

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 6, 2014 at 12:56pm

Miami archbishop: Wage gap robs working poor of hope

by Brian Roewe

NCR Today

Rising economic inequality in America does more than further the financial burden upon the working poor -- it robs them of hope, said Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski.

In an op-ed column published Monday in the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel*, Wenski uses the state's recent minimum wage increase and Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* as touchstones in calling for the closing of wage gaps between the classes.

"For a worker to be dignified by his or her work, remuneration must be just," the archbishop said.

As of Jan. 1, Florida's minimum wage increased 14 cents, from \$7.79 an hour to \$7.93 -- "hardly enough for a worker to support oneself, much less a family," said Wenski. A dozen other states also raised minimum wages with the New Year, and the adjustments mean that 21 states will now pay minimum wages higher than the federal rate, currently \$7.25 an hour.

Wenski, who also serves as chair of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development for the U.S. bishops' conference, noted that Florida's poverty rate (17.1 percent) ranks the state in the top third across the nation. The South is home to 11 of the 20 the highest poverty rates, according to 2012 U.S. census data. Mississippi leads the country, with 24.2 percent of its population living below the poverty line.

Allowing companies to avoid paying their employees a living wage institutes a type of "corporate welfare," Wenski said, where businesses benefit from lower personnel costs while community assistance groups like parish food pantries and government subsidies fill the gap in helping families pay bills and provide food.

Such programs do little to enhance the dignity of the worker, he said, whereas higher wages would reduce dependency on such subsidies, alleviate workers' economic insecurity and help economic recovery by enhancing spending.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that workers deserve just wages, wages that allow them and their families to fulfill material, social, cultural and spiritual needs, said Wenski, who also referenced the three most recent popes -- Francis, Benedict XVI and John Paul II -- in making his argument.

In particular, he pointed to the economic sections of Francis' recent apostolic exhortation, where he challenges consumerism, a throwaway culture and a mindset that has humans serving the economy rather than vice versa.

His words should provoke reflection -- and lead to action -- especially in the face of the challenges faced by low-wage workers in our economy today, Wenski said.

"As Pope Francis has repeatedly said, we cannot tolerate a 'globalization of indifference.' We cannot rob the working poor of hope," he said.

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Read the full column here.

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