

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

A Tribute to the "Common Laborer"

PART II

The plaintive appeals of two frustrated workers that I quoted in last week's column seem to be typical of what many of their fellow workers have said to the media in other interviews and what millions of additional workers would undoubtedly say were they given the opportunity to speak. The essential frustration, as one sociologist has analyzed it, is "the utter stagnancy of the worker's status. Wages may increase but not the opportunities for advancement. He feels that society does not value his work."



Making work more human and humane and making it possible for unskilled or semi-skilled workers to live not as machines but as men and women of dignity and worth will not be easily accomplished, but it is at the very heart of social justice. It also is at the heart of the Gospel message about the dignity of manual labor. The Christian theology of labor derived from Gospel values starts from the premise that people work — or should work — not merely to earn a living, not merely to develop their own personal growth, nor merely to serve the needs of their fellowmen, but also and more profoundly because by means of their labor they become partners in the work of bringing God's creation to perfection.

The Fathers of Vatican II voiced such a theology of labor in the document, *The Church in the Modern World*:

"Human labor comes immediately from the person. In a sense, the person stamps the

things of nature with his seal and subdues them to his will. It is ordinarily by his labor that a man supports himself and his family, is joined to his fellowmen and serves them, and is bringing God's creation to perfection. Indeed, we hold that by offering his labor to God a man becomes associated with the redemption work itself of Jesus Christ, Who conferred an eminent dignity on labor when at Nazareth He worked with His own hands."

Believe me, I am not suggesting, nor were the Council Fathers naive enough to suppose, that the average person normally has such a vision of his daily labor. But I believe it is safe to say that such a theology offers to people of faith the one satisfying answer to why they should work at all.

But for workers who feel hopelessly trapped in occupations which seem meaningless and make automatons of them, the preaching of a Christian theology of work is doomed to become an exercise in futility. Effective preaching of Gospel values happens only when a climate of acceptance has been provided. Our missionaries have always sought to fill empty stomachs before attempting to fill empty hearts with spiritual nourishment. It makes the same good sense, then, to say that the liberation of the worker from his condition of servitude which erodes his spirit and his feeling of personal worth must precede any preaching about the dignity of his labor.

We are all called upon to work for a change in a system which has entrapped the common laborer. This apostolate of social justice is our common vocation. Each of us can be at least a small voice in a chorus of protest against injustice. Some have the talents and opportunities to organize and lead the protest, but changes are effected only through united action and the collective force of our human witness.

To transform the structures of society which enslave the human spirit, we have to begin with the revolution of our own sensitivity to justice and charity in the neighborhood in which we live. We begin, then, with the change in our own conscience, our mentality and our vision. Every time we renounce our own selfishness, become aware that we are our brother's keeper, show respect and love for the freedom and rights of others, we start a tiny ripple of hope that can have far-reaching effects. The Gospel calls us to action which affects the whole human family. The implication of our inaction also affects the whole human family.

It is with pride that I have called the Church of Rochester in recent years to support the cause of the oppressed laborers in areas which are as removed from us as Texas and California. And what has happened should encourage the power of the small voice and the tiny ripple that has reached distant shores.

I shall be happy only when all of our people have been raised to a level of conscience which reaches out to our brothers and sisters in one family of "Our Father" and to a vision that portrays those who espouse the cause of social justice not as meddlers in other people's business but as our brothers' keepers.

As a young steelworker, recently interviewed in a study of industrial unrest, put it: "Everybody should be thinking about giving people better lives."

I prayed this Labor Day that we all grow in our awareness of our common vocation to promote this better life in which the common laborer can achieve a sense of vocation and personal dignity.

'Our Teacher Is Christ'

In the course of the General Audience held Wednesday Aug. 20 in St. Peter's Square, Pope Paul VI gave the following address:



We repeat once more that the Holy Year, which we are all doing our best to make a worthy and worthwhile celebration, appears as a renewal. A renewal of what? A renewal of our Christian life, of our faith, of our conduct, of our attitude towards the world in which we live, this world so changed and so changeable, so entrancing and so powerful. The point at issue is to maintain and strengthen the meaning of the word 'Christian'. The word is often used by custom or by tradition to classify us in a purely ethnic or demographic way, without paying any attention either in logic or in fact to its true meaning. If we are Christians in name, we ought to be Christians in fact. The restless and reforming spirituality of our day understands this when it bears witness to the necessity of proven authenticity. With good reason then is it a question of a two-fold operation to guarantee our authenticity: Comparison and Recovery.

Comparison of whom and with whom? The answer is clear: a comparison of ourselves with Christ who is the model *par excellence*, the true man, the shepherd of our life, he who has said of himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14, 7). Implicitly or explicitly, we place our faith in him for the simple fact that we bear his name: we are Christians. Christ indeed gave that wonderful, captivating description of himself. We can find it summarised in another description which Jesus also gave of himself, and which we could well keep in mind as a slogan and a resolution for our Jubilee renewal. Jesus says in fact, almost as if to clinch an

argument: "You have one Master, the Christ" (Matt. 23, 8, 10).

How many Scriptural quotations we could recall to support and confirm this title of Master of life which Jesus attributes not only to his mission but to his own Person. He is the Word, he is the Divine Word of God. Let us remember, for example, the mysterious voice which came from the bright cloud that appeared on the night of the Transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased: listen to him" (Matt. 17, 5). Can we say that we are truly disciples of our divine Master? Are we in conscience certain of being listeners who really give weight to his teaching? (Cf. Matt. 13, 13-17).

The comparison between what we are, what we think, what we do, with the Gospel teaching (cf. Matt. 11, 29 "learn from Me . . .") and that which follows from it with authority ("he who hears you, hears Me . . ." Luke 10, 16), obliges us to recover those theoretical and practical principles which, when lived out with humble fidelity, entitle us to bear worthily the glorious name of Christian (Acts 11, 26; cf. 1 Pet. 4, 16). On the other hand, if deprived of their effective correspondence with the life we live, they recoil to accuse us, and, God forbid, to condemn us (cf. Matt. 25, 26 s.). We must give or, if needs be, restore to the name of 'Christian' a genuine consistency with Christ's Word from which it is derived: this is the renewal which we continue to seek. The condition and the consequence of the renewal expected from the Holy Year is therefore this: to listen to the Master, Christ.

Unfortunately it is not hard to see that our standing as Christians, our Christian conscience, is often watered down by our way of living which has made us forget its theological and ontological value, the concern for that state of faith, that state of grace, which is truly the Life of our life (cf. Rom. 1, 17; Gal. 3, 11). How many Christians are dominated by habits of thought and conduct copied, from the world, to the

detriment of the concept of our existence based upon the teaching of Jesus, Our Master!

Modern history, no less than ancient history, teaches us this fact: that man needs the guidance of a teaching that is vouched for by the name of some great person, worthy or otherwise of the trust of his followers. Man in general is not self-sufficient. He needs a Master, a Head, a Leader, to think, to act! If he has not one, he creates one for himself—often with unthinking dedication, with purely passing enthusiasm, with debasing self-interest, with sheer force of words . . . And the One who gave a divine guarantee to his word when he said: "He who follows me will not walk in darkness" (John 8, 12), he, the Master, the Head of the human race, is today too easily abandoned.

Let it not be so with us who walk the pathway of courage and sincerity. With this Jubilee we have reached a new and renewing meeting with Christ. Here is our new program:

1. We shall not be deaf, bored or indifferent to the divine Master's Word. His grave and gentle appearance, his simple and profound word shall be always before us. We shall listen, we shall study, we shall invoke what the Holy Spirit can teach us of the total truth of Christ to guide us on our way as faithful believers (cf. John 16, 13).

2. With hungry hearts we shall submissively treasure the teaching of Christ (Luke 11, 28) and of those whom "the Holy Spirit has made Bishops to feed the Church of God" (Acts 20, 28).

3. We shall keep vigilant watch over certain new theories in circulation today; they are sometimes not immune from spiritual and doctrinal dangers. In the depths of our hearts we shall hear the Gospel invitation in the teaching of the magisterium and in the ecclesial communion: "The Teacher is here and is calling for you!" (John 11, 28). The Teacher, my brethren, the Teacher is Jesus!