Bishops Renew Focus on Poverty in Wisconsin

The Catholic bishops of Wisconsin will make poverty a major focus of their advocacy in the Wisconsin Legislature in 2015. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) will be calling on lawmakers and all people of good will to renew their efforts to find ways of alleviating the daily hardships faced by hundreds of thousands of residents.

Research from a variety of respected sources indicates poverty is a pressing problem in Wisconsin. According to new research from the University of Wisconsin-Extension and University of Wisconsin-Madison, poverty rose from 8.7 percent of all state residents in 2000 to 13.2 percent, or about 737,356 people, in 2012. While the economic outlook is improving, nevertheless the losses of the past decade, coupled with depressed wages, mean that too many Wisconsin residents face daily challenges to secure the most basic necessities.

As Wisconsin’s high-paying manufacturing jobs have declined in number and been replaced by low-wage service sector jobs, too many workers are unable to make ends meet without government assistance or private charity. Today a full-time minimum wage job pays $7.25 an hour and provides a gross income of $15,080, which is below the federal poverty level (FPL) of $15,730 for a family of two and more than 35 percent below the FPL of $23,850 for a family of four.

“Clearly the income from a single minimum wage job is barely adequate for a family of one parent and one child, and totally inadequate for a family of three or more people,” says WCC Executive Director John Huebscher.

The fact that wages have not kept up with inflation has much to do with the plight of the working poor. Since 2009, Wisconsin’s minimum wage has been set at $7.25, the same as the federal minimum wage. In 1968 dollars, this amounts to more than $2.00 less per hour.

Glaring racial disparities exacerbate the problem. A recent report commissioned by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that Wisconsin ranks last out of 46 states in the well-being of its African-American children. According to the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, as of 2010, 52.5 percent of African-American children lived at or below the poverty line, compared with 10.9 percent of non-Hispanic...
Another campaign season has come to an end. This means that we can savor a respite from the seemingly non-stop negative political advertising that added so little to our grasp of the issues and so much to the caustic political environment in which our policy debates take place. Still, as citizens we are responsible for these debates. We have an ongoing duty to participate in these debates. And it is now, between elections, that the policies that will frame the next campaign season will be made.

In the months ahead, anyone who felt disgust at the negativity, distortions, and appeals to fear and resentment has a chance to do better. We can prove, by our own example, that there is a better way to discuss how to foster the common good.

Recently, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington D.C., reflected on the need for “civil dialogue.” As he did so, he offered a number of ground rules for engaging each other in conversation. Here are the ground rules he invites us to follow:

1. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak.
2. Share your personal experience, not someone else’s.
3. Listen carefully and respectfully. Speak carefully and respectfully. Do not play the role of know-it-all, convincer or corrector. Remember that a dialogue is not a debate.
4. Don’t interrupt unless for clarification or time keeping.
5. Accept that no group or viewpoint has a complete monopoly on the truth.
6. “Be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another’s statement than condemn it” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2478, quoting St. Ignatius of Loyola).
7. Be cautious about assigning motives to another person.

All of us can and should take Cardinal Wuerl’s suggestions to heart. As we do so, we can ponder: How would Wisconsin’s “village square” be different today had we taken these rules to heart in recent years? We can also hope that our village square will look and sound more civil in the next few years if we put these ground rules into practice now.

The week after the fall election features another set of elections, as those elected to the Legislature pick their respective leadership teams. As in other years, the balloting in the majority (Republican) and minority (Democratic) caucuses in the Senate and Assembly produced some new faces to accompany leaders who are re-elected. The week also offered insights as to the policy priorities of those in leadership.

Assembly Republicans re-elected Robin Vos of Rochester as Speaker and chose Jim Steineke of Kaukauna as Majority Leader. Assembly Democrats re-elected Peter Barca of Kenosha as Minority Leader and chose Katrina Shankland of Stevens Point as Assistant Minority Leader.

In the Senate, the Republicans re-elected Scott Fitzgerald of Juneau as Majority Leader and chose Paul Farrow of Pewaukee as Assistant Majority Leader. Senate Democrats chose Jennifer Schilling of La Crosse as their new Minority Leader and re-elected Assistant Minority Leader Dave Hansen of Green Bay.

The Governor and the Legislature’s leadership are already sending signals regarding some of their legislative priorities.

One such priority is an expansion of the statewide parental choice program that provides vouchers to parents in lower-income families who want to send their children to religious or independent schools. The program is currently capped at 1,000 students. Republican leaders want to lift the cap or perhaps remove it completely. Another issue on the front burner is a plan to require drug testing for recipients of certain benefits such as Food Shares (food stamps) and unemployment insurance.

Other initiatives identified by Republican leaders include reducing regulations on business activity, energy reform, new approaches to transportation financing, support for rural schools, and additional tax reforms. For bi-weekly updates on all legislative proposals of interest to the WCC, subscribe to our e-advocacy network online.
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white children. For Native American children the number was 46.7 percent, for Hispanics 35.3 percent, and for Asians 20 percent.

That child poverty generally is on the rise can be seen by the percentage of Wisconsin children who are eligible to receive free or reduced meals at school. Between 2000 and 2012, the rate increased from 30.8 percent to 40.0 percent. The two maps below show that this increase in child poverty is found in every corner of the state. As indicated by the darker shades on the 2013-14 map, most areas of Wisconsin have between 41 to 70 percent of children poor enough to qualify for free or reduced lunch.

When the 2015 legislative session opens in January, the WCC will collaborate with other interested groups to press lawmakers for effective and measurable public policies that enable all state residents to live dignified and productive lives.
Catholics at the Capitol 2015 Provides a Unique Opportunity

Newcomers to Catholics at the Capitol, a biennial event hosted by the WCC and other Catholic organizations, are often surprised by the experience. Some expect the day includes political rallies and proclamations. Instead, participants experience a day dedicated to reflection, formation, discourse, and Catholic social teaching.

The day starts with registration and breakfast, followed by a morning general session that begins with a prayer service and ends with a keynote address. Past keynoters, such as Archbishop Jerome Listekti of Milwaukee and Bishop Peter Christensen of Superior, have affirmed the role of religion in the public square and examined how we as Catholics can reclaim the common good. This year’s keynote address will be provided by Dr. Jonathan J. Reyes, Executive Director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

After the morning session, participants select one of seven breakout sessions to attend. These sessions focus on various aspects of Church social teaching, such as the dignity of life, sustaining the family, advancing the lives of the poor and vulnerable, the dignity of work, and the stewardship of creation. There is also an introduction to Catholic social teaching for those interested in gaining a better understanding of the principles that guide Catholic public policy engagement.

After lunch is another series of breakout sessions, followed by an afternoon general session discussion. To complete the day, participants are encouraged to meet with their elected officials, often with fellow Catholic attendees.

Catholics at the Capitol 2015 will take place at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center in Madison, Wisconsin, on Wednesday, April 8, 2015. Please take advantage of this unique opportunity to pray with fellow Catholics, learn about the issues, and visit with legislators. Registration starts January 2015 and a registration form will be provided with the next Capitol Report. For more details, visit www.wisconsincatholic.org.