

Priest calls on church to defend workers' rights

By Jerry Fliteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Bishop John H. Ricard has urged U.S. Catholics observing Labor Day to take up the challenge of Monsignor George G. Higgins and "recommit ourselves to the Catholic tradition of defending the dignity and rights of workers."

Monsignor Higgins — known for half a century simply as "the labor priest" — is "a symbol of what is best in our social justice tradition," said Bishop Ricard, an auxiliary of Baltimore and chairman of the U.S. Catholic Conference Domestic Policy Committee.

Writing the USCC's annual Labor Day statement on behalf of the committee, Bishop Ricard limited his own comments to a brief introduction and conclusion. He filled out the body of the statement with excerpts from Monsignor Higgins' own reflections on the church and the labor movement today.

Among the quotes from Monsignor Higgins were:

- A call to the labor movement to focus its efforts on organizing low-paid female and immigrant workers:

"Without female and immigrant workers, the labor movement has no future in this country."

- A critique of the "many upwardly mobile Catholics" who have abandoned the worker solidarity ideals of their parents and grandparents and have come to consider unions passé: "Their own relative affluence has blinded them to the fact that, like their immigrant forebears, millions of today's workers struggle to maintain a minimum standard of living."

- His blunt condemnation of Catholic institutions that obstruct organizing by their own workers: "Church leaders and administrators of church-related institutions must unequivocally recognize the right of their employees to organize. ... This is simply another way of saying, in the words of the Synod of Bishops, that 'anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes.'"

Monsignor Higgins, 77, who was ordained a priest in 1940, joined the U.S. bishops' Social Action Department in 1944 and headed the department from 1954 to 1972. In 1972 he was made secretary for research — a post that essentially let him set his own agenda until

his retirement from the U.S. Catholic Conference in 1980. Since then he has been an adjunct lecturer in theology at The Catholic University of America.

For most of those years Monsignor Higgins wrote the annual Labor Day statements of the bishops.

"For more than half a century," Bishop Ricard wrote, "Monsignor Higgins has been the bridge between the church and the labor movement and a pre-eminent analyst and articulator of Catholic social teaching. In the conference and across the country, he has challenged our church to take our social tradition seriously."

The reflections by Monsignor Higgins that Bishop Ricard reproduced as part of the 1993 Labor Day statement were excerpted from "Organized Labor and the Church: Reflections of a Labor Priest," which Monsignor Higgins co-wrote with religion writer William Bole. The book was published earlier this year by Paulist Press.

In one of the reflections quoted by Bishop Ricard, Monsignor Higgins recalled a stay at a Disneyland hotel during a two-week conference in California.

"I got to know some of the hotel

workers, including the woman who cleaned my room," he wrote. "I asked her how long she had worked there. 'Twenty years,' she said. I asked if she would mind telling me how much she earned. 'Minimum wage' was her reply."

"I am often asked: Why are unions needed in this day and age? People should not ask me. They should ask the maid at Disneyland and other low-wage workers."

Also quoted are Monsignor Higgins' comments on the paradox that — despite the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the role of the laity in the world — Catholic justice and peace work seems to have become more institutionalized or "churchy" now than it was before the council.

"Not everyone will agree with Monsignor Higgins' analysis or agenda," the bishop said, "but no serious student of the Catholic social tradition can dismiss it ... It is still our task to ensure that people can find decent work, that the rights and dignity of workers are respected, that workers are not 'replaced' for exercising their rights, that our church practices what it preaches on participation and economic justice."

Strikers fast to call attention to Diamond Walnut boycott

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Workers engaged in a two-year strike against Diamond Walnut Co. in Stockton, Calif., concluded a 40-day liquids-only fast Aug. 29 to call attention to an ongoing boycott of the company.

The broth-and-juices fast went 40 days, according to strike coordinator Barbara Christe, because the number 40 "is significant."

During the fast, strikers lived at a Daughters of the Holy Spirit convent at St. Gertrude Parish in Stockton, went to daily Mass at the parish church and recited the rosary each evening under a tent.

"We're happy to be able to help them in their plight," said Father Tom Alkire, in residence at St. Gertrude, of the strikers. "We think it's a just cause, but we think they're people who deserve to be helped in this way ... Some of our people are Diamond Walnut strikers."

At one of the rosaries, which they dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, "there was this rainbow that shot up into the sky, just huge," Father Alkire said. "Even some of the Protestant strikers were impressed with that."

Christe said that with school resuming at St. Gertrude, more women religious were expected to occupy rooms that had been used by fasting strikers. But the fast would likely continue on a rotating basis, with strikers and others in the community pledging to fast on certain dates throughout 1993, she said.

The fasters, most of them women, told Catholic News Service in Aug. 26 telephone interviews from Stockton they never felt closer to God than they did during the fast.

"Our church stands for justice," said Cynthia Zavala, 53, a great-grandmother and 24-year employee of Diamond Walnut. "God, he's there, he takes our aches and pains away."

Zavala, who is Catholic, added, "For a while, Diamond Walnut was our god. Then God slapped our face a little

bit: 'I want you to pay attention to me.'"

A letter in August supporting the fast was signed by seven U.S. religious leaders, including Franciscan Sister Pat Drydyk, executive director of the National Farm Worker Ministry, and Monsignor George G. Higgins, long known for his support for union labor. The letter went out to church leaders and also asked them to endorse an open letter to Diamond Walnut management and growers urging the strikers be given their jobs back.

Diamond Walnut workers, who are represented by the Teamsters, went on strike Sept. 4, 1991, hoping to win back wage concessions offered in 1985 when the growers cooperative was on the brink of bankruptcy.

The company offered a 10-cent raise in 1991 but also wanted the workers to pay 30 percent of their health care costs, which workers considered a net reduction in pay.

The strike took place at the height of the growing season. Diamond Walnut hired replacement workers, and now considers them permanent replacements.

The union then mounted a boycott of Diamond Walnut products. Some commercial and retail users of walnuts have stopped using Diamond walnuts, Christe said.

Last March the strikers took their fight across the country and testified in Washington at a Senate subcommittee hearing in support of a bill to ban the hiring of permanent striker replacements. The U.S. bishops have backed such a ban.

Diamond controls about half of U.S. walnut production. Sandra McBride, company spokeswoman, declined comment when asked if the boycott had hurt business.

McBride said the fast was only an attention-seeking device. "What they're doing really has nothing to do with the facts that led them to where we are today," she said.

The two sides last met at the bargaining table Aug. 24, she added. "We made no progress whatsoever."

Angry over decision



AP/Wide World Photos

Commission suspends art funding

Agnes Harty (right) protests in front of the Cobb County Courthouse in Marietta, Ga. Aug. 24, after the county commission voted to suspend all funding for the arts. The controversy began when some commissioners objected to a county-funded play containing references to AIDS.

Special on life of St. Francis to air on ABC

WASHINGTON (CNS) — "St. Francis: Troubadour of God's Peace," a one-man special on the life of St. Francis of Assisi, will be shown Sunday, Sept. 12, 12:30-1:30 p.m. EDT, on ABC.

In the special, actor Leonardo DiCaprio, barefoot and clad in a ragged gray tunic, relates the story of St. Francis' profound conversion from a spendthrift, selfish youth to a man

who lived a radical life of service and prayer for the love of God.

The special was produced with funding from the Catholic Communication Campaign.

It is the first program in the 1993-94 season's "Visions & Values," series of the Interfaith Broadcasting Commission, of which the U.S. Catholic Conference is a member.