

Statement by the Northern Catholic Bishops on the current economic crisis for the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul

- **“For the poorest in our society, this is an emergency, not a crisis. We call on everyone, from public representatives to parishioners in our parishes, to come together in a spirit of solidarity and active concern for those who are in need among us at this time.”**
- **“Despite political differences about the Protocol and a future border poll, the most urgent duty on our local MLAs, of all parties, is to prioritise concrete actions that will address the life or death situation many people and businesses face now, and in the months ahead.” – Northern Bishops**

Statement

On this, the Feast Day of Saint Vincent de Paul, we, the Northern Catholic bishops, want to raise our voices in urgent concern about the challenges facing the most vulnerable in our society, as multiple economic pressures converge to create life threatening levels of deprivation and fear for individuals and businesses. For the poorest in our society, this is an emergency, not a crisis. We call on everyone, from public representatives to parishioners in our parishes, to come together in a spirit of solidarity and active concern for those who are in need among us at this time.

Every day seems to bring news of dramatic and unplanned increases in the cost of basic essentials such as food, fuel and heating. More and more low and middle income families, older people and vital businesses in our economy, are gripped with fear as they think about what lies ahead this autumn and winter. The recent Westminster budget has done little to lift this fear and the absence of an Executive at Stormont is unquestionably impeding the effort to respond to the depth and urgency of the situation. We therefore urge a combined effort from all those in Church, politics and society to help address this crisis now; to act justly, to promote the common good and to show solidarity with the many thousands of families who are enduring hardship and worry.

Politicians have a particular duty to ensure the basic needs of citizens are being met and to reassure those in need that serious, meaningful help is on its way. What has been offered to date, does not go far enough to meet that need. Indeed, the “fiscal plan” presented last week to the Westminster parliament represents an unjust distribution of resources which will benefit the richest but bring little comfort to those hardest hit and most at risk in these trying times. This highlights once more the need for working devolved politics in Northern Ireland that can deliver for the real needs of people here, especially lowest income families and many small and medium businesses, key employers on this part of the island, on the brink of collapse. Despite political differences about the Protocol and a future border poll, the most urgent duty on our local MLAs, of all parties, is to prioritise concrete actions that will address the life or death situation many people and businesses face now, and in the months ahead.

Of particular concern, is the fact that in Northern Ireland, one in four children are living in poverty - one of the highest levels of child poverty of any population in Europe. This is

despite the fact that a Child Poverty Strategy has been promised for years now - most recently in the New Decade New Approach agreement - but has not yet been delivered, 25 years on since the Good Friday Agreement.

Recent research from our Marriage Care Service, ACCORD, also points to the intensifying pressure the financial crisis is having on families, with 81% of those surveyed reporting that worries concerning money are a primary point of family and relationship pressure. It is known that many families here already have less than £100 per month in disposable income. We also know that, in comparison with other parts of these islands, more people here are reliant on social security, more people are in fuel poverty, more people are in absolute poverty and we have some of the highest levels of working poor. This means that the impacts of this emergency will be felt most acutely here.

We accept that there is also much that we in the Churches can do to help. The amazing positive response at parish and community level during the Covid-19 pandemic shows what can be achieved when people work together. We commend and thank the many charitable organisations and partnerships that are already delivering help to people on the ground, as they have always done. A similar effort is now needed.

We therefore call on all of our parish communities to BE ALERT for those who are most impacted by the current emergency, recognising that hardship is often hidden and that many people suffer in silence, being reluctant to go out and seek help. We invite our congregations, like St. Vincent de Paul and after the example of Jesus himself, to put the poorest and most vulnerable among us first, and to reflect in prayer on what more they can do to help ordinary families and those in need over coming weeks and months.

Food banks, Saint Vincent de Paul Conferences and other charitable outreaches urgently need new volunteers and more resources due to the unprecedented demand which is likely to get worse as winter approaches. Parish Pastoral Councils might consider extending their existing parish hall activities or providing warm spaces, hot meals, fuel vouchers or other helpful initiatives in response to this urgent situation.

Psalm 34 reminds us that “The Lord hears the cry of the poor”. At a personal level, let us all be open to hearing and responding to “the cry of the poor” in our midst - both at local and global level. And if we are fortunate enough to have sufficient resources to keep ourselves warm and nourished this winter, let us think of others who are struggling simply to survive. A time like this calls us to examine our own relationship with the material goods of this earth in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, friend of the poor. The Word of God challenges us today to give as generously as possible; to be especially conscious of any waste of food, energy, or other resources that we sometimes so easily take for granted; and, to join our voices with those who call for real change in government policy and priorities so that social injustice, inequality and poverty can be eliminated here, and everywhere.

To conclude, we encourage our Parish communities to reflect prayerfully on the “pact” signed in Assisi on Saturday last by Pope Francis together with young people from all over the world:

We, young economists, entrepreneurs, and changemakers, called here to Assisi from every part of the world, aware of the responsibility that rests on our generation, commit ourselves

today, individually and all collectively to spending our lives so that the economy of today and tomorrow becomes an economy of the Gospel, and therefore:

an economy of peace and not of war;

an economy that opposes the proliferation of arms, especially the most destructive;

an economy that cares for creation and does not misuse it;

an economy at the service of the human person, the family and life, respectful of every woman, man, and child, the elderly, and especially those most frail and vulnerable;

an economy where care replaces rejection and indifference;

an economy that leaves no one behind, in order to build a society in which the stones rejected by the dominant mentality become cornerstones;

an economy that recognizes and protects secure and dignified work for everyone;

an economy where finance is a friend and ally of the real economy and of labour and not against them;

an economy that values and safeguards the cultures and traditions of peoples, all living things and the natural resources of the Earth;

an economy that fights poverty in all its forms, reduces inequality and knows how to say with Jesus and St Francis, "Blessed are the poor;"

an economy guided by an ethics of the human person and open to transcendence;

an economy that creates wealth for all, that engenders joy and not just riches, because happiness that is not shared is incomplete.

We believe in this economy.

It is not a utopia, because we are already building it. And some of us, on particularly bright mornings, have already glimpsed the beginning of the promised land.