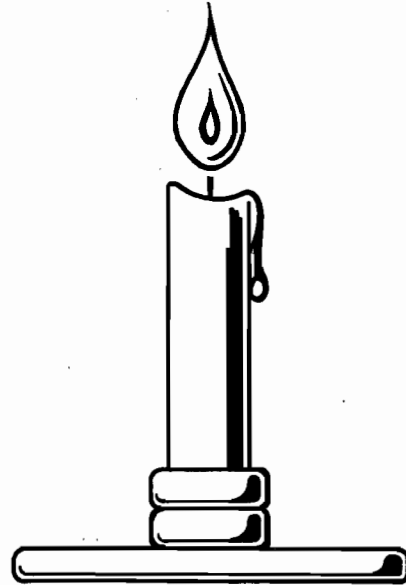


CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A TIME OF ECONOMIC DEPRESSION



**A Statement from the
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Our country, South and North, is going through a period of great discouragement and depression at the present time. In the Republic of Ireland about 187,000 people out of an estimated labour force of 1,146,000, that is some 16% have no job. In Northern Ireland, unemployment is now at the highest level recorded since 1945, having doubled in the last five years. Over 116,373 people are now unemployed, which is almost 21% of the labour force. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are, according to official statistics, two of the five least prosperous regions of the European Community. There is much suspicion between the different sectors in society. There is discontent with our falling standard of living and great fear about our future. There is much cynicism and disillusionment among our young people. Many of the factors which have led to our deep economic recession are undoubtedly outside the control of our people, North and South. The economic recession is not just Irish, it affects the whole Western world. But it would be mistaken and foolish to pretend that all of our country's economic difficulties have been caused by external factors. Many are of our own making.

Political In Northern Ireland, violence and instability and political instability have done so much to damage the economy that it will be extremely difficult to raise it up again to a level where it can support even modest

living standards for the population. In the late 1960's, on average 6,000 new industrial jobs for Northern Ireland were promoted each year. More than double that number would now be needed annually to reduce unemployment. Instead, the figure in 1981 was only half of that in 1971. The fact that Northern Ireland, because of violence, have such a poor image abroad in the eyes of potential investors is a very significant factor in bringing this about. One estimate put the loss of jobs in Northern Ireland attributable to violence at 20,000 in 1976. The present total is likely to be much greater. This is only part of the suffering inflicted on both communities by the continuing violence. Every bomb and every bullet is lengthening the dole queues and shattering the prospects of jobs for our youth. It is the weakest sectors in Northern society who have suffered most from the economic consequences of violence. Violence in the North weighs heavily on the economy of the Republic too. The cost of security is an enormous burden. The tourist trade has been hard hit by the violence.

Unrealistic expectations In the Republic, perhaps the greatest single cause of our depressed economic condition is that we have expected to go on, year by year, increasing our standard of living; but without having to work harder, to be more efficient and more competitive, to improve our industrial relations and make our management and

marketing skills more efficient. We became used to looking to some benevolent patron to hand us "goodies" for nothing — whether the "patron" be our politicians, or our own State, or the E.E.C. We were becoming a "hand-out" society, accepting and wanting and voting for the politics and promises and of "hand-outs".

Now that the overdue bills are crowding in, we are having to face reality at last. Reality can hurt; but it can also heal. The present situation could bring out the best in the Irish people, if only we face it in the light of the Gospel and the strength of our faith. One of the saddest things about Ireland today is how little we turn to our faith to inspire us in days of depression and to find the Christian ways of thinking and reacting in the present crisis.

Sharing our resources Christ's command to love our neighbours as ourselves should move Christians to think of those less fortunate than themselves; rather than be determined to defend their own group or sectoral interest or their own "relativities", at no matter what damage to others. As Christians, we should "bear *one* another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ". Instead people are too often suspicious of others and see only class enemies in those who should be partners in national recovery. Instead of "sharing our bread with the hungry", some more powerful groups seem determined to grasp and hold all they can for

themselves, no matter who goes without. Patriotism has become suspect. Appeals to patriotism and to unselfishness and to harder work and to readiness for sacrifices are fortunately sometimes greeted with cynicism.

Workers for justice and love Yet there are many who are shining examples of christian faith and charity in these difficult times. We salute those men and women and those young

people who are labouring to unselfishly, whether in the public service or in the statutory and voluntary social services and in the fields of care for the poor, the deprived, and those suffering from all kinds of physical or social handicap. We include here both paid employees and voluntary helpers. We mention in particular, because of the very acute needs of our young people, those who plan, administer and supervise the various activities of the Youth Training Scheme and ACE scheme in Northern Ireland and the Youth Employment Agency and AnCO in the Republic of Ireland. We ask, in this time of growing poverty and hardship, for greater support from all the faithful for voluntary welfare and charitable organisations. We ask many more men and women, and especially young people, to join in their work, so that there may be a great mobilising of Christian commitment to justice and charity in these times of growing injustice and self-seeking.

Christian responsibilities and of capital and of labour Those who have money cannot let themselves be guided solely by the profit motive. Corporations disposing of investment funds should give priority to productive enterprises within Ireland. Persons or groups who have made their profits in Ireland, must remember that they have a responsibility to the people of this country and an obligation to put this country and its acute needs before the maximising of their own profits. Money cannot "follow its own laws" of maximum return. The use of money is subject to the law of God. It is a national abuse that profits from property speculation can be more attractive than profits from productive and job-creating enterprise.

Companies operating in Ireland, whether Irish or non-Irish, and in particular multi-national companies, have an obligation towards their Irish employees. Foreign companies receive massive grants and financial concessions when setting up plants in Ireland, North or South. It is morally wrong that they should pull out of Ireland when they have derived maximum benefits from funding provided by Irish taxpayers. It is wrong that Irish branches should be the first to be closed by multinational companies when recession hits. Decisions to close factories raise moral issues and not just financial ones. We note with grave concern that in 1982 there were some 26,000 redundancies in the Republic and almost 18,000 redundancies in Northern Ireland. There were many redundancies also in the private sector. Profits must not be given priority over persons. The closing

of a factory, the laying-off of workers, the investing of capital, these are moral decisions and not just financial or economic ones.

The Trade union officials and members must **morality** remember that they also have now **of strikes** become wielders of power; and that they are no more immune from the temptation to abuse power than those who traditionally had a monopoly of power. Unless power is subordinated to moral principles, it can corrupt trade unionists no less than employers or politicians. Trade unionists must remember that stringent conditions must be fulfilled before a strike is morally lawful. We are disturbed by the fact that 434,253 working days were lost in the Republic of Ireland by stoppages in 1982. The comparatively lesser loss of 38,300 working days in Northern Ireland in the same period is still a source of worry. In present circumstances, only the gravest reasons could morally justify a strike. Strikes inflict such damage on our weak economy and do such harm to the whole working community and particularly to the poor, that only real and serious injustice could be a sufficient reason for going on strike. Many strikes do not fulfil these conditions. To go on strike is a moral decision, and not only a financial or economic one. There is still too much absenteeism. There are dishonest work practices. There is pilfering by workers from their firms. Such practices might seem trivial; but habitually indulged in they can be gravely sinful. The same standards of

justice in the matter of work practices apply in the public sector as in the private.

Co-responsibility Strikes however are sometimes **in work** the result of workers' frustration and insensitive management and industrial relations procedures. Factory closures and redundancies can be a consequence of managerial neglect and inefficiency. Competitiveness is an essential condition of survival for Irish firms and jobs; but it must not be thought that competitiveness is only a matter of wage restraint. It is also a matter of efficient management, professional marketing skills and packaging of products, good industrial relations, investment in re-equipment and research and retraining. A sense of co-responsibility between employers and workers must be developed. If workers became shareholders in their firms this could help to promote that spirit of co-responsibility.

The consciousness of personal moral responsibility becomes lessened when it is a Board of Directors or a Trade Union Executive Committee which takes decisions. The individual member of the Board, or the ordinary member of the Trade Union may feel that the responsibility is not his or hers. This is not true. Each member of a board, each member of a Union, has personal responsibility for the decisions taken. They must do everything in their power to influence the decision and to ensure that moral and social responsibilities are the prior considerations

when decisions are adopted. Members of Trade Unions should attend meetings and try to influence policies according to their conscience.

People before economics The rich have special reason to heed the teaching of Jesus Christ; for he said that "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven". Wealth brings with it grave moral responsibilities. It can be redeemed only by special concern for justice and for charity. The scandal of our time is the great and growing gap between the wealth of some and the deprivation of others. There is too much flaunting of wealth and of luxury sectors. A prime obligation of the well-to-do is to make honest returns of income and pay the taxes which are justly and legally due from them. They should support political and social programmes leading to a more just society. They have an obligation to cut down their superfluous spending and instead give generously to the help of the poor, both here at home and in the Third World. They should give time on a regular and continuing basis to voluntary organisations helping the disadvantaged.

There is too much defeatism about unemployment, especially of young people. Some of the strategies advocated by economists seem in practice to be both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland, and their economic advisors, must be prepared to review their economic policies, and must not be too ready to assume that the prevailing economic theories of

today are necessarily the true ones or are the only way to economic recovery or national wellbeing. Economic recovery must certainly be painful; but it seems clear that a disproportionate share of the burden is being borne by the weaker sectors in society. Some of today's economic theories look like a prescription for the "survival of the fittest".

Supporting native industry Those with jobs in present circumstances are a privileged class. They must be conscious of how their behaviour affects their unemployed fellow-citizens. Indeed everyone in the community has an obligation to do anything in their power to save existing jobs and create conditions favouring new jobs. Supporting locally-based firms both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland by buying locally-manufactured products could make a significant contribution. It has been calculated the 5,000 new jobs could be created if every wage-earner in the Republic were to switch even £1 per week from imported to Irish-made products. The major job losses in the Republic are in fact being experienced in the industries most responsive to purchasing trends in the home market — such as clothing, footwear, furniture, textiles and so on. Approximately 50,000 jobs were lost in these sectors in the past ten years. Shopkeepers and consumers should keep this in mind. Their purchasing habits have a direct impact on Irish jobs. Economic patriotism is as important as any other form of patriotism.

Relevance of the Gospel Our Christian faith is our greatest strength Ireland has been at her best and has made her finest contribution to the world in her days of scarcity. The materialism which crept into our lives in recent years has not improved us as a people. It has certainly not improved us as Christians. Our short-lived prosperity brought new forms of unhappiness and suffering, as much as it brought happiness. We must learn again the Christian meaning of material things and the moral and social responsibilities of property, wealth and power.

The Gospel was never more relevant than it is in our present situation. People should form the habit of reading a passage of the Gospels or other parts of the Bible every day, and review their lives and lifestyles by the standards of Jesus Christ. We do not need an ideology, whether Marxist or neo-capitalist, to create a new and just society in Ireland. We need only to take the Gospel of Christ seriously and remodel our lives and our society by its standard.

In this jubilee Year of the Redemption we appeal to our people for a great effort of prayer, that the God in whom our fathers put their trust, and never in vain, may help our country to surmount its present difficulties.

What can be done

A number of positive steps can be taken to alleviate the mental hardship caused by unemployment and to create jobs.

1. *It is surely wrong that millions in the developed world should be unemployed while two-thirds of humanity live in under-developed countries and millions starve. Some young people could consider giving their skills for some years to developing countries or to volunteer missionary service.*
2. *It is surely wrong that so many should be unemployed here at so much useful work needing to be done in Ireland. The regulations regarding unemployment benefit should not exclude voluntary work at modest remuneration for schemes benefitting the community, organised at local level.*
3. *Unemployment benefit is not an alms. It is a social entitlement. It is society's duty. There should be no stigma attached to it. It is no disgrace to be unemployed against one's will. The manner in which unemployment benefit is paid can sometimes be needlessly humiliating. More sensitive arrangements for payment should be made, which respect the dignity of the unemployed.*
4. *The unemployed should continue to be*

members of their union when they lose their jobs. It is when unemployed they need the support of their union most. Unions should have special care for their unemployed members.

5. State schemes for youth training and employment should be made known and availed of at parish level. Priests in many areas have given great leadership in this regard and others can learn from their experience. There is endless scope for schemes for improvement of the environment, provision of community amenities etc. All that is needed is local leadership and initiative. The skills are there. People must be motivated to help themselves. Chambers of Commerce and such bodies all over the country have done much for local development and can do more.

6. There is room for promotion of small-scale locally-based firms. Every community has persons with the competence to identify such projects and people with skills to operate them. The IDA in the Republic has been paying more attention latterly to small-scale enterprises. Banks should be more willing to provide venture capital for responsibly-backed projects of this kind.

7. In spite of massive unemployment, people often have difficulty in obtaining the services of tradesmen for such services as routine maintenance and repair work. Registers of such

services and demands for such services should be kept at parish level and made known locally. Parish-based and voluntarily-staffed advice centres should be set up to provide information on both benefit entitlements and job opportunities.

8. Social cultural activities and recreational amenities should be provided in each parish for the unemployed and especially for jobless youth. Priests will devote special pastoral attention to those out of work and their families.

9. We support the recommendations recently formulated by the National Conference of Priests of Ireland and commend them to our clergy.

10. The young must not be allowed to feel that there is no future and no job prospect for them. Many young people are still finding jobs. Signs are beginning to emerge of an upswing in the world economy from which Ireland will benefit. We have the advantage, both North and South, of a talented, skilled and well-educated work-force. Our large young population is not a burden. It is an asset. We will have an expanding home market and a still better-educated work-force in the future. We must not think and talk ourselves into a worse situation than we are in. Apathy and defeatism are our worst enemies.