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Statement for Workers' Rights Convention 4 November 2005

Australia is now engaged in a discussion about employment law and industrial relations that is important to each and every one of us, to our families and to the future of our country.

The Catholic Church has developed teachings on work and the employment relationship over the past century.

Catholic Social Teaching on work starts from the nature and dignity of humanity and work. Employees cannot be treated as commodities, nor can their labour be treated in purely economic terms. Their work has to be understood as part of God's plan. Their work is also vital to their relations with others.

It is through work that men and women co-operate and support each other and achieve social progress. In particular, and at its most fundamental level, it is the means by which families are formed and nurtured.

Work is a principal means by which human kind seek their personal fulfilment and make their contribution to the common good. Thus there is a natural priority of labour over capital. Simply expressed, work exists for the person, not the person for the work.

The Church's teachings require that the importance of work to society and the dignity of the employee should lie at the heart of the regulation of workplace relations and employment law.

A major concern of Catholic Social Teaching is with the position of the poor and the vulnerable. There is a *preferential option for the poor*.

In *Laborem Exercens* Pope John Paul II wrote:

“In order to achieve social justice in the various parts of the world, in the various countries, and in the relationships between them, there is a need for ever new *movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers*. This solidarity must be present whenever it is called for by the social degrading of the subject of work, by exploitation of the workers, and by the growing areas of poverty and even hunger. The Church is firmly committed to this cause, for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be the "Church of the poor". And the "poor" appear under various forms; they appear in various places and at various times; in many cases they appear as a *result of the violation of the dignity of human work*: either because the opportunities for human work are limited as a result of the scourge of unemployment, or because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family.” (*Laborem Exercens*, 8)

The remuneration of work cannot be left to the laws of the marketplace; nor should it be a decision left to the will of the more powerful. It must be determined in accordance with justice and equity; which means that workers must be paid a wage that allows them to live a truly human life and to fulfil their family obligations in a worthy manner.

Poor wages, excessive hours, irregular work and job insecurity will affect the ability of the family to function as a family, meet day-to-day needs and provide for the future. Governments are obliged to implement policies that will remove or alleviate these potential threats to the well-being of families.

A feature of Catholic Social Teaching is its identification of mutual rights and duties that link and unite individuals, society and the State. These rights and duties are necessary for the promotion of the common good. Catholic Social Teaching, therefore, identifies interlocking obligations. There is an obligation on individuals to perform work where, and to the extent, they are able to do so. The obligation to work co-exists with the entitlement to receive a just wage.

The State has a duty to sustain business activities by creating conditions which will ensure job opportunities, by stimulating those activities where they are lacking or by supporting them in moments of crisis...”

Furthermore, society and the State must ensure wage levels adequate for the maintenance of the worker and his or her family. This requires a continuous effort to improve workers' training and capability so that their work will be more skilled and productive, as well as adequate legislative measures to block exploitation, especially to the disadvantage of the most vulnerable workers, including the young, women, the low paid, immigrants and those on the margins of society.

There will be much discussion in the forthcoming months about the relationship between economic growth and social justice. It would be unfortunate if these two aspects were seen as simple or opposed alternatives. The discussion should be about growing and strengthening our economy in a way that will provide prosperity and economic security for all Australians.

An informed discussion about the choices confronting Australia requires careful examination of the economic case for change and a proper consideration of the various means by which that change can be facilitated. Central to this discussion must be the recognition that social justice must be an explicit goal of government and that economic growth is an essential requirement for social justice.

There is a need for balance in the relationship between employers and employees so that the objectives and needs of both are respected and supported through the establishment of a genuine partnership in the workplace. The values of society cannot be separated from the values of the workplace.
