

Unions provide basic freedoms

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Since I'm not a regular reader of *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and similar business-oriented publications, I've probably missed most of the articles and columns written in recent years by conservative and neo-conservative Catholics on the relationship between Catholic social teachings and the U.S. and global economies.

When I do see their writings, I am struck by the extraordinary lengths to which they go to find some basis of harmony between their own economic views and those of their church, and especially of their all-time favorite pope, John Paul II.

They seem to read his encyclicals with a Magic Marker in hand, highlighting those sentences and paragraphs that — taken out of context — sound like passages from a U.S. Chamber of Commerce position paper.

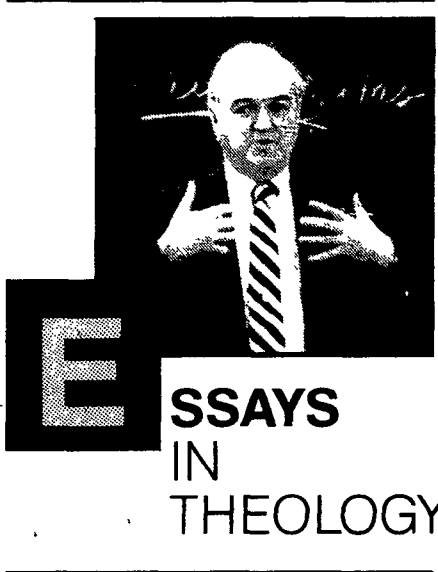
At the same time they pass over many other passages that take positions at odds with their own.

Pope John Paul II's support of labor unions is a case in point.

I am not aware of any expressed concern in conservative and neo-conservative Catholic quarters in the past several years regarding the dangerous decline of the organized labor movement in the United States.

On the contrary, one suspects that the development pleases rather than disturbs them.

And yet this pope whom they



champion as a post-modern leader of almost heroic proportions, greater in their minds than even former President Reagan, has been unequivocal in his support of the trade union movement — as every pope has been since Leo XIII.

A section devoted to the importance of unions can be found in the pope's 1991 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work).

Therein he insists that the formation of unions is a right, and that unions function as "a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice, for the just rights of working people in accordance with their individual professions."

"The experience of history," the pope argues, "teaches that organizations of this type are in indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrialized societies"

(n.20).

The word "indispensable" is significant.

In his most recent social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Year), written to mark the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul II joins with Leo XIII in reaffirming that "the right of association is a natural right of the human being, which therefore precedes his or her incorporation into political society" (n.7).

"The role of trade unions in negotiating minimum salaries and working conditions is decisive," he continues.

But beyond negotiating contracts, the pope declares, labor unions are also "places" where workers can express themselves. They serve the development of an authentic culture of work and help workers to share in a fully human way in the life of their place of employment" (n.15). He repeats the point later on (n.35).

In light of Pope John Paul II's clear teaching of the "indispensable" and "decisive" role of labor unions, it is heartening to read of the concern voiced by former Secretary of State George P. Shultz in a recent address before the National Planning Association (see Leonard Silk, "Economic Scene." The address was published in the Dec. 31 issue of *The New York Times*.)

One of the two major lessons Shultz claims to have learned in his years as an economist, business executive, and government official is that "free societies and free trade unions go together."

It is no accident, he points out, that the first thing a dictator does is to eliminate or emasculate free trade unions, if there are any.

"And it's not an accident," he observes, "that a lot of the fire for what happened in Eastern European countries came out of a trade union, Solidarity."

Without internal resources like the trade union movement that will "really get up on its hind legs and fight about freedom," Shultz notes, societies are vulnerable to governmental suppression of liberties.

And so the former secretary of state in the Reagan administration is profoundly concerned about the decline of the labor union movement in the United States.

He reminds us that in the private sector only 12 percent of the labor force today belongs to unions, while government unions represent just 36 percent of public employees.

Shultz argues that "as a society, we have a great stake in freedom and a lot of that is anchored somehow historically" in the labor movement.

Such thinking is a lot like Pope John Paul II's, who gave such staunch support to the Solidarity movement in Poland.

Perhaps I've missed something, but conservative and neo-conservative Catholic writers don't seem to have expressed equivalent concern about the decline of the U.S. labor movement.

Given their regard for freedom and their enthusiasm for Pope John Paul II, that silence is puzzling.

Life's decisions are difficult, necessary

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

We put my widowed mother-in-law in a nursing home two days before Christmas.

Heartless? No, there was no choice. Grandma was just too sick to be cared for at home any longer. My wife had rushed her to the hospital a week before, and she had almost died then. So the move to the nursing home was actually an affirmation of life. But its necessity did not make the decision any easier for her family.

Stephanie turned 80 last October. For the last five years she has lived with Kathy and me and our three pre-school children. I cannot say that it has always been easy for us to live together, but it has been the way it should be.

By that I mean that part of the work of being family is to care for those in need. When children are infants, they are almost totally dependent on family. As they grow in wisdom and age and grace,

however, children become less and less dependent until finally they are able to function on their own as confident and competent adults.

Meanwhile, the adults of the family grow older until at some point it is they who require assistance. Then it is their kids' turn to care for them. Stephanie worked very hard to raise three beautiful daughters to successful adulthood, and now they, their husbands and their children must work very hard to make her last years as comfortable and meaningful as possible.

So when it became clear over five years ago that Stephanie could no longer live on her own, it seemed only natural that my wife and I would invite her to stay in our home. I used to lecture people that a nursing home was a "last resort" and was proud of the fact that Grandma lived with us (despite my constant temptation to engage in mother-in-law jokes).

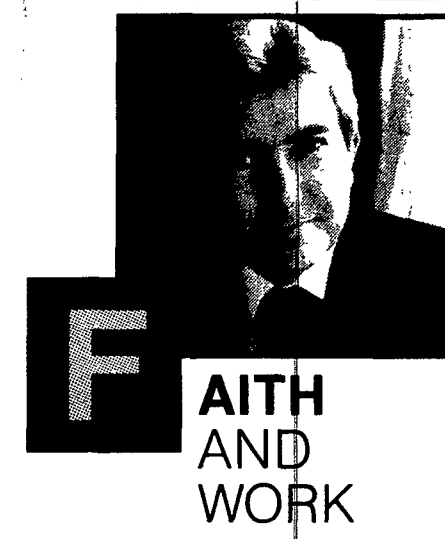
Yet as Stephanie's health problems and disposition got worse over the years, the idea of a nursing

home for her became more attractive. Between caring for Stephanie and dealing with our three children, Kathy and I felt exhausted most of the time.

We sought all kinds of assistance. Kathy's sisters took their mother every other weekend and anytime we went on vacation. They drove her to numerous doctors' appointments and helped in any other way possible. We enrolled Stephanie in an adult day care two days a week (and then had to insist she go when she balked). We ended up hiring a companion to be with her three days a week, just to give us a break from "eldercare."

We reluctantly concluded that we could not care for her at home much longer. We were just beginning conversations with Kathy's sisters about looking into nursing homes when Stephanie had her recent attack and the decision was — thankfully — taken out of our hands.

So now our work changes. Instead of caring for an elderly relative in our home, we must now



learn how to care for one in an institution. That means lots of visiting and volunteering and sympathy and sensitivity on all our parts. I hope that she — and others — will understand that we still love Grandma. I know that I will be much less judgmental of others who make the same decision about loved ones.

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