



**Message of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
on the occasion of the
Feast of St. Joseph the Worker
1 May 2021**

The Feast of St. Joseph the Worker was instituted by Pope Pius XII in 1955 to celebrate Joseph, the patron saint of workers on 1 May each year. We learn from the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 13:55-56) that St. Joseph was a carpenter. As a worker, St. Joseph would have been gifted in his craft but dependent on others for work that would help him meet the basic needs of his family.

Since 1891, when Pope Leo XIII issued the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* in response to injustices to workers that arose during the industrial revolution, the Church has stated that the right to work, and the rights of workers, must be maintained and strengthened no matter the nature of the work or the stature of the worker.¹ *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* identifies work as a human right that enhances dignity, sustains families, and contributes to the common good of society.² Work allows the individual to share his or her gifts, cooperate with others for the building up of society, and participate in God's work of Creation.

Of late, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Canadians have become acutely aware that despite labour laws that protect workers, there remain many inequities and indeed numerous difficult working conditions for many of our brothers and sisters. We find this particularly prevalent among those deemed “essential workers,” such as grocery store clerks, restaurant workers, factory employees, distribution centre workers, gas station operators, health care workers, educators, and migrants who labour in the farming industry – to name only a few. “Essential workers” do not have the option of working from home. Many of these workers do not have access to paid sick leave. Some who need to stay home face consequences such as loss of pay, a lay-off, or even dismissal. Many do not have adequate health benefits that would assist them in purchasing medicine and other supplies. This, combined with the fear of contracting Covid-19 at work and spreading it to their families, makes the situation untenable. Even if “essential workers” are not sick, when schools are closed, and children must learn virtually, access to affordable day-care is not always available. The parent is left to choose between care and supervision of their children and their jobs. This is a choice that no one should have to make. Furthermore, it must not be lost on us that many of our brothers and sisters here in Canada do not have equitable access to just remuneration, to living wages, paid sick leave and adequate child care. Collectively, we must heed Pope Francis' call to “review our priorities” and advocate for justice for all workers, especially those identified as essential. Work is essential for the life of an individual and of the community.

¹ Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical “*Rerum Novarum*”, 1891.

² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, “*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*”, Cf. No. 287, 2005.

Another sobering effect of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the reality of increased unemployment in Canada. This is particularly true for women and youth. Many youths rely on the money they make during the summer and throughout the school year to offset the costs associated with post-secondary education. This lack of income has left many in a state of uncertainty and created mounting obstacles to continue post-secondary education. Those who graduated from college or university in 2020 find themselves without work in their field of study, stalling their life plans.³

As we continue to celebrate the Year of St. Joseph, we are reminded of the words of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*, where he writes:

*Saint Joseph's work reminds us that God himself, in becoming man, did not disdain work. The loss of employment that affects so many of our brothers and sisters, and has increased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, should serve as a summons to review our priorities. Let us implore Saint Joseph the Worker to help us find ways to express our firm conviction that no young person, no person at all, no family should be without work!*⁴

St. Joseph, patron saint of workers, pray for us!
St. Joseph, patron saint of Canada, pray for us!

³Marc Frenette, Derek Messacar and Tomasz Handler, Statistics Canada, "To what extent might COVID-19 affect the earnings of the class of 2020?". Accessed 26 April 2021 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00063-eng.htm>

⁴ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter, "Patris Corde", No. 6, 8 December 2020.