



Youth Unemployment

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The Challenge of Solidarity

The social teaching of the Catholic Church, since the publication of the first social Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891, has consistently emphasised the importance and dignity of work. For Christians, work means something far greater than paid employment. When conducted in right relations with one another and with respect for all of God's creation, work is a powerful expression of solidarity. It is central to the common good of society: "human work, by its nature, is meant to unite peoples" (*Centesimus Annus*, 27). In his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* Pope John Paul II has elaborated an understanding of work as the means by which we become co-builders of God's creation.

The reality for too many of our young people today is that they find themselves excluded from the world of work as a result of social and economic conditions in their countries and a lack of opportunities suited to their skills and abilities. The consequences, on both the personal and societal level, are devastating. Today's young generation may become a lost generation and the risk of social exclusion because of young age has become a serious challenge for our European societies.

What is the responsibility of our Christian communities when faced with large-scale unemployment, described by Pope John Paul II as "a real social disaster" *Laborem Exercens* (18)? Churches have a responsibility to raise their voices, in solidarity with young people, highlighting to policy makers the need for a greater emphasis on social justice in our approach to this problem. Access to work, which allows us to make our contribution to society is a basic human need. Exclusion from the world of work is a significant obstacle to the realisation of other human rights and can force people to the margins of society and to political extremes.

Since his election, Pope Francis has consistently pointed to the injustices that prevent people from working, or keep them working in unacceptable conditions. There is a need to follow this example in all our countries, publicly highlighting practices that are not consistent with our values.

With many young people struggling to cope emotionally and psychologically with the impact of unemployment – the shattered dreams, the crippling blow to self-esteem, the loneliness and isolation – we should not underestimate the value of the ministry of listening which Churches can provide. Many of these young people may need a space where they can articulate their fears and concerns without being judged or

made to feel a failure. This kind of support is vital as young people in this position may find themselves vulnerable to manipulation by those who wish to exploit their pain to undermine stability, social cohesion and even democracy, in our societies.

As Churches, we have to offer, wherever possible, the possibility for young people to set up concrete networks of solidarity and partnership. We are also challenged to lead by example in ensuring that young people are provided with suitable opportunities for leadership in our local church communities. We need to reflect on our own openness to engage with the energy and experience of young people. More importantly, we need to ask them whether they are satisfied with the existing opportunities for them to make their contribution to the life of the Church.

A key contribution of Churches in society, following the example of Jesus in the Gospels, is to provide a place of welcome. A direct consequence of young unemployment in many countries has been a significant rise in levels of migration. Churches can provide a safe space for young people to develop support networks on arriving in a new country and are uniquely placed to assist in their integration with the local community. For the families they leave behind in their home country, churches can provide pastoral care and support for those who are finding it difficult to cope with the absence of loved ones.

As Church communities, our concerns about unemployment extend beyond our national boundaries. Inspired by the spirit of solidarity, we need to be open to exploring opportunities to work together, combining our resources, and raising our voices, to improve the situation of all young people in need of employment.

For Church communities, we recommend:

- That national bishops' conferences, in partnership with relevant church youth organisations, engage in a process of dialogue with young people, providing a platform where young people can articulate their concerns and propose solutions to the current employment crisis;
- That church leaders support young people by highlighting their concerns to Government and all those in leadership positions in society;
- That churches reflect on their own engagement of young people in the life of the church. Are our churches effective models for the changes we wish to see in the wider society? How welcoming are our church communities for young people who are currently feeling alienated from church and faith questions?
- That local Church communities encourage reflection on what Catholic social teaching has to say on issues of work and employment. Applying the see, judge, act methodology, what are the implications of this for our Church communities and wider society today?
- That local Church communities explore ways in which they can provide practical and pastoral support to young people who are unemployed in their area.