

# Church's words just don't work

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

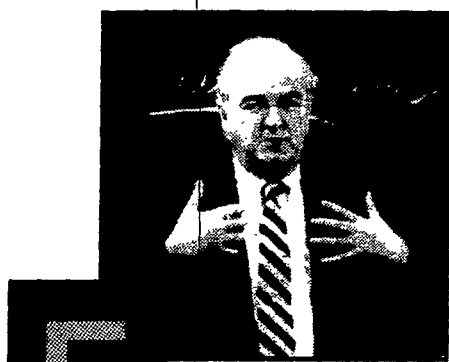
As Labor Day rolls around each year in the United States, politicians, union leaders and church officials crank out a generous helping of empty, boiler-plate rhetoric about work's dignity and the contribution of workers to the well-being of the nation and the world.

No pro-worker words are emptier, however, than those of a faith community that fails to practice what it preaches about social justice and human rights.

"While the Church is bound to give witness to justice," the 1971 World Synod of Bishops declared, "it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church itself.

"Within the Church," the document continued, "rights must be preserved. No one should be deprived of his or her ordinary rights because he or she is associated with the Church in one way or another."

Yet how often are those who work for the church told that, because the church is a "faith community," they cannot expect the same measure of justice that the church urges upon governments, businesses, and other



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

public and private organizations?

Church employees are told, in effect, that because the church "can't afford" to do more, they should expect to work for less, with less job security, and with less say about their working conditions than do people in comparable positions outside the church.

But the synodal statement insisted that lay people "should be given fair wages and a system for promotion." And it made explicit reference to women (who constitute more than 80 percent of the church's entire ministerial work force), urging that they "should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and like-

wise of the Church."

The U.S. Catholic bishops' 1986 pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All," boldly applied the synodal teaching to the American scene.

The bishops called upon Catholics to increase their voluntary contributions to the church so that it can provide just wages and benefits for those it employs.

They also addressed the issue of unionization. "All church institutions must also fully recognize the rights of employees to organize and bargain collectively with the institution through whatever association or organization they freely choose" (n.353).

This principle is violated by bishops who deliberately thwart the right of their schoolteachers to unionize (sometimes employing anti-union law firms to do their dirty work), and the right of their religious educators to form diocesan associations.

Likewise, such bishops violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the principle when they discourage — or even forbid — the granting of contracts to church employees or, what is worse, when they fail to honor contracts that have already been entered into.

The principle is also flagrantly violated by those women religious who administer hospitals in a manner worthy of the worst anti-union businessmen of the 1930s and 1940s.

With too few exceptions, the scandalous behavior of these hospital

administrators seems to have escaped public criticism from other women religious who are otherwise sensitive to justice issues in the church. Perhaps some of them have forgotten that most of those working in Catholic hospitals in menial, low-paying jobs are women struggling to make a living for themselves and their children.

Indeed, the bishops call upon us to be "particularly alert to the continuing discrimination against women throughout 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" (n.353).

But for many church employees, these are nice-sounding but hollow words because they have never been enforced. And they have never been enforced because of the bishops' unwritten code that each bishop, in his own diocese, is a law unto himself, subject only to the Vatican.

The code is wrong at its very core. Each bishop, like every other Christian, is subject first, last, and always to the Gospel. When an injustice is committed against church employees, diocesan boundaries are of no account. Conscience alone matters.

In the end, it's all a matter of sacramentality. The church has to practice what it preaches.

Labor Day is as good a time as any to remind ourselves of that.

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