

# Church must put principles into practice

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

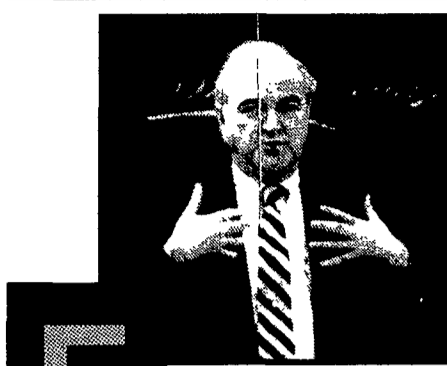
Labor Day weekend in the United States has traditionally inspired lofty statements on the dignity, rights and contributions of working people. Such statements are usually crafted from within the labor-union movement, agencies of government and the churches, including the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Difficult as it may be for their authors to admit, these pronouncements are never widely read. If a real, flesh-and-blood, working person were to chance upon one of these statements and actually read it through, it would more likely evoke cynicism than inspiration.

Inside and outside the church, many working people — especially women and people of color — experience a substantial gap between our pious Labor Day rhetoric and the reality of their work place.

Recently, my column touched upon the overwhelming presence of women in the Catholic Church's ministerial work force. They constitute about 85 percent of lay and religious parish ministers nationwide.

Some of their painful stories were told to the U.S. bishops' committee that has been trying doggedly, for these many years, to produce a pastoral letter on women. But those stories got excised in the drafting process. Too gamey. Too close to the pastoral bone.



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

The only message we're given is that all is well. Things are fine and going to get better. Be patient. Trust us. President George Bush has tried that approach politically, and it failed. The approach is just as wrongheaded for the church.

There are simply too many violations of basic human rights in the church to ignore them. They are particularly offensive when they happen to people without the means or the power to defend themselves.

It is nothing less than a scandal that lay employees of the church, most often women, have to have recourse to the civil law in order to secure justice from the church.

The state guarantees the rights of workers to form labor unions. In

some dioceses, lay teachers and parish ministers are not allowed to work under contract or to form unions and professional associations. If they try, the bishop refuses to bargain with their agent.

So much for social encyclicals. So much for respect for papal teaching.

Lay ministers have almost no job security. They may have a good working relationship with a pastor or a bishop, but a new pastor or bishop can dismiss them without warning and without due process.

Their salaries are almost always too low, and their health benefits, inadequate. Where the salaries and benefits are not too low, they are resented. The lay minister is made to feel that she should apologize if her compensation package is consistent with her ministerial background, experience and performance.

Occasionally, one will trot out the argument that the lay minister is working, after all, for a faith community. All the more reason why justice should be served!

If a faith community claims that it cannot afford to be just, it should be required to defend in precise detail its current allocation of limited financial resources. Justice comes before nonessentials and frills. The bishops themselves have taken this position in their remarkable pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All," in 1986.

"We bishops commit ourselves to the principle that those who serve the church — laity, clergy, and religious

— should receive a sufficient livelihood and the social benefits provided by responsible employers in our nation." They then called upon all Catholics to increase their contributions to the church in order to honor this commitment to justice.

Contrary to the practice of some union-busting bishops and hospital administrators, the pastoral letter gave a ringing reaffirmation to the church's teaching on workers' right to unionize.

"All church institutions must fully recognize the rights of employees to organize and bargain collectively with the institution through whatever association or organization they freely choose."

The bishops also addressed the age-old problem of discrimination based on sex, often hidden, but sometimes blatant and explicit: "In seeking greater justice in wages, we recognize the need to be particularly alert to the continuing discrimination against women throughout the church and society, especially reflected in both the inequities of salaries between women and men and in the concentration of women in jobs at the lower end of the wage scale."

If we can't put these Gospel values and social-justice principles into practice in our dioceses, parishes, schools, hospital, and other ecclesiastical agencies, then we ought at least or protect the environment from the rhetorical glut of pious Labor Day pronouncements.

# Following Christ is spiritual battle with Satan

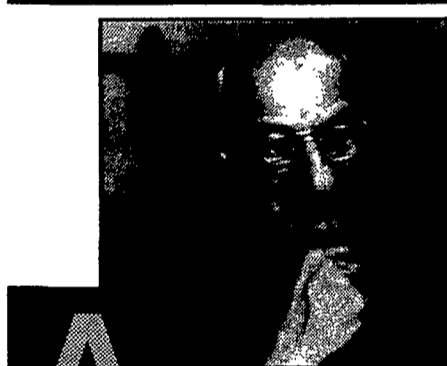
By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 14:25-33; (R1) Wisdom 9:13-18; (R2) Philemon 9-10, 12-17.

Wisdom was the last book of the Old Testament written about 90 B.C. in Alexandria. Some people justify not practicing religion by saying, "I live a good life. I don't hurt anyone. Why should I go to church?"

Wisdom answers, "How do you know your life is good? For what man knows God's counsel? We can scarcely know the things of earth, much less the things of heaven?" Besides, Wisdom goes on to remind us, "the corruptible body burdens the soul: the needs of our 'earthen shelter' weight down the mind, distract it from knowing the truth, can cause a busyness that can choke out truth."

In other words, Wisdom says man needs divine revelation. The first 11 chapters of Genesis show where man goes on his own: he ends up in a Babel of confusion. So God sent Wisdom, His Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit of a woman, that He might show man the way to life by teaching the truth.



## A WORD FOR SUNDAY

The truth He taught is that it is folly to let anything or anyone, even one's own family, separate one from Him. He demands all or nothing. Then Jesus used two parables to illustrate what He meant.

First, He likened the spiritual life to the building up of a tower. I remember climbing one of these towers in the Holy Land. Every vineyard of any size had one. They were used to store equipment, to serve as a lookout

against thieves and to provide a room for the lookout.

It took time to build such a tower. Similarly, to follow Christ is a lifelong endeavor: it is a gradual work that takes a lifetime. "We have not wings, we cannot soar; But we have feet to scale and climb/ By slow degrees, by more and more,/ The cloudy summits of our time."

Following Christ is not only a building process, it is a spiritual combat. As Satan assailed Jesus during His public life, so he most certainly will assail us. One of the greatest follies would be to underestimate our enemy. Satan is a fallen angel. We are no match for him. That is why God has assigned to each of us a guardian angel to assist us in the struggle. It would be folly not to pray daily to our guardian angels.

It would be equally stupid to neglect daily morning and night prayers, monthly confession, and Sunday Mass and Communion. We are engaged in a supernatural battle; without supernatural helps, we are bound to be defeated. With them, we most certainly will win.

Sometimes, following Christ demands great sacrifices like what

Paul asked of Philemon. Philemon owned a slave, Onesimus, who had run away. The only safe place for a runaway slave was to get lost in some big city. Onesimus fled to Rome, no doubt with some of his master's money.

In Rome around A.D. 61, Onesimus met Paul, who was about 50 years old and under house arrest at that time. Paul converted Onesimus and urged him to go back to Philemon at Colossae. Paul was a good friend of Philemon, so he asked him to release Onesimus and treat him like a brother.

He must have done what Paul asked. Writing to the church at Ephesus, St. Ignatius of Antioch addressed his letter to the Bishop of Ephesus, whose name was Onesimus. Many biblical scholars believe that the runaway slave Onesimus became a great leader in the early church.

Wisdom asks that we pray: Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain wisdom of heart. For a thousand years in your sight are as yesterday. ... Thus may we learn to give and not to count the cost when it comes to following Christ.



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