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## U.S. Bishops' Labor Day Message

# 'Church Must Become Champion of Poor'

See editorial, Page 4

Washington, D.C. [RNS] — The U.S. Roman Catholic Church must play a "pivotal role" in reconciling white ethnics and non-white minorities and in building an "effective coalition for constructive social change" in urban America.

The Church must also become, "without fear or favor, the champion of the poor in our society."

These mandates were offered by Msgr. George C. Higgins, secretary for research of the U.S. Catholic Conference, in his annual Labor Day Statement which focused on the Catholic bishops' Bicentennial theme, "Liberty and Justice for All."

In urging a greater leadership role for the Church in promoting social justice for all the nation's citizens, Msgr. Higgins recalled the words of Moses to his followers on the threshold of the Promised Land: "There will be no lack of poor men in the land that is to be your home; I must needs warn you, then, to be open-handed toward your brother, your fellow-countryman, when he is poor and in want."

"Perhaps never before has this biblical injunction been so timely and of such crucial importance as it is in the

U.S. in this Bicentennial year," Msgr. Higgins said. "Poverty, in other words, was, in those days, and in many parts of the world still is the perennial and almost irremediable lot of all but the favored few."

In his 4,000 word statement, Msgr. Higgins said the words of Moses and the subsequent teaching of Jesus Christ are all the more important for Americans, not only because there is no lack of poor people, but "because there is less excuse today for the continuation of widespread poverty and less excuse for steeling our hearts and shutting our purses against its unfortunate victims."

While acknowledging that "we are gradually facing up to the fact" that 25 million Americans are poverty stricken and that the poor are "drifting back" into our national consciousness, he said the situation is still bleak for those at and under the poverty level.

And what is worse, he said, "there is no inherent reason, from the point of view of our economic resources and technical facilities, why we cannot substantially reduce the level of unemployment and the incidence of abject poverty if we have the will to do so."

Msgr. Higgins noted that labor, management, government, civic organizations and other groups have

made significant strides in seeking to eradicate the root causes of poverty. And he pointed out that the Catholic Church — as evidenced by papal and synodal statements in recent years — has achieved a "new social awareness . . . a new stirring of justice characterized by an ever-increasing aspiration to equality and participation and by the will to change whatever has become intolerable."

He stressed that the "poor themselves — the black, the Spanish-speaking, the native Americans, the Appalachians, and other disadvantaged groups in our affluent society are helping us regain our sense of justice and compassion."

The long-time observer of the American labor scene said the poor "are challenging the nation to take off its moral blinders . . . and to look more honestly and realistically than ever before at the darker side of American life — at poverty, racial discrimination, the ravages of war, the awful wastefulness of the suicidal arms race, the destruction of the natural environment, and other deep-seated problems of society."

Turning to the role of the Church, Msgr. Higgins said its leaders must work for justice in ways "consonant with her own nature and specific mission. That is to say, the Church can and must promote justice by constant

Continued on Page 2

## Intention Fine But Direction Is Needed

By FATHER JEROME ROBINSON, OF  
Diocesan Director, Black Ministries

With an indisputably consistent sharp perception of both the realities and systems of the United States government and the Roman Catholic Church, Msgr. George C. Higgins remains a highly respected spokesman deserving the attention of a rather diverse audience. Indeed, he cannot be heralded as the champion of any particular faction or divisive segment within the American experience during the past 25 years. It is encouraging to know that this is still possible amid pervasive instances of outrage and dishonesty. It is for this reason, I suppose, that I find his 1976 Labor Day message interesting and challenging.

He possesses an integrity which frequently embarrasses many of his conferees at the U.S. Catholic Conference headquarters as well as his colleagues in the fields of labor, politics, and social justice. This sort of influence is not a consequence of arrogance or self-righteousness. It is seemingly far more due to an earnest boldness rooted in qualities of love and commitment to both the mission of the Church and the potential of this nation.

In response to the bicentennial theme of the Catholic Bishops, ("Liberty and Justice for All,") he focuses upon the "pivotal role" the U.S. Roman Catholic Church must play in reconciling white ethnic groups with non-white peoples for the sake of building an "effective coalition for constructive social change" in urban America. Moreover, he heightens the conviction that the re-gaining of a "sense of justice and compassion" can be possible through the confrontation that non-mainstream Americans present to the rest of the country to dispose of racial discrimination, impoverishment, wastefulness, destructiveness, and other deep-seated problems of society. His reasoning for the necessity and latent actuality of this kind of thrust is certainly well-founded and greatly hopeful. In fact, I think his perspectives are basically "right on."

However, his insights are without clear directives on how to proceed toward accomplishing the mandates he has suggested, if the Church is truly to advance in accepting such a responsibility. Though this type of expectation may be unfairly held of Monsignor Higgins, it is nothing short of what I would hold of myself or any writer, speaker, and leader who exhorts others to re-direction, renewal, and reconciliation.

I am not at all contending that guaranteed solutions and infallible

Continued on Page 2

## Diocese in Action

Next week in the Courier-Journal, departments of the diocese will report on their activities for the past fiscal year in interviews with Courier-writers.

Every department will be represented and progress, staff, outlook and budgetary matters discussed to emphasize the human dimension of the good work going on in diocesan offices.

From the detailed — planning, finance — to the dramatic — missions, hospitals — the diocesan departments are busy places. Read about them in the Sept. 8 Courier-Journal.



FATHER ROBINSON



JOHN ERB

## Urban Coalitions Seen as Necessary

By JOHN ERB  
Director of Urban Social Ministry  
Office of Human Development

The very survival of the Urban Church is dependent on a new understanding of ethnicity, parish, and neighborhood. Slowly it is becoming more and more apparent that the Church has to develop an urban policy that legitimizes pluralism and includes the realization of the parish neighborhood as an essential building block for renewing our cities.

In the past, especially in the sixties, the frustrations of ethnic working class communities were directed, in large part, toward other minority groups. Even though many of their problems were jointly shared there was a strong "suspicion and fear of each other." The American Dream had proved to be no more than an illusion for both groups. Working-class ethnics saw their neighborhoods — once a source of fierce pride — become fertile ground for studies and surveys about the "urban problem." Thesis after thesis was written about them while the situation only became worse. Banking policies such as redlining gave some neighborhoods a war-torn look. Taxes rose year after year while services declined. People lost their trust in government. Their President did not pay his taxes. Inflation robbed them of the small economic advance they had made. Their parents could not afford to live in decency and their children questioned them about the American Dream.

While all of this was happening, corporate power brokers sat back contentedly. Wealthy Americans became wealthier. Corporate profits rose and their taxes fell. The war and every other crisis — from meat to oil — turned out to be an economic boom for the privileged few and a disaster for the many. The price of all this was urban decay; human values were lost in the cost-benefit analysis. Most importantly, corporate decision makers could sit back knowing that frustrations were being directed not at

Continued on Page 2



## Gift from Japan

Mayor Thomas Ryan looks on as Mrs. Ayako Isimaru explains the "dragonfly doll" legacy to Mrs. Helen Smythe and sixth graders Renee Hokula and Karen Farrell. Story on Page 21.