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Remarks by The Most Reverend Edgar M. daCunha, SDV, Chair, Public Policy Committee of the New Jersey Catholic Conference, On the Statement on Poverty in New Jersey by the Bishops of New Jersey

More than a year ago, the Public Policy Committee of the New Jersey Catholic Conference brought to the bishops' attention the need to speak out on the problem of poverty in this state, and to invite Catholics and non-Catholics alike, church and state alike, business and non-profit alike, to work together to find a solution before it is too late, for some of the residents of this great state.

The members of the Public Policy Committee are everyday people. They are laypeople, clergy and Religious who understand very clearly that Catholic teaching on the subject of helping the poor is very specific and very critical.

The Church's work may be described as "Two Feet of Social Action." One foot is charity, and the other is justice. The metaphor is appropriate because both "feet" are needed in order to move forward. "Charity" refers to our duty to provide direct social services to those in immediate need of life's basic necessities. This may include, among other things, serving the poor in soup kitchens, donating food, money or clothing, or mentoring an at-risk teen. "Justice" means that we strive to correct the long-standing inequities in our society. This may involve advocating for fair public policies, developing community organizations, and participating in community self-help projects.

The Committee members also knew, however, that despite this deep-rooted belief and commitment of the Church, we needed to learn more about poverty, its causes and its cures, before we acted. We are thankful for the Public Policy Institute for their hard work in making us even more aware of the need for action now. We are grateful for the men and women in our parishes, for the students in our schools, for embracing the call to action to help the poor. Even with this help, we are still not experts. We need and want more advice, support, collaboration to ensure that poverty begins to end here in New Jersey, and the time to begin is now.

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Today the Bishops stand ready to work together with others to solve this problem, just as we always have done.

Our statement is an invitation for all people of good will to come together and to recognize the plight of the poor – their lack of food, housing, medical care, and preparation for jobs.

For that reason, the statement of the Bishops calls on task forces to look into the root causes of poverty: the weakening of family life, the lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and failing educational systems.

We will identify pragmatic recommendations to help strengthen families, improve schools, reduce unemployment, assure living wages, and increase affordable housing.

The New Jersey Catholic Conference, with assistance from the Catholic Charities Agencies, will organize and manage the task forces with oversight from a blue ribbon advisory committee that we will appoint in the next few weeks.

As the Blessed John Paul II said in his Encyclical *Novo Millennio Ineunte*:

“How can it be that even today there are still people dying of hunger? Condemned to illiteracy? Lacking the most basic medical care? Without a roof over their heads? . . . Christians must learn to make their act of faith in Christ by discerning His voice in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty.” (Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 50)

This is a time of prayer, a time of action. To everything, there is, indeed, a season. We are sowing the seeds today to reap a harvest that will end poverty tomorrow.

Thank you.

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