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***A Pastoral Letter for the
Feast of St Joseph the Worker***

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Keeping Time

Australian families and the culture of overwork

I heard a story recently that shocked me. It is of a family finding it hard to manage the demands of paid work on family time. The husband holds down multiple jobs, working all hours of the day and night and travelling from one side of town to another. The wife is also very busy caring for the six children they love dearly.

The husband starts his morning bundling papers for a newsagent. Before most of us are awake, he is cleaning a large retail store. Through the day he cleans three hotels and then he is back at another retail complex. Then he is on call. On Saturdays it's the same routine and he spends Sundays cleaning a shopping centre.

The income just covers the costs of living, running a car and paying off the mortgage. He is on the base rate of pay and depends greatly on the 15% loading for the evening jobs. Asked when he finds time for sleep, he says 'usually in two-hour blocks'. Doing over 80 hours of work a week, it is understandable that there is tension when needs at home cannot be met and the family misses their husband and dad.

On this day, the Feast of St Joseph the Worker, we might hold in our prayers the growing number of workers caught in this kind of situation. I invite all people of good will to bear in mind those who, working their hardest for the ones they love, are denied time with their family and friends.

The loss of family time

Over the past two decades there has been a massive encroachment of work into family time. An increasing number are juggling the demands of work with their family commitments. Families struggling to meet rising costs of living and higher levels of household debt have not been as well served by a labour market that has produced more jobs that are low paying, insecure and involve irregular hours.

Two new studies by the Relationships Australia Forum¹ and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC)² show that after 15 years of economic prosperity, many Australians are disappointed with the results and feel overworked, stressed-out and unhappy.

We are among the most overworked nations in the world, with a very high rating among 18 developed nations on key indicators of work intensification. With 22% of the workforce doing at least 50 hours each week, Australia runs second only to Japan in terms of average working hours. Almost a third of the labour force regularly works on weekends, making Australia second only to Italy. It is revealing that around two million Australians work on Sundays. Around 27% of Australian workers are in casual employment, making us second to Spain in terms of work often characterised by irregular hours and, as a result, an enforced dysfunctional family life.

For some workers, flexible working arrangements may be a benefit. For many, however, the rhetoric of family-friendly workplaces has not been realised. This is particularly true for workers in the retail, hospitality and service industries, who have the most unpredictable hours, are often low paid and have little power when it comes to negotiating hours and conditions.

This is a real problem for families with young children and those with caring responsibilities for elderly family members. People caught in the dilemma of having to work longer and harder in jobs that really upset the normal family routine are entitled to ask, 'Where are the promised benefits of workplace flexibility?'

The studies confirm what many have experienced during two decades of labour market deregulation. The demand to work longer and more irregular hours has upset the balance. There is less time for family functions, difficulty in maintaining networks of friends, little time for religious worship, community events and recreation. More alarming is the direct damage to the family unit in the form of high levels of depression and stress, drug and alcohol problems, strained relations leading to separation and divorce, and reduced child welfare.

HREOC makes the case for a national framework and legislation that would ensure the right for workers to request flexible working arrangements, limit long working hours and improve leave arrangements. It seems unlikely, however, that such initiatives will be entertained under the current industrial relations system.

The new workplace laws

After the introduction of *WorkChoices*, there were stories in the media about the impact of the new industrial laws on individuals and groups. The trade union movement and initiatives like the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union's *Clean Start* campaign have focused on the impact on the most vulnerable. It is becoming clearer now, through detailed academic studies, that the loss of some basic protections is substantial.

The Catholic Church in Australia has voiced concerns about workers' rights and conditions under the new laws. The Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations is currently calling on the Australian Fair Pay Commission to ensure that minimum wages meet ordinary family needs without the need for both parents to enter the labour market.³

The Church has also been aware that workers could feel pressured or even forced to bargain away entitlements related to work time. That workers could cash out leave entitlements or that employers could demand additional hours have been particular issues. It is worrying to hear that there has been a substantial reduction of overtime and penalty rates in individual workplace agreements registered under *WorkChoices* and that a majority of these agreements abolish or reduce meal breaks and public holiday payments and shiftwork loadings.⁴

The loss of these conditions can result in lower pay for vulnerable workers. There is also a risk that businesses may see the reduced costs of labour after hours and on weekends as an incentive for more irregular hours of work.

We should remember that it is often small business employers who have a greater understanding and regard for the family needs of their workers, even though small businesses face many pressures. It would be a great shame if the viability of the businesses of employers who maintain their workers' entitlements were undercut by competitors who had abolished these rates.

It has been suggested that any public discussion on the work and family balance will be futile if no policies are being considered to address structural issues in the labour market, such as the casualisation and fragmentation of the workforce.⁵

A helpful first step in assessing the impact of labour market changes on working families would be for the Government to regularly release the full range of data on the terms and conditions of individual agreements registered under the new legislation. This would ensure thorough reasoning and sound debate on the system's operation and its practical outcomes.

Time together is a right

Perhaps it is time for Australia, with the help of our political leaders, to put work in its proper perspective. Work can be an expression of our God-given talents, the means for forming and supporting families and an opportunity for solidarity and contributing to the common good. It is an important means – not an end in itself. This coincides with what Australians say they most aspire to: the welfare of spouses and families, their health and wellbeing, strong friendships, community life and their faith.⁶

Can we reawaken the biblical notion of the Sabbath? It is a time of liberation from the necessity of work, for rest and giving thanks to God. Not limited to Sunday, it is about taking time to find stability in family life, for worship and for recreation. Importantly, Sabbath is also a refuge: 'a barrier against becoming slaves to work, whether voluntarily or by force, and against every kind of exploitation, hidden or evident.'⁷

Time together is every family's right. The Vatican has called on the international community to ensure working parents, both men and women, are 'assisted, if necessary by law, to bring their own unique and irreplaceable contribution to the upbringing of their children, to the evident benefit of the whole society ... [that] families receive adequate and fair wages that are sufficient to meet ordinary family needs'.⁸ Recently the Holy Father, Pope Benedict, warned of labour market changes depriving young people of their 'ability to not only dream and build up a project for the future, but even to commit themselves to matrimony and start a family.'⁹

On this Feast of St Joseph the Worker, we are invited to consider the ways in which we can establish the proper place for work, and the necessary pay and conditions, so that family life is well supported now and for future generations.

Most Rev Christopher Saunders
Bishop of Broome
Chairman, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council

Notes

1. Relationships Forum Australia, 2007, *An Unexpected Tragedy – Evidence for the connection between working patterns and family breakdown in Australia*, RFA Inc, Sydney.
2. HREOC, 2007, *It's About Time: women, men, work and family*, HREOC Sex and Age Discrimination Unit, Sydney.
3. Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations, 2007, Submission to the Australian Fair Pay Commission, 2007 Minimum Wage Review: <http://www.accer.asn.au/docs/tribunal/index.html>
4. Professor David Peetz, 2007, 'Brave New Work Choices: What is the story so far?', paper presented at the 24th Conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand.
5. Dr Tim Battin, 2006, *Choice for Whom? A discussion of the 2005 industrial relations laws*, Catholic Social Justice Series No.58, ACSJC, Sydney.
6. Survey cited in Relationships Forum Australia, 2007, p.36
7. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, n.258. See also nn. 259f, 280, 284.
8. Statement of the Apostolic Nuncio, H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, to the U.N. Economic and Social Council 45th Session of the Commission for Social Development, New York, February 2007.
9. Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the 9th International Youth Forum, 28 March 2007.