

Church workers labor for too little

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Labor Day is a traditional occasion for the U.S. Catholic bishops, through their Committee on Domestic Social Policy, to issue a statement on some work-related issue.

These statements generally do not receive very much media coverage: not only because they do not come from the bishops' conference as a whole, but also because their content is rarely controversial in nature.

This situation would change if the bishops looked at employment conditions within the church itself.

In 1971 the worldwide Synod of Bishops made the first and only Vatican-level application of Catholic social teaching to the Church.

"While the Church is bound to give witness to justice," the synod 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 lifestyle found within the Church itself.

"Within the Church," the statement 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. Those who serve the Church by their labor, including priests and religious, should receive a sufficient livelihood and enjoy that social security which is customary in their region" ("Justice in the World,"



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

chapter III, paras. 2-3).

The U.S. Catholic bishops, in their 1986 pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy," applied this teaching to the church itself with uncommon directness and courage.

The bishops stated: "All the moral principles that govern the just operation of any economic endeavor apply to the Church and its agencies and institutions; indeed the Church should be exemplary" (n. 347).

They appealed to the same words from the Synod of Bishops that are cited above: "While the Church is bound to give witness to justice ..."

To help make it possible for the church to practice what it preaches about social justice and human rights, the bishops called upon U.S. Catholics

to contribute more generously to the church so that the many thousands of church employees may receive adequate wages, salaries, and fringe benefits (n. 351).

The bishops also insisted upon church employees' rights "to organize and bargain collectively with the institution through whatever association or organization they freely choose" (n. 353). Therefore, it is not up to the local bishop to decide which bargaining agent with which he will deal. He is to bargain in good faith with "whatever association or organization" the diocesan employees "freely choose."

"In the light of new creative models of collaboration between labor and management described earlier in this letter," the bishops continued, "we challenge our church institutions to adopt new, fruitful modes of cooperation."

Furthermore, "we recognize the need 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).

It is said that about 80 percent of those working in U.S. parish and diocesan ministries are women, most of them lay.

What is their actual situation of employment? Are they generally satisfied with the manner in which their skills and their gifts are respected?

Are they justly compensated for

their work? Do they have adequate job security? Are they protected by contracts enforceable in civil courts?

When a new pastor is appointed to a parish, are these workers subject to precipitous and arbitrary firing, regardless of their job performance under the previous pastor, or their contractual agreements, or the judgments of parishioners most directly involved with their ministry?

And if they do lose their jobs without advance notice and without any process of public review within the parish, are they treated with basic fairness — not to say Christian charity? Are they offered a continuation of their salary and benefits for the remainder of the year (September through June) or until such time as they find other employment?

Is unemployment compensation available, or does the diocese not pay into it? If not, what other arrangements are made to satisfy the requirements of justice?

The number of church ministers who would roll their eyes at questions of this sort is appallingly large. The continuing injustices against church employees remains one of the most serious problems in the church today.

Perhaps some Labor Day weekend we'll have a statement from the bishops deploring this situation, calling it by its proper name, a scandal, and challenging their fellow bishops to begin addressing the problem at once.

I guarantee the media would take notice. And many thousands of Catholics would begin to take heart.

Words and deeds build up, tear down

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 7:31-37; (R1) Isaiah 35:4-7; (R2) James 2:1-5.

A woman and her husband interrupted their vacation to go to a dentist. "I want a tooth pulled, and I don't want gas because I'm in a big hurry," the woman said, "so just extract the tooth as quickly as possible and we'll be on our way."

The dentist was quite impressed and said, "You're certainly a courageous woman. Which tooth is it." The woman turned to her husband and said, "Show him your tooth, dear."

The first reading and Sunday's Gospel are about the deaf and the dumb — the disadvantaged. How often those who don't experience pain, like the woman in regard to her husband, usually call the shots.

There are more than 36 million Americans who suffer from the disabilities of blindness, dumbness, lameness, and deafness. How should we react to them? Should we say, "Hang in there; in time something is bound to happen for the better." Do we really believe that? Or should we say, "Sweet



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

are the uses of adversity. The Lord sends tribulation, your duty is to tribulate." Easy to say, since we are not the sufferers.

A more useful approach might be found in asking how can we minister to the afflicted, how can Christ do through us what He did for the deaf and the dumb man in the Gospel? What attitudes of ours will really help those who suffer physical disabilities?

One attitude that seems to be trag-

ically wrong is to assume that disabled persons are different from us more than they are like us, that their disabilities somehow set them apart from the rest of us. Our emphasis ought to be not so much on their disabilities as on their abilities, on their similarities to us rather than their differences from us.

When Queen Victoria pinned one of England's highest awards on Helen Keller, she asked her, "How do you account for your remarkable accomplishments in life? How do you explain the fact that even though you were blind, deaf, and mute, you were able to accomplish so much?"

Without hesitation, Helen Keller signed, "If it had not been for Anne Sullivan, the name of Helen Keller would have remained unknown."

Most of us know Helen Keller's story, but few know Anne Sullivan's.

As a young girl, Miss Sullivan was known as "Little Annie." Diagnosed as hopelessly insane, she was locked in the basement of a mental institution outside of Boston. Little Annie would on occasion violently attack anyone who came near her. At other times she would ignore them.

An elderly nurse believed there was

hope for the child and felt she could communicate love and hope to her. Each day the nurse visited Little Annie, but for a long time Little Annie gave no indication she was aware of her presence. The elderly nurse persisted and repeatedly brought cookies and left them in her room.

Soon the doctors in the institution noticed a change. After a period of time, they moved Little Annie upstairs. Finally the day came when this seemingly "hopeless case" was released. Filled with compassion for others because of her institution experience, Little Annie, Anne Sullivan, wanted to help others.

Because Anne Sullivan's life had been miraculously opened, she was able to open Helen Keller's life, as Jesus opened the life of the deaf mute.

What has been called the Preacher's Prayer can be the prayer of everyone of us: "Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff, and nudge me when I've said enough."

In the book of Sirach we read: "If you blow upon a spark, it quickens into flame, if you spit on it, it dies out: yet both you do with your mouth!" (28:12). We can build up or tear down, especially by our words and deeds.

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