

Unions

Continued from page 1

Labor has enjoyed the church's approval at crucial moments, Monsignor Higgins explained. When Pius XI published his 1931 encyclical "Quadragesimo Anno," which commemorated "Rerum Novarum's" 40th anniversary, U.S. Catholic labor activists in the midst of the Great Depression were reassured that the church smiled on their efforts, he noted.

"Since the crucial issue facing mass production workers was a simple one, the right to organize, classes in Catholic social teaching usually emphasized what the encyclicals had to say about labor," Monsignor Higgins wrote.

"At a time when the labor movement was frequently branded as communist and anti-religious, social-minded Catholics would respond, encyclical in hand, 'No, unions are a good thing.' This was the heart of the matter," he concluded.

Such conclusions enabled priests and religious to stand with lay Catholics and non-Catholics on picket lines outside companies, and at bargaining tables, as allies and mediators, he noted.

But even though they may have heard cries from the pulpit on behalf of workers striking at a local plant, many Catholics may not be aware that in recent decades, their church leaders have also supported the right of their own employees to organize.

When the U.S. Catholic bishops issued "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the American Economy" in 1986, they reaffirmed their previous statements that the church must practice what it preaches.

"All Church institutions must fully recognize the rights of employees to organize and bargain collectively with the in-

stitution through whatever association or organization they freely choose," the bishops stated.

Yet despite such rhetoric, many church officials and administrators of church-related institutions have shown a decidedly different face to church employees than that shown to workers in the secular world.

Monsignor Higgins' book points out that even early labor advocates in the church failed to recognize the right of their own workers to organize.

For example, during the Great Depression, one of the more prominent labor advocates was Bishop Bernard Sheil, auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese of Chicago, Monsignor Higgins wrote. However, Bishop Sheil "nearly went berserk" when his own Catholic Youth Organization office workers decided to organize, Monsignor Higgins recalled.

"Like so many others, Sheil believed himself a good employer who treated his workers well," he wrote. "He wanted to know: Why do they need to organize me?"

If he had had the opportunity, Pope John Paul II likely would have told Bishop Sheil that such musings are irrelevant and, in fact, miss the point of union activity altogether, according to Monsignor Higgins.

His book explains that people want to organize not simply because they are experiencing a negative work environment, but because they want to have a say in decisions that affect their own lives — a perfectly normal desire. That desire was underlined by the current pope in the 1981 encyclical, "Laborem Exercens," which called unions "indispensable," Monsignor Higgins explained.

The pope may consider unions indispensable, but many of his flock would heartily disagree. Monsignor Higgins' book includes numerous examples of church-related institutions, particularly

hospitals operated by religious orders, that hired anti-union consulting firms to derail organizing efforts by their employees. He even documents a case in which a religious order smeared union organizers by making false accusations that the union employed violent organizing tactics.

"I get phone calls nearly every month from union leaders wondering what to do about a Catholic hospital that has hired a firm to destroy their union," Monsignor Higgins wrote.

However, not every woman religious who takes on a union does it out of malice, Monsignor Higgins stressed. Some hospital administrators are genuinely baffled that their lay employees would rather represent themselves than trust their economic fate to an order dedicated to serving Christ. Yet, as in the case of Bishop Sheil's office workers, the hospital employees who vote union are simply exercising their inherent and natural right to organize, Monsignor Higgins maintains.

One place where nobody tortures their conscience on these issues any longer is the Archdiocese of New York, led by Archbishop John Cardinal O'Connor.

"Cardinal O'Connor has made a primary point of his episcopacy in New York that labor unions are to be worked with and negotiated with in the best manner possible given the resources and mission of the church," commented Paul E. Ward, deputy superintendent of archdiocesan schools, in a recent phone interview.

Ward's position is bolstered by Margaret L. Menard, president of the 2,000-member Federation of Catholic Teachers in New York.

"We were not even seen by any cardinal before him," she said of Cardinal O'Connor. "I don't think we'll ever see his kind again."

Unlike some anti-union church leaders, the cardinal sees lay teachers for what they are, Menard noted. Most are

women who work out of necessity, not choice, and a growing number are the sole breadwinners of their families, she emphasized.

She added that the union is well aware that the diocese can't pay salaries equal to that of the public schools, but both she and Ward, and Monsignor Higgins for that matter, put the blame for that problem at the feet of the people in the pews.

Although many Catholics grew up enjoying free or low-cost education from low-paid sisters and lay teachers, many of these same lay Catholics now only give just a few dollars each week to their parishes and dioceses, forcing them to pay small salaries to Catholic teachers, Ward noted.

Menard suggested that church leaders such as pastors — and the teachers themselves — need to do a better job of publicizing educators' salaries. Yet she added that raising teachers' salaries and promoting unionism is a tough sell in an era when Catholics are giving less and administrators of hospitals and religious orders need more.

Monsignor Higgins' book was less generous in his assessment of the situation. Catholic hospitals receive, at the very least, some federal funding to ease the financial burden created by their mission to the poor, he noted. But Catholic schools — and their teachers — share a somewhat similar mission but do not enjoy similar government assistance, he wrote.

"For my part, I can name parishes all over the country in which families have three or four cars, send their children to Europe in the summer, and go to Aspen in the winter — but they don't want to pay teachers in parochial schools a reasonable salary," he wrote. "Without a stronger financial commitment on the part of the laity, it will remain extremely hard if not impossible to boost the salaries of our teachers."

'Downsizing' presents church with tough challenge

By Patricia Zapor
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — There's no easy way to lose a job. Nor do most employers find it a simple matter to fire people — let alone lay off workers who've done nothing to deserve it.

Just as for IBM or the local contractor, when income falls or the market being served changes significantly, Catholic institutions sometimes look to personnel to cut expenses.

Today, employers call it "downsizing" or "right-sizing." In more old-fashioned terms, it's a layoff. To workers being "right-sized" out of a job, the term matters little. However, experts in personnel matters agree some ways of eliminating jobs are clearly better than others.

"It's very important that an employer respect the dignity, value and worth of the individual," said Thomas J. Meehan, human resources director for the U.S. Catholic Conference. Thorough review of alternatives, checks and balances of outside evaluation, communication with everyone affected and a compassionate approach to the circumstances under which people depart are essential, he said.

"Sometimes doing what is just means doing more than what the law demands," said Loretto Sister Ann White, executive director of the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators. Her organization offers workshops on how to cut staff legally and justly and is in the process of producing a position paper that will touch on the subject.

For more than 100 years, the

Catholic Church has unequivocally urged employers to pay just wages and follow fair employment policies. A series of papal encyclicals dating back to 1891's "Rerum Novarum" have emphasized workers' rights and the responsibility of employers to the common good.

From the Vatican to small social agencies and parishes, the church itself generally is considered a stable and secure — if not especially lucrative — place to work.

But in 1989 and 1990 half a dozen dioceses cut their workforces to help make budget ends meet. Among the largest cutbacks, the Diocese of Tucson, Ariz., eliminated 13 of 54 positions in 1988. In 1989, the Diocese of Fresno, Calif., closed its newspaper and eliminated 17 jobs — a third of the diocesan staff.

This summer, layoffs were announced by two USCC divisions: the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America and Migration and Refugee Services (MRS).

CTNA announced plans in July to lay off two-thirds of its 18-member staff to avoid a projected \$1 million deficit.

MRS employees in Washington, New York, Miami and several other cities received a memo Aug. 2 about a pending reorganization that is expected to result in layoffs.

While a dozen CTNA employees found themselves without jobs a month later, at least one newly unemployed executive with the television network said he thought the layoff was "the most compassionate I've heard of."

"There are always going to be some ruffled feathers and unhappiness,"

said Frank Lattanzi, former vice president of marketing for CTNA. "But I think CTNA handled it quite well. They've even welcomed us in to use computers and equipment for our job hunting."

Sentiments were somewhat different at MRS, where uncertainty dragged down morale, as employees awaited final word on the reorganization. An announcement of layoffs of up to 10 percent of the 120 or so employees is expected Sept. 12.

"It's just so unsettling to not know if I should look for a job," said one MRS employee.

Sister White said the church should be following its own advice on how to treat employees.

"Ideally, the church would be better at it," she said. "Unfortunately there are things that have been done unjustly. There are many people who've suffered terribly in downsizing."

Most dioceses have personnel directors trained to handle layoffs as humanely as possible, Sister White said. But smaller organizations, such as parishes, often lack someone with that expertise.

Outplacement services, offered by the USCC to laid-off CTNA employees, often seem too expensive for small employers, she said.

Meehan figures the expense of laying off an employee to be 30-50 percent of an annual salary, including extension of benefits, severance pay and the cost of helping the worker find a new job.

While it might seem high, "that expense is immediate," Meehan said. "It's not there the next year or six months

from now."

Compared to comparably sized private employers, Catholic institutions are probably better at handling layoffs well, said Jesuit Father Thomas Reese, a researcher at Georgetown's Woodstock Theological Center who has written about the U.S. church operations.

Among U.S. Catholic employers, there's a wide variety of skill in how to approach personnel matters, said Father Reese, "but I'd guess the church is as good or better than private employers at handling downsizing."

However, many church employees simply don't expect to have jobs disappear from under them the same way they might in the for-profit business world, he said.

"The church in a lot of ways is like a family business," he said. "People come to work for the church because they like that it's not a dog-eat-dog environment and people are nice to each other. Then there's the feeling that we're doing something important for the kingdom of God."

"But like the other side of a family business, it's very hard to fire Uncle Charlie, or Father Charlie, or Monsignor Charlie," Father Reese said.

After seven-and-a-half years at the USCC, Meehan has been through a variety of reorganizations and layoffs and has advised dioceses around the country about how to tackle similar situations.

"Primarily it comes down to communication," Meehan said. "At all times you need to respect the dignity and worth of the individual and communicating every step of the way is important."