

Church must act on what it preaches

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

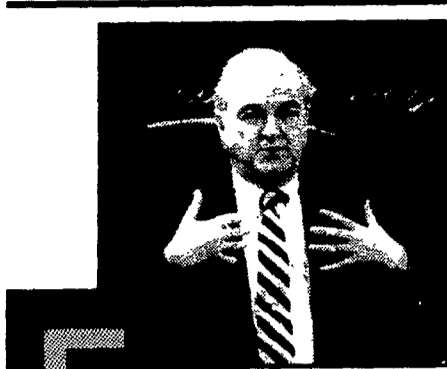
Since his election to the papacy in 1978, Pope John Paul II has established a splendid record in developing Catholic social teachings. He has issued three major social encyclicals and has given many powerfully prophetic talks all over the globe, not only where human suffering is most acute, but also in the United States, Canada, Western Europe and at the United Nations.

Bishops' conferences have also been strong advocates of social and economic justice. The U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter of 1986, "Economic Justice for All," is a striking case in point.

Taking their lead from the 1971 World Synod in Rome, the U.S. bishops insisted that the Church has to practice what it preaches. Only a just community can credibly preach to others about the demands of justice.

The bishops were remarkably specific in their call for justice inside the Church as well as outside. They spoke of the obligation of the Church to provide just salaries, wages, and benefits to its employees, and to recognize their right "to organize and bargain collectively with the institution through whatever association or organization they freely choose" (paragraph 353).

Many U.S. dioceses have shown a good-faith effort to abide by these clear principles, even when the financial cost is great. These bishops recognize that the demands of justice are



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always greater.

But the record in other dioceses is not so wonderful. In fact, it's scandalous.

Catholics who work in these dioceses — in the diocesan offices, in the parishes and schools — live in fear of being "reported" back to the bishop (or his alter-ego) and losing their jobs. And if they are reported, they can be sure that their dismissal will be swift and cruel.

There is no room for "trouble-makers" — church employees who attempt to form a labor union (or even talk about it); religious educators who question a diocesan mandate imposing a textbook series that professional educators know to be "safe," but inferior; school teachers who come to the defense of other teachers abruptly and

brutally fired or threatened with dismissal for alleged "morals" violations (often meaning a marital situation not canonically sanitized); or that rare employee who does have the resources and the courage to file suit in the civil order for rights not honored in the diocese.

By sweet contrast, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee has recently issued guidelines of labor relations that have obviously been shaped by the Gospel and the social teachings of the Church rather than the advice of anti-labor law firms.

If the Church is to be "a credible prophet and teacher of justice," the document states, "it must also be a model for justice in its day-to-day ministry."

Among the guidelines:

- * The Church must not presume to determine wages and benefits solely on the basis of what the local market dictates. We have to set a higher standard, if necessary.

- * There must be due process for pay determination, advancement, and grievances.

- * Church employees should actively participate in decision-making that affects their work.

- * Compliance with state and federal laws and regulations regarding discrimination are to be regarded as a *minimal standard for Catholic institutions* (my emphasis).

- * Church employees have other rights as well, including adequate health care, unemployment compensation (how many parishes fail to provide that?), and security against "arbi-

trary dismissal."

Giving teeth to all of the above is "the right to form associations for the sake of collective bargaining without fear of threat, coercion or intimidation."

Many bishops have gotten themselves and their dioceses into wretched trouble regarding the recent sex-abuse cases because they have been guided too much by the advice of lawyers and too little by the message of the Gospel and the stirrings of their own pastoral hearts.

And they continue to make the same mistake in their disputes with church employees. Lawyer-like rather than pastor-like, they appeal to "confidentiality" (If you only knew the real reason she or he was fired, you'd understand"), the institutional interests of the Church, or to some statute that exempts the Church from providing due process, or a fair severance, or even unemployment compensation.

In almost every such case the bishops have the upper hand, and they know it. Very few church employees have the financial resources to fight back when they feel their rights have been violated.

Of course, if they had ever hoped to accumulate that kind of money, they wouldn't have pursued a vocation in ministry in the first place.

But, then again, they thought that in working for the Church they'd be working with and under others who took the Gospel seriously.

For many, the real pain is in discovering that not to be so.

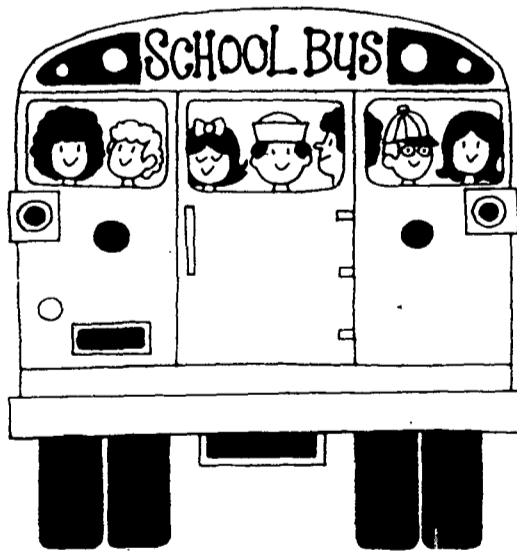
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