As New Zealanders we pride ourselves on giving everyone a ‘fair go’. We value ‘fair play’. We accept that a ‘good game’ requires good teamwork, good sportsmanship and playing by the rules. We get angry when the odds are stacked against one side, or when people are not given a sporting chance.

New Zealanders like to be on the winning side of sports competitions – and are hoping for success in the Rugby World Cup this year. In a country that takes satisfaction in sporting achievements, we may apply a sporting metaphor to illustrate our vision of a fair society – ‘a level playing field’.

Unfortunately, one of the areas in which New Zealand has been a ‘world leader’ has been in the growth of inequality. Many New Zealanders do not experience our society as a fair one. In Social Justice Week 2011, we blow the whistle on issues of fairness and inequality in our midst.
The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner.

Pope Benedict XVI: *Caritas in Veritate* #32, 2009

**New Zealand wealth is unevenly distributed:** The wealthiest 10 percent of the population hold over 50 percent of total wealth, while the bottom half of the population holds 5.2 percent of New Zealand’s wealth.

![Graph showing change in Gini coefficient between mid 1980s and 2000, selected countries](source: New Zealand Treasury, May 2011)

**Growth in income inequality**

Between 1984 and 1998 New Zealand was a world leader in the growth of inequality: Health research indicates that wealthy societies with wide income inequalities have worse social outcomes than less wealthy societies with smaller inequalities. Former New Zealand Treasury head John Whitehouse recently said that in highly unequal societies it is hard to maintain economic performance.
The negative consequences of income inequality are felt across society, not just at the extremes: Negative impacts of the growth in inequality during the 1980s were felt across 80 percent of incomes.

Although inequality levelled off in the past decade, inequalities have become entrenched in New Zealand society: These inequalities are likely to have increased as a result of the 2009 global financial crisis, the 2010 tax cuts, and the Christchurch earthquakes. Further impacts will be felt as a result of government decisions in welfare and prison policy, public spending cuts and 2011 Budget decisions.

Our Scriptural tradition teaches the responsibility of the wealthy for the poor: The Gospel of Luke tells Christ’s story of the rich man who ignored the needs of the poor man Lazarus at his gate and was held to account for it.

Catholic social teaching also emphasises the duties of private wealth for the common good of all: The gap between the rich and the poor has been a concern of formal Catholic social teaching since Pope Leo XIII witnessed the extreme growth in the gap between ‘the enormous fortunes of some individuals and the utter poverty of the masses’. Pope Benedict XVI has most recently spoken out on the growth of inequality, both between rich and poor countries and also within countries.
The Common Good: New Zealand’s Catholic Bishops and Church Leaders of other denominations have constantly spoken out about the growth of inequality, paying particular attention to the impact of economic and social policies on the poorest members of society.

A Catholic way of understanding our mutual responsibilities towards one another is expressed through the concept of the Common Good. Pope Benedict explains the common good like this:

To love someone is to desire that person’s good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. ...The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them.

Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate #7, 2009

WHAT CAN I DO?

- Raise issues of fairness and inequality with election candidates
- Consider how you can contribute to fair play, on and off the sportsfield
- Write to your Member of Parliament asking how they intend to address these issues

Further information about inequalities in New Zealand society can be found in Caritas Social Justice Week materials, or from the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services’ project Closer Together – Whakatata Mai www.closertogether.org.nz

This leaflet is a summary of the Caritas Social Justice Week booklet: On a level playing field: Fair play and the common good. Copies of the full booklet are available from the Caritas office: PO Box 12-193, Thorndon, Wellington 6144 www.caritas.org.nz