

# A VISION OF LOUISIANA FOR THE 1990'S

## LOUISIANA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE 1991

During 1991, Catholics around the world are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, issued by Pope Leo XIII. The observances highlight the encyclical's impact on social ministry. As we enter the last decade of the century, we aspire toward greater social justice in our own state.

Our hope, as Catholic Louisianians, is that this decade will bring a greater recognition of the dignity and rights of the most vulnerable citizens of our state.

The Catholic commitment to the fulfillment of this hope is not new. History takes us back to the work of the Ursulines for the poor children of New Orleans, beginning in 1728; to the selfless dedication of the Daughters of Charity at the Carville Leprosarium since 1894; to the heroism of so many nuns during the yellow fever epidemics of the late 1800's; and to the formation of Catholic Charities in New Orleans in the 1930's.<sup>1</sup>

**OUR CONTINUING COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE MOTIVATES THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TO PROVIDE ANNUALLY DIRECT SERVICE TO HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF INDIVIDUALS IN AREAS OF COUNSELING, PROBLEM PREGNANCIES, ADOPTIONS, REFUGEE AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES, EDUCATION, SOCIALIZATION, FOOD, EMERGENCY CRISIS INTERVENTION, FINANCIAL SUPPORT, HOUSING, OUT-OF-HOME CARE, AND OTHER AREAS. ANNUALLY, THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LOUISIANA SPENDS MILLIONS OF DOLLARS TO MEET THESE AND OTHER CRUCIAL HUMAN NEEDS.<sup>2</sup>**

We do this because the Gospel of Christ calls every member of the Church to serve the poor and vulnerable. The Gospel is clear: If we have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick, we have done it to the Lord himself; if we have not done it, we have refused it to the Lord.

But the Gospel also imposes on us the mandate to speak for those who have no one to speak for them, and to defend those who are defenseless. The Christian vision impels us to assess lifestyles, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor and vulnerable. This is the viewpoint of the Christ of the Gospels, and it must be ours.

Our commitment as Christian believers, therefore, leads us to advocate for the rights of workers and for economic justice, for peace and freedom around the world, and for "liberty and justice for all" here at home. It brings us to do our best to empower and help the poor and vulnerable.

At the heart of our commitment is a set of principles, a body of thought and a call to action called Catholic Social Teaching. On this centennial of Leo XIII's great encyclical, we are called to share once again our Catholic Social Tradition. As both Catholics and citizens, we feel compelled to apply the principles of Catholic Social Teaching to our own state, and to set forth a vision of how we might work hand to hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Twenty-fifth Anniversary: Associated Catholic Charities of New Orleans. October, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> 1989 Catholic Charities: USA Annual Survey. Washington, Catholic Charities USA.

## THE LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

At the core of our convictions is the belief in the fundamental dignity of every human person, the clearest reflection of God among us. Yet, in many instances we see the dignity of people in Louisiana being violated.

**PERHAPS NOWHERE IS DISREGARD FOR THE SACREDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE MORE BLATANT THAN IN THE MORE THAN 15,000 ABORTIONS PERFORMED IN OUR STATE IN THE LAST YEAR FOR WHICH STATISTICS ARE AVAILABLE.<sup>3</sup> THIS WANTON DESTRUCTION OF THE MOST DEFENSELESS OF ALL HUMAN LIFE IS CAUSE FOR SADNESS AND FOR SERIOUS CONCERN. HENCE, WE STRIVE TO OFFER LIFE SUSTAINING ALTERNATIVES.**

In 1989 alone, our agencies provided counseling and support services to more than 4,000 pregnant women and their parents or guardians, and we offer professional adoption and foster care services.<sup>4</sup>

We envision a state which upholds the God-given dignity of every person, including the unborn, a state in which the test of every policy is whether it enhances or threatens human life and human dignity.

## THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Every person has basic rights and responsibilities. These include not only the right to freedom of conscience and religious liberty, and freedom from discrimination, but also to life and those things which make life truly human - food, clothing, housing, health care, education, economic security, social services and meaningful employment.

Louisiana has the second highest poverty rate in the country. Approximately 18.5% of our residents have an income less than the federally established poverty line.<sup>5</sup> This is further exacerbated by the appallingly low rates of assistance through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). In 1988, the maximum AFDC payment level was only 24% of the federal poverty level, and 30% of our own state's standard of need.<sup>6</sup> The payment level has not increased since 1981.

**DURING 1989, DIOCESAN CATHOLIC CHARITIES AGENCIES PROVIDED EMERGENCY FOOD, CLOTHING, SHELTER AND MEDICAL ASSISTANCE. THESE SERVICES ALONE REACH MORE THAN 50,000 INDIVIDUALS.<sup>7</sup> IN ADDITION, MANY OF OUR CHURCH PARISHES PROVIDE EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE TO COUNTLESS NUMBERS OF PERSONS. WHILE WE ACCEPT OUR RESPONSIBILITY IN THIS, WE ALSO BELIEVE THAT THE STATE HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO INSURE ECONOMIC RIGHTS.**

We are concerned that 22% of our citizens have no health insurance,<sup>8</sup> and therefore go without needed medical care. This may contribute to Louisiana's having the lowest life expectancy of any state in the country.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Louisiana State Department of Health and Hospitals, Office of Public Health, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Service statistics from diocesan Catholic Charities and Social Services offices, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> "Caring for Young Black Children at Risk in Louisiana: A Fact Sheet." Prepared for the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, 14 July 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Service statistics from diocesan Catholic Charities and Social Services Offices, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Code Blue: Health Care in Louisiana. Louisiana Health Care Campaign, 11 April 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## THE CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATION

We believe that the human person is not only sacred, but social, and that the central community is the family. We envision a society and a church working together to support family life. Of special concern is the rise in the number of single-parent families headed by teenaged mothers. In 1988, approximately 70% of infants born to women under age 20 in Louisiana were born to an unmarried mother.<sup>10</sup>

**THE ALARMING RISE IN CHILD ABUSE IS ANOTHER CAUSE FOR SERIOUS CONCERN ABOUT OUR FAMILIES. BETWEEN 1981 AND 1988, THE TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILD ABUSE INVESTIGATIONS IN LOUISIANA MORE THAN DOUBLED FROM 11,094 TO 23,265 PER YEAR.<sup>11</sup> THESE FIGURES AND OTHER FACTS REMIND US THAT BOTH CHURCH AND STATE MUST COMMIT ALL AVAILABLE RESOURCES TO STRENGTHENING FAMILY LIFE.**

Although we are encouraged by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children-Unemployed Parents (AFDC-UP) program, we continue to have concern about the effect of public policies on the well being of families. Currently our state ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in the number of persons living in institutions, and first in the number of institutionalized children.<sup>12</sup> By removing children rather than working to reunite and heal families, we are contributing to further dissolution of families.

All citizens should exercise their right and responsibility to participate in and contribute to the broader society, and we take this opportunity to call our Catholic citizens to exercise greater political responsibility. We applaud the efforts of such groups as the Campaign for Human Development which empower people to create a more just society through local community organizations.

## THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

We believe that work is more than a way to make a living; it is an expression of our dignity and a form of continuing participation in God's creation. People have the right to decent and productive work, at fair wages, to private property and economic initiative.

Louisiana has been hard hit over the last decade. Between 1981 and 1985, while annual per capita income increased nationally at an average rate of 6%, in Louisiana it decreased by 1%.<sup>13</sup> Unemployment and underemployment still deny too many of our citizens their right to work.

**ONE WAY TO PREPARE OUR CITIZENS FOR BETTER WORK IS THROUGH EDUCATION. CURRENTLY, LOUISIANA TIES FOR LAST IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE PERCENTAGE OF LITERATE ADULTS.<sup>14</sup> WITHOUT EVEN THE ABILITY TO READ, TOO MANY OF OUR CITIZENS ARE CLOSED OFF FROM JOB OPPORTUNITIES. FOR OUR PART, WE ARE CURRENTLY EDUCATING OVER 96,000 STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN LOUISIANA.<sup>15</sup> WE ENCOURAGE OUR PARENTS AND PASTORS WHO ARE SHOULDERING THE ONEROUS FINANCIAL TASK OF SUPPORTING THESE SCHOOLS TO CONTINUE TO DO SO.**

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<sup>10</sup> Louisiana Office of Vital Statistics, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> New Orleans Police Department, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Louisiana Division of Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities, 1989.

<sup>13</sup> Congressional Research Service, 1989, and Southern Growth Policy Board, as quoted in "Early Intervention Strategies for the 90's." Report of the New Orleans Council for young Children in Need, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> "Phase II Report - A Strategic Plan - Meeting Economic and Social Challenges in the New Orleans Metropolitan Area." Prepared for the National Association of Regional Councils/Ford Foundation by the Regional Planning Commission for Jefferson, Orleans, St. Bernard and St. Tammany Parishes, 1989.

<sup>15</sup> Enrollment statistics from Louisiana Catholic Conference Catholic Schools Committee, 1990-91.

Research by the U.S. Department of Education over the last decade has found that Catholic school students consistently outscore students in the public schools in reading, mathematics, and science. They are especially effective in educating minority and low-income students.<sup>16</sup> Recognizing that Catholic schools are a significant part of education in our state, we call on all citizens to join us in supporting legislation that will provide financial assistance, to give all parents, especially the poor, a genuine freedom of choice in the education of their children, whether this is through a system of vouchers, or tax credits, or some other measures.

**WE ALSO CAN SUPPORT WOMEN IN THE WORK FORCE BY PROVIDING ADEQUATE DAY CARE FACILITIES. WHILE THE NEW WELFARE REFORM LEGISLATION HELPS A GREAT DEAL, THERE ARE STILL OVER 9,000 CHILDREN IN LOUISIANA ON A WAITING LIST TO RECEIVE STATE SUBSIDIZED CHILD CARE;<sup>17</sup> WE ENCOURAGE MORE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INITIATIVE IN THIS AREA. WE ALSO CALL FOR A SYSTEM IN WHICH PARENTS CAN HAVE TRUE FREEDOM OF CHOICE IN CHOOSING DAY CARE FACILITIES, INCLUDING THOSE UNDER RELIGIOUS AUSPICES.**

We also are concerned about those citizens working for minimum wage, without benefits, for those not receiving equal pay for equal work, and for those denied the right to organize.

We envision a state in which both management and workers find the economic climate attractive. We must continue to seek ways of diversifying our economy and encouraging investments, but this can never be at the expense of workers or of the environment. At the same time, we recognize the connection between growth in the economy and the ability of government and other institutions to meet our social needs.

#### **THE OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE**

We believe that the poor and vulnerable have a special place in the church and in society. A basic moral test of any society is how its most vulnerable are faring; they do not always fare well in Louisiana. In 1987—the last year for which figures are available—Louisiana had 11.8 infant deaths per 1,000 births, the 7<sup>th</sup> highest in the nation.<sup>18</sup> In many of these cases, poverty is the underlying cause.

**In New Orleans alone, it is estimated that at least 7,000 people are homeless, yet there are only 1,201 shelter beds available.<sup>19</sup>**

We believe that both the church and our state are called to respond to the needs of all our sisters and brothers, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response.

#### **SOLIDARITY**

We believe that we are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. And yet we see that discrimination is far too rampant in Louisiana, and that attitudes of racism are far too pervasive.

**WE CALL ALL CITIZENS OF OUR STATE, AND ESPECIALLY OUR CATHOLIC CITIZENS, TO RECOGNIZE THE EVIL OF RACISM IN OUR MIDST, AND TO WORK TOWARD CHANGING ATTITUDES AND STRUCTURES THAT FOSTER RACISM. AT TIMES THIS MAY CALL FOR PUBLICLY EXPOSING AND CHALLENGING INSTANCES OF RACIST BEHAVIOR.**

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Education National Assessment of Educational Progress Studies, quoted in "In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools." Washington, D.C., U.S.C.C., November 1990.

<sup>17</sup> New Orleans Council for Young Children in Need (see note 13).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Searching for Shelter – An Analysis of Metropolitan New Orleans Homeless Programs. Rudegear and Associates, April 1990 for Associated Catholic Charities of New Orleans.

## **THE CONTINUING CHALLENGE**

Our long Catholic tradition has led our Church over the last century to support workers and unions actively in the exercise of their rights, to work against racism and bigotry of every kind, to condemn abortion, the arms race, and other threats to human life, and to pursue a more just society and a more peaceful world.

We envision a Louisiana in which our efforts to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, welcome the stranger, and empower the poor and vulnerable are accompanied by concrete efforts to address the causes of human suffering and injustice. We believe that dialogue and cooperation with the state about these issues both strengthen the church and enrich our society.

We strongly believe that we have something unique to offer the state: our Catholic Social Teaching, which impels us to the service of our fellow citizens, with our well developed body of applications of the Gospels to current problems.

We see great value in working in partnership with public and private institutions. We recognize the tremendous good for the whole community when the church works in collaboration with government and with the private sector to meet human needs.

We call our pastors, our families, our institutions, our church parishes, our secular community, our legislators and other political leaders to a transformation of both our hearts and our social structures. Let us all commit ourselves to building a just and peaceful society, and to renewal of our church and state to this end.

*Prepared by*  
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