

COMMENTARY: Wage hike a matter of moral concern

BISHOP DENNIS SULLIVAN 12:06 a.m. EDT April 16, 2016



(Photo: JOHN ZIOMEK/Courier-Post file)

The position of the Catholic Church on the right of workers to a just and living wage is clear, with numerous popes having repeatedly taught that workers should be provided a living wage that will enable them to support their families and provide them with the necessities of life.

I thank New Jersey Senate President Steve Sweeney and Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald for their leadership in the effort to increase the state minimum wage gradually — eventually tying it to increases in the Consumer Price Index. On the federal level, Congressman Donald Norcross has introduced legislation that would have the same effect on the federal minimum wage, and I have been pleased to have lent my support to the congressman's commendable endeavor.

It is incomprehensible to me how anyone could be expected to support their families, and provide them with the necessities of life, on an hourly wage of \$8.38 (which is the minimum wage in New Jersey), or an hourly wage of \$7.25 (which is currently the federal minimum wage).

Indeed, we in the Diocese of Camden see the consequences of institutionalized low wages throughout the six southern counties of New Jersey that we serve. In our Catholic Charities offices in each county, at our 65 parishes, in our 26 grammar schools and high schools, and in our other service institutions we confront, on a regular basis, the human consequences of this unjust wage structure.

While raising the minimum wage is not a panacea, it has been shown that — once we increase the minimum wage — the entire bottom earnings structure rises with it. Raising the minimum wage, therefore, is a catalyst that can provide those workers who are the “economically least” of our brothers and sisters with justice, and with a greater sense of self-worth and dignity.

In 2014, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office reported that the income disparity between the very wealthiest Americans and those families whose earnings are in the lowest 20 percent has continued to grow. No one could seriously contend that a continuation of this trend is politically or socially healthy. Raising the bottom rung of the wage ladder is not, of course, a solution to this unhealthy situation; it is, however, a start in curbing this unwholesome disparity.

There are, therefore, two basic reasons for my thanking Sweeney, Greenwald and Norcross for their efforts to bring an element of justice to the wage structure for the lowest-paid. The first is the moral concern, which is paramount. The second reason is simple economics — and a concern for the long-term health of our great country. These reasons prompt me to recommend to all citizens that these efforts are worthy of consideration and support.

We must always remember Pope Francis' wisdom on the importance of the worker as he reminds us that labor is “not a mere commodity,” but has “its own inherent dignity and worth.”

Bishop Dennis Sullivan leads the Diocese of Camden.

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