



A Pastoral Letter on the Occasion
of
National Poverty Awareness Month¹

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Who is my N E I G H B O R ?

“But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Luke 10:29

“There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores.” Luke 16:19-21

“Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers that question in two parables: the Good Samaritan and the Last Judgment. In both of these timeless stories Jesus teaches us that there is a direct connection between our love of God and love of neighbor. There are times, however, when we do not see the neighbor in our midst who is in need, the neighbor who lives in poverty. Or if we do encounter someone in need, we may not know how best to respond.

Cover Art: Vincent Van Gogh, *The Good Samaritan*.

Photos: Courtesy of Catholic Charities USA

Visit the Diocese of Youngstown Catholic Charities Campaign to Reduce Poverty website at
<http://www.ccdoy.org/ccdoy-poverty.html>
for more ideas, information, links and resources.

POVERTY: A LIVED EXPERIENCE

The Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Word Made Flesh, invites Christians to see the world in a new way. That challenge has been relevant down through the ages, but today it is urgent. Many of our neighbors, near and far, are crying for help. Poverty remains a reality in our region and in many parts of the world. Those in poverty are our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, trying to get our attention. The Church is especially called upon to recognize our neighbors in need, provide care, and engage the entire community to find solutions that can help them break the cycle of poverty.

Who are some of these people asking to be noticed?

Sally and George both work full time jobs. Both worry about having enough money at the end of each month to pay their rent and feed their three children. Both adults have jobs that bring in an annual combined salary of \$32,000. Neither has health insurance. This family is living at 125% of the U.S. poverty rate for a family of 5 (the amount for 100% poverty rate is \$26,000). While their income is a welcome relief from unemployment, trying to balance a household budget for five severely limits them. Some programs that benefit persons living at 100% of poverty and below are unavailable to Sally and George since they make a bit too much.

Robert lost his job right after the financial crisis of 2008. As a single person, his work provided him with a nice salary. Over two years later, out of employment benefits and with few interviews offered, he remains out of work and seeks assistance with his monthly payments. Family members and friends have all been asked to help. Fear of continued unemployment places great emotional stress on him and his family.

Julia is a single mom with one child. Her part time job is helping her pay some of her expenses while she lives in her parents' home. The child's father tries to provide some resources, but due to his chronic unemployment, payments are small and infrequent.



He tries to spend some time with his young child despite transportation issues.

Bert is a war veteran who lives alone without many family ties. At noon each day he goes to the St Vincent de Paul Dining hall for lunch. Bert goes because he enjoys being with other vets and seniors at the dining hall. But Bert visits each day not only for the fellowship. He goes mainly because his income forces him to supplement his food budget in order to pay for his medications and rent. Bert experiences almost daily food insecurity since he can never find enough money to pay for all his meals without assistance.

Juan, 19, who is from Central America, has attempted on many occasions to obtain the proper visas to work in a local poultry processing shop here in our region. Since he could not get a Green card, he found a job caring for animals. In that way, he earns money to support his family back home. He knows that the wages he makes here far surpass anything he can earn in his remote village. But he is also afraid of his immigration status and wants to find a way to be "normal."

These stories provide a vivid reminder that persons and families are living in poverty in our Diocesan region. Poverty is not a simple problem. It involves family dynamics, minimal material resources, missed opportunities, personal fears, complex relationships, cultural norms, geographic locations, isolation, and lack of understanding. Despite all of that complexity and regardless of the causes, the Church continues to respond in numerous ways.



SCRIPTURE AND OUR CALL TO LOVE GOD AND TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR

"Then God said: 'Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.' " Genesis 1:26

"This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed; Your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard." Isaiah 58:6-8

"He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'" Matthew 25:45

"But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight." Luke 10:33

These Scripture passages remind us of Jesus' call to his followers to love and care for each other, especially for those who are in need and are suffering. The Prophet Isaiah, for example, challenged the believers of his time to re-think how their relationship to God is lived out in their relationship to each other. Isaiah urged the faithful to respond to their kin and neighbors with charity and justice. Luke's story of the Good Samaritan reminds us of our dual obligation to love God and neighbor. Matthew's powerful Last Judgment image directly connects our love of God with our love for, and solidarity with, our neighbor -- even someone we do not know. These Scriptural references help us to think about and respond to persons living in poverty, whether they are in our midst or in another country.

These families have visited one of our Catholic Charities agencies, or a parish food pantry or a Catholic school or hospital, or one of our many other Catholic sponsored organizations, in order to find assistance. Each one of them has been helped, and as a Catholic community, we can be very proud that our network of social service organizations work in our name to care for every person who comes to the door.

The Church alone, however, cannot solve the problem of poverty. To succeed at first reducing and eventually eliminating poverty everyone must be involved including the private and governmental sectors, along with religious and community agencies, and each one of us individually.

We must all care for our neighbors. The Church does its part by organizing and delivering assistance, while continuing to advocate for just social policies and working with others to find means to create and sustain good jobs. In that, the Church has no specific, technical plan of action tailored to this present economic downturn. But what it does have is two thousand years of experience of what policies and programs offer the best hope and practical means to help families move beyond poverty. That experience is rooted in the Scriptures.

SOME ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE OF POVERTY IN OUR DIOCESAN REGION

"You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." John 12:8

"Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied." Luke 6:20-21

What did Jesus want to tell us about poverty? In Jesus' reaction to a comment about the cost of perfume being used to anoint him, he provides a sad reminder that due to the way we think about and react with each other, we will "always have the poor" with us. But Jesus did not stop there. He called upon us, his followers, to see and love our neighbor as ourselves. As Christians, we believe that we must look for God's face in every person, especially in the poor. Thus, the Church, in Jesus' name, beckons us to look at the world, understand it better and find ways to respond to the cry of the poor. The reality of poverty for many persons and families is a moral issue that requires analysis and practical application.

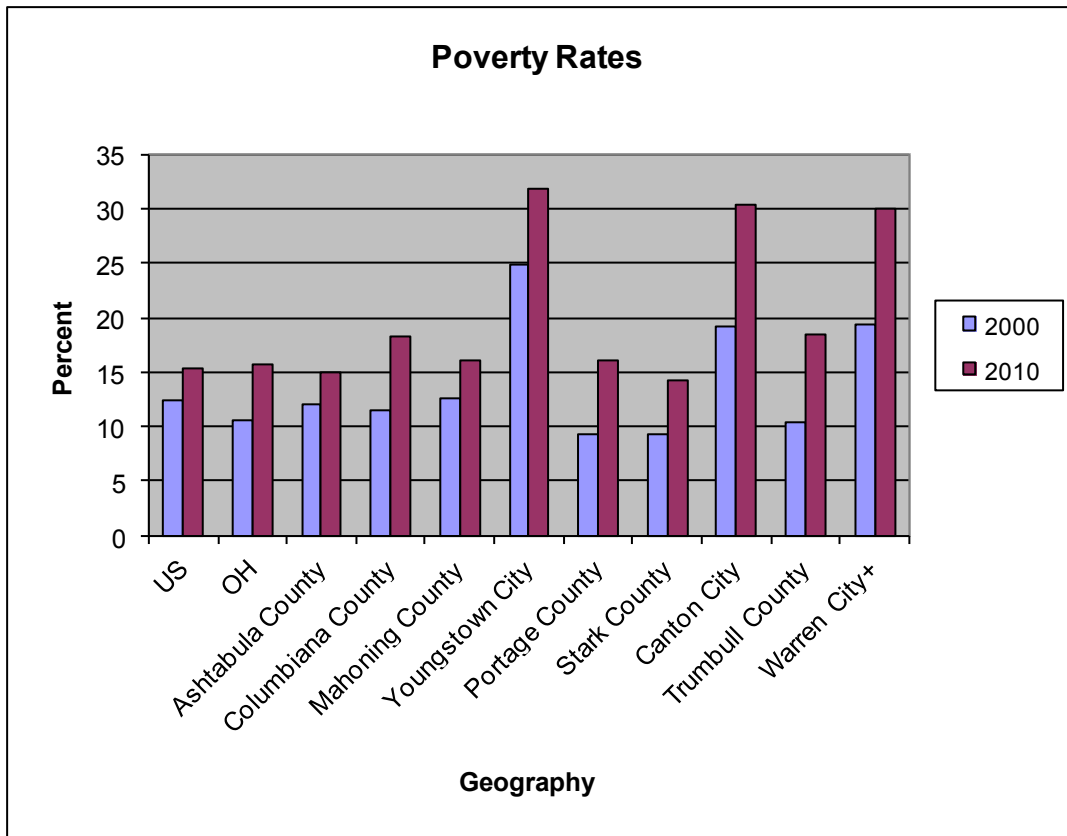
Sadly, during the past decade, our Diocesan region and many other parts of the country and the world, have witnessed an increase in the number of persons and families living in poverty. Some of those people live in isolation, estranged from family and friends. Some who are poor are embarrassed to admit they have lost their jobs, their homes, and sometimes even their identity. Feeling hopeless and abandoned adds to the fear that their lives will never be what they were because they are too old for the job market and possess skills that are out of date.

One fundamental insight from Scripture forms the functional understanding of the Church: despite one's economic, social or immigration status, every person is created in the image and likeness of God. Consequently, every person possesses a dignity that requires respect. The Book of Genesis clearly points to a critical and fundamental belief, namely that each person has inherent dignity and that every person is to be given the greatest respect. In our contemporary political and social conversations and in our public debates, it seems that we are losing basic respect for each other. Similarly, there is a sense that we have lost our historic concern for the poor among us. Sometimes we hear language and share attitudes that deride persons living in poverty. Often-times we fail to understand the reality of poverty and too easily blame the poor for being poor without looking at our reality and the real experiences of families trying to break out of poverty.

This call to respect the inherent dignity of each person informs the Church's position and response to all persons, but especially forms the basis of our concern for those who lack economic security. The dignity of each person requires that we Christians not stand by as our neighbor suffers from fear and want. The dignity of the human person is the foundational principle that shapes our individual and institutional commitment to be in solidarity with those in need. As Christians, we must always be conscious of and anxious for our neighbor.



Chart A: Poverty Rates for Diocese of Youngstown Region



As persons living in poverty can attest, though they may be struggling to find a new “normal” and a means to make ends meet, they rely on some constants in their lives: their faith and their Church. The Catholic community -- just as the inn keeper in the Good Samaritan story -- remains ready to provide compassionate care.

Thankfully some families have grown out of poverty. Still, obstacles remain for other families and individuals trying to break through barriers such as unemployment, underemployment, low wages, lack of health care insurance, lack of transportation, lack of sufficient personal, social or work skills, weakened family structures, and a lack of social connections.

According to the US Census Bureau and other related sources, poverty rates have increased in general in the US from 12.4% in 2000 to 15.3% in 2010. In Ohio there has been an increase over the same period, from 10.6% to 15.8%. In our Diocesan region, the cities of Canton (19.2% to 30.4%), Warren (19.4% to 30%) and Youngstown (from 24.8% to 31.8%) have seen dramatic increases in the rate of poverty for persons and families.² All counties served by the Diocese of Youngstown have witnessed increases in poverty rates: Ashtabula (12.1% to 14.9%), Columbiana (11.5% to 18.2%), Mahoning (12.5% to 16%), Portage (9.3% to 16%), Stark (9.2% to 14.3%), and Trumbull (10.3% to 18.4%).

What does living in poverty mean? Officially, poverty levels are defined annually by the federal government based on the size of a family and its ability to purchase a basket of goods. Chart B lists the most current guidelines.

Chart B: FY2011/2012 HHS Poverty Guidelines

For all states (except Alaska and Hawaii) and for the District of Columbia

Size of family unit	100 Percent of Poverty	110 Percent of Poverty	125 Percent of Poverty	150 Percent of Poverty	175 Percent of Poverty	185 Percent of Poverty	200 Percent of Poverty
1	\$10,890	\$11,979	\$13,613	\$16,335	\$19,058	\$20,147	\$21,780
2	\$14,710	\$16,181	\$18,388	\$22,065	\$25,743	\$27,214	\$29,420
3	\$18,530	\$20,383	\$23,163	\$27,795	\$32,428	\$34,281	\$37,060
4	\$22,350	\$24,585	\$27,938	\$33,525	\$39,113	\$41,348	\$44,700
5	\$26,170	\$28,787	\$32,713	\$39,255	\$45,798	\$48,415	\$52,340
6	\$29,990	\$32,989	\$37,488	\$44,985	\$52,483	\$55,482	\$59,980
7	\$33,810	\$37,191	\$42,263	\$50,715	\$59,168	\$62,549	\$67,620
8	\$37,630	\$41,393	\$47,038	\$56,445	\$65,853	\$69,616	\$75,260

For family units with more than 8 members, add \$3,820 for each additional person at 100% of poverty; \$4,202 at 110 %; \$4,775 at 125%; \$5,730 at 150%; \$6,685 at 175%; \$7,067 at 185% and \$7,640 at 200% of poverty.

Poverty influences one's ability to obtain needed prescriptions for proper health care, visit a doctor, purchase food items, or even pay rent. Trade offs are made each day by families living in poverty: do they eat, pay rent, buy gas for the car, purchase prescriptions, or buy clothes? Trying to plan and manage a budget on a very limited income is a process that few can master. Lacking monetary resources one's ability to plan and save is restricted. Daily survival consumes enormous amounts of time and energy.³

There exists a large amount of research and debate about the measurement of poverty, its extent and its causes and consequences. The Church continues to review such research and contributes where it can to a better understanding of poverty. Although this Pastoral Letter cannot identify all of the causes of poverty, we as the Church in Northeastern Ohio must remain committed to respond both in charity and in justice to the needs and hopes of those who struggle while living in poverty.

A CALL TO ACTION



"He answered, 'The one who treated him with mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'" Luke 10:37

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Luke 4:18-19

Akin to the Good Samaritan, we are required by our faith in and love of God to stop and offer support to neighbors we meet who are in need. Our Catholic Tradition, based in Scripture, calls each one of us to respond to his or her baptismal promise to care for our neighbor both through works of charity and acts of justice.

Works of Charity

Our Catholic parishes provide many opportunities to respond to our neighbors in need. Among them are food pantries, hot meals services, monetary assistance, and referrals to Catholic Charities. Other Catholic sponsored social service agencies (e.g., St. Vincent de Paul Society, Beatitude House, Emmanuel Community Care Center, Ursuline HIV/AIDS ministries) focus on helping families with specific needs by providing both immediate and long term assistance. Our Catholic schools continue to invest in

the formation and education of low income children and young persons. Our Catholic hospital systems -- Humility of Mary Health Partners and the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine -- have provided tens of millions of dollars each year in charity care for low income families.

Again I say that as Catholics we can take justifiable pride in the work of our Catholic Charities, parishes, schools, other Catholic service agencies and Catholic health care. Each one of those institutions needs our constant help and support through monetary contributions and the contribution of time as a volunteer. How can you become involved? Our Diocesan Catholic Charities office can help you find ways to participate in the corporal works of mercy. Contact us at www.ccdoy.org.

Works of Justice

Providing services to persons and families in need is an obligation of our faith. Acts of charity, however, are not the only requirement. Our faith Tradition challenges us to look at the social structures and policies that influence our society. We are called to work for justice throughout our world. The work of justice, tied to a deeper understanding and practice of the corporal works of mercy, requires that we ask questions including: Why are people poor? Why do they remain poor? Are our governmental policies and business operations promoting the common good, subsidiarity, solidarity and respect for human life?

Our involvement in the works of justice is multi-faceted. We can engage in this God-inspired work by advocating for common good public policy issues, assisting low income persons and communities to organize, investing in jobs for the poor, and by using our consumer purchasing power to support companies promoting economic development and just human relations, to name a few.

It is imperative at this moment in history, for instance, that we use our individual and collective voices to encourage our governmental leaders to promote social policies, laws and investments in job creation and the reduction of the number of persons who remain unemployed and underemployed.⁴ I ask that you consider joining our Diocesan Legislative Group (<http://www.ccdoy.org>) in order to learn more about current public policy and also to participate in voicing our concerns to elected officials.

Moreover, the education and engagement programs of the US Catholic Bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development has helped large numbers of low income and middle/upper income persons work in solidarity to find common and just solutions to economic problems and better their lives. This Campaign deserves our support.⁵

Another area in which we can work together is the promotion of economic development. It is not the role of the Church to plan and create jobs in our region. We can, however, use our institutional resources to support plans that will increase employment opportunities. The social teachings of the Church have consistently called for jobs that respect the dignity of the person and that pay a fair and just

wage with benefits. This is no easy task. Yet, many companies provide such employment opportunities. One case in point is our Catholic hospitals which make available numerous employment opportunities throughout the region. We should applaud the good work of these hospital administrators and all committed business leaders while, at the same time, calling for more public and private partnerships to invest in communities and in workers.⁶

Formation and Prayer

In order to assist Catholics and others of good will to engage in the works of charity and the works of justice that emanate from the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church, I encourage parishes and schools to continue the work of forming consciences. Our Offices of Religious Education, Social Action, Missions, and Pro-Life, Marriage and Family Ministry offer numerous formation programs and can assist any parish or school. This Diocese is gifted with many committed clergy, religious and lay leaders who dedicate themselves to work for charity and justice in the name of the Church. These women and men are available to support the work of our parishes and schools in their efforts to organize positive responses to our neighbors in need.

Our **Diocese of Youngstown Catholic Charities' agencies** (<http://www.ccdoy.org>) provide much needed material and emotional assistance to families and persons living in poverty. Catholic Charities organizes the corporal works of mercy for the diocesan Church, helping individuals and parishes to respond to the needs of our neighbors. Catholic Charities' programs and services provide persons and families with the tools to break out of poverty so that a helping hand is provided rather than just a hand out. There are times, however, when a family needs immediate assistance to prevent a harm. Helping families understand budgeting, household management, and how to access needed resources, provides many with hope and a new self-respect.

On the international level, **Catholic Relief Services (CRS)** (<http://www.crs.org>) is the official international relief and development agency of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Working in over 90 countries, CRS provides immediate relief in disaster areas and offers resources for long term reconstruction and development.

Chart C: Corporal Works of Mercy

The seven practices of charity
toward our neighbor

Feed the hungry
Give drink to the thirsty
Clothe the naked
Shelter the homeless
Visit the sick
Visit those in prison
Bury the dead

Another virtue that we all can practice is to pray for the poor asking the Lord to grant them courage and perseverance. We can pray for those who work for charity and justice, in solidarity with those who are poor, so that their witness may promote a more just society. We can pray for those who offer and provide jobs for the poor, that God may bless them with His abundant grace. We can pray for Catholic Charities, Catholic hospitals, Catholic schools, Catholic parishes, Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and the many other Church groups that work daily on the local, national, and global levels to reduce poverty.

We can also pray for ourselves. Each day, we should examine our consciences and along with other personal questions, reflect upon our role in responding to our neighbors in need. Did we see people in need today? How did we respond? What can we do to respond better in the future? How can we support our Church's efforts to respond to those living in poverty here in our own community, our state, our country and throughout the world?

Conclusion

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenges the lawyer who asks, "And who is my neighbor?" to see his responsibility to care for anyone who is in need. Just as that lawyer, we too must look to the needy and realize that how we respond is part and parcel of the story of our salvation.

Jesus comes to bring Good News to the poor, the broken hearted, the prisoner, and those who live with fear and despair. As his body on earth, we, the Church, are given many resources to care for each other. We, therefore, must act with works of charity and works of justice deeply rooted in our faith and life of prayer.

The corporal works of mercy cannot be accomplished without our individual and collective response. As baptized Catholics, we are called to see our neighbors in need and to stop and render help. Each person, family, parish or group can do something to respond to the reality of poverty. Catholic Charities, Catholic schools, Catholic hospitals, and Catholic social ministries are institutional ways of making that response. There are, likewise, innumerable personal responses. Whatever we can do to pray, be informed, volunteer, advocate, or donate is and will be greatly appreciated by those who live in poverty.

As we await the coming of the Kingdom of God, let us be that seed, leaven, and light, that brings Good News to life. The poor may always be with us, but if each of us stops on his or her own journey to help a neighbor in need, the Kingdom of God will come closer to realization each day.

ENDNOTES

¹ Visit the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Poverty USA website at <http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/povertyusa/>

² The City of Youngstown recently discovered that it recorded one of the highest concentrations of poverty in the city limits, with 49.6% of low income persons living in low income census tracts (see Brookings Institute, The Re-Emergence of Concentrated Poverty: Metropolitan Trends in the 2000s found at http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/1103_poverty_kneebone_nadeau_berube.aspx)

³ Poverty has a wide impact on families and communities. One area is hunger or food insecurity. In a national report from the Food Research and Action Center, it was reported that "Of the 25 metropolitan statistical areas with the worst rates of food hardship, two were in Ohio including the Youngstown-Warren-Boardman area, ranked 5th in the U.S. with a food hardship rate of 24.8% and Dayton with a food hardship rate of 21%, ranked 15th in the nation" (Food Research and Action Center, March 2011, **Food Hardship: A Closer Look at Hunger**, http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/food_hardship_report_mar2011.pdf).

⁴ The US Catholic Bishops wrote to every member of Congress the following:

"For millions of American workers and their families, economic hardship continues and grows. The US Catholic bishops have long advocated that the most effective way to build a just economy is the availability of decent work at decent wages. When the economy fails to generate sufficient jobs, there is a moral obligation to help protect the life and dignity of unemployed workers and their families. . .The median length of joblessness has reached 10 months, and economists estimate that there are over .our job seekers for every opening. Pope John Paul II, who called such prolonged and pervasive economic pain 'a real social disaster,' said: 'The obligation to provide unemployment benefits, that is to say, the duty to make suitable grants indispensable for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families, is a duty springing from the fundamental principle of . . . the right to life and subsistence.' (Laborem Exercens No. 18)." (USCCB to Congress on December 12, 2011)

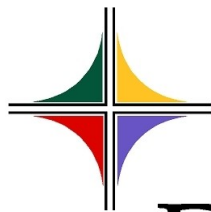
⁵ One such group funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development located in our Diocesan region is called **ACTION (Alliance for Congregational Transformation Involving Our Neighborhoods** <http://www.actionoh.org/index.html>) that engages numerous church and community groups, including many local parishes, in working for social justice in the Mahoning Valley based on the tenets of Catholic Social Doctrine. The newly formed Catholic Worker movement and its **Dorothy Day House** also connects its work of charity with justice around formation and education. Become more knowledgeable and involved in community initiatives that bring people together to find creative ways to deal with poverty by bringing hope.

⁶ The Church continues to support through its Catholic Campaign for Human Development and other efforts the development of worker cooperatives and employee owned businesses. The Diocese of Youngstown works in close collaboration with the Kent State University's **Ohio Center for Employee Ownership** to help identify opportunities for such efforts. Our Diocese is proud of its investment through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development to a local cooperative in the City of Youngstown sponsored by the Ursuline Sisters' Beatitude House (<http://www.beatitudehouse.com/services/>). The **Beatitude House Green Clean Cooperative** is owned by the women who participate in their programs. This effort creates jobs that develop these women for long term career opportunities as workers and leaders in their own business. Consider contacting The Beatitude House Green Clean Cooperative to contract with them for cleaning services, if you are able.

Besides direct support for job creation and cooperative business start ups, the Church has been active in using some of its investments to support community development. In 1986, the Diocese of Youngstown through the national Catholic Campaign for Human Development, started the **Common Wealth Revolving Loan Fund** (<http://dept.kent.edu/oeoc/cwrlf/index.htm>) This revolving loan fund uses socially responsible investments to loan to cooperatives or ESOPs to help workers become owners, as well as providing capital for low income housing development. Consider investing some of your resources in this Fund, or maybe consider accessing this resource as you consider forming, joining, converting or selling a business as a cooperative venture.

Housing development is another aspect of providing a charitable service through community development. **Catholic Charities, along with the Humility of Mary Housing corporation and Beatitude House**, provides hundreds of units of safe, permanent and affordable housing for persons and families living below the poverty level. Long term housing solutions are a critical component of reducing poverty. The Church has been a long term provider and supporter of housing initiatives throughout the Diocese and the world.

On a more personal level, in order to further the work of justice, you might consider making an **investment in socially responsible institutions and securities/money market funds**. Those investments, if screened carefully for compliance with the Church's teachings, can leverage needed dollars for economic and community development efforts. You may also want to reflect upon how you and your family spend your money as consumers. Where do you buy your goods? You might want to consider purchasing your coffee, tea, chocolates and other household products from **Fair Trade** vendors. **Catholic Relief Services** (<http://www.crsfairtrade.org/>) actively works with artisans, shop owners and laborers in many developing countries, to provide consumers with Fair Trade goods.



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OF YOUNGSTOWN

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