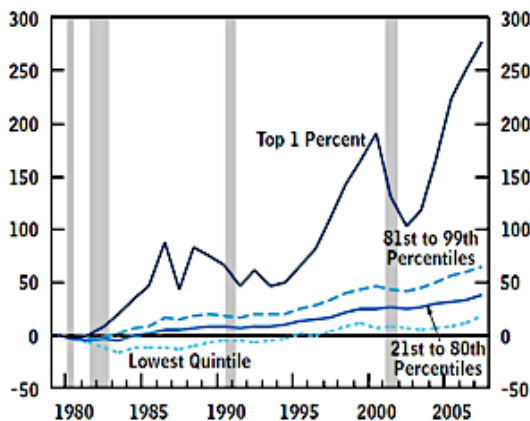


class increased about 40%, while income for the bottom 20% grew by 18%.

**Figure 2.**

### Cumulative Growth in Average After-Tax Income, by Income Group

(Percentage change in income since 1979, adjusted for inflation)



Source: Congressional Budget Office.

- There were 46.2 million people in poverty in 2010, up from 43.6 million in 2009 - the 4th consecutive annual increase and the largest number in the 52 years for which poverty estimates have been published. One in six Americans now lives in poverty, and concentrated poverty is spreading from urban to suburban areas. (US Census Bureau)
- Growing poverty is accompanied by increases in hunger, homelessness, poor health, community decay, and insecurity.
- Growing inequality adversely affects the quality of life for everyone, including the wealthy.
- A growing ethic of extreme individualism elevates the individual as the first and only measure of society's health, at the expense of the well-being of the human community.

These trends raise serious questions about America's economic and social health. Equally disturbing is the growing inability of our political system to address these issues. Consider:

- With massive special-interest money flooding the political system, our elected officials are strongly enticed to serve their powerful, wealthy benefactors, while giving lip-service to the interests of the common good and people without voice, power, or wealth.

- Since 1998, lobbying spending to influence Congress and federal agencies has increased from \$1.4 billion to \$3.5 billion. In addition, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (Supreme Court ruling, 2010) opened the door for unlimited expenditures by corporations, unions, and individuals to openly advocate for or against political candidates. (Center for Responsive Politics)

**If these trends continue, a truly troubling picture of America's future emerges. We ask:**

- Is this our vision of a healthy America?
- Is this the America we want for ourselves and our children and grandchildren?
- Is there a different view and a better way?

**Our faith and Catholic Social Teaching offer a radically different view of our responsibilities as followers of Jesus Christ. On a foundation of respect for the dignity and value of every human being, our faith tradition asserts:**

- We are one human family, bound together in a variety of communities.
- Every person has a right to life, and to access food, shelter, health care, education, employment, and an opportunity for a better life.
- Every person has the right and responsibility to participate fully in all dimensions of society.
- The world in which we live is our shared home, which must be cherished, nurtured and protected from contamination and destruction.
- The true measure of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed the critical importance of the common good in the Pastoral Constitution on Church in the Modern World. The common good "consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend work in a manner that benefits all people." (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University)

**We are challenged to examine whether our economic, political, and social systems favor the privileged few, or do they serve the common good?** No amount of wealth at the top can justify policies, laws, structures, and attitudes which systematically spread deprivation or suffering to the rest of society. Democracy cannot be sustained under such circumstances. Economic justice is a pillar of Catholic Social Teaching, and we have a moral obligation to advocate for those who have little or no voice in the halls of power. Charity, while truly valuable, is insufficient to bring about societal change.

**Our Catholic faith exhorts us to get involved, courageously speak out, and work for change in political, economic, and social systems which violate the dignity of individuals or undermine the common good.** We are called to pursue and support values, laws, policies, programs and actions which will address the troubling trends in America. Our vision is a better, healthier world for all God's children.

Catholics may legitimately come to different conclusions as to specific solutions to address America's serious problems. But the lens of faith, Catholic Social Teaching, conscience, and prudential judgment should guide every Catholic in actively promoting life and the common good.

**Jesus told his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."  
If we don't answer the call, who will?**

For additional information and resources on this public policy initiative, please visit the Diocesan web site at: <http://www.dor.org/index.cfm/catholic-charities/public-policy/common-good/>