

# COLUMNISTS

## Trend is toward 'management priests'

Back in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, there was a breed of Catholic clergy in the United States known as "labor priests." They functioned as chaplains to labor unions, encouraged and supported the organizing efforts of a largely Catholic work force, served on state and national boards of arbitration and mediation, and ran so-called labor schools to teach Catholic workers and union leaders their rights under the civil law as well as in the official teaching of their church, transmitted principally through the social encyclicals.

By the 1960s and '70s, the focus had shifted away from the declining heavy industries of the Middle West and Mid-Atlantic states (the so-called "rust belt") to the plight of the migrant workers in California and the American Southwest, under a charismatic leader named Cesar Chavez.

These labor priests included such figures as Msgr. Charles Owen Rice of Pittsburgh; Msgr. John Monaghan of New York; Bishop Francis Haas of Grand Rapids (originally a priest of Milwaukee); Jesuit Fathers Louis Toomey of New Orleans, Philip Carey of New York, William Smith of Jersey City, Leo Brown of St. Louis, and Mortimer Gavin of Boston; Fathers Raymond Clancy of Detroit, Eugene Boyle of San Francisco (an early supporter of Chavez), and John Corridan of New York (the priest depicted in the Marlon Brando film "On the Waterfront"); and



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Msgr. John A. Ryan, Father Raymond McGowan, and Msgr. George Higgins — all of the old National Catholic Welfare Conference in Washington, D.C.

I should be remiss if I did not single out a fellow diocesan, Joseph Donnelly, the late auxiliary bishop of Hartford, who served for many years as chairman of the state board of mediation in Connecticut and then as chairman of the U.S. Catholic bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Farm Labor during the time of the grape boycott. Msgr. Higgins, however, remains today the most persistent and eloquent voice for justice in the American workplace, including even Catholic hospitals. Ever since my days as a seminarian (a considerable number of years ago!), I have regarded George Higgins as an exemplary priest. I know him today to be also among the wisest and best-informed.

In his book, *Organized Labor and the*

*Church: Reflections of a "Labor Priest"*, published by Paulist Press in 1993, Higgins expressed his concern that the Catholic Church "stands in danger of losing forever its tradition of cooperation with organized labor."

Whether the danger is real or not, it is unmistakably clear that the category of Catholic clergy once known as "labor priests" has practically disappeared from the national scene. At the same time, the labor union movement has declined precipitously in membership and influence, and an increasingly well-off Catholic community identifies less and less with its aims and purposes.

More than that, there are signs of an opposite trend — away from the phenomenon of "labor priests" to that of "management priests" allied with some high-profile laymen.

Their numbers may still be small, but their financial support is not. They run institutes that are privately endowed by politically conservative, often anti-union backers. They write, lecture, hold conferences, and publish newsletters on behalf of the American capitalist system, even though the last time anyone looked, there weren't very many people out there trying to attack it or bring it crashing down.

Their basic message, recycled over and over since the 19th century, is that the government that governs least governs best. They support generous tax breaks for business, even if at the

expense of poorer citizens, on the grounds that productivity, fueled by the profit-motive, will cure most of society's ills. What isn't cured by the unfettered exercise of the free enterprise system can and should be taken care of by private charity, especially the churches.

But the churches, including especially the Catholic Church and its many social service agencies, insist that they are in no position to take up the slack created by the proposed withdrawal of the federal government from its traditional responsibilities. Their resources are already stretched to the limits.

That may be one of the reasons why some enlightened and socially conscious American bishops encouraged the pope to sound an alarm during his recent visit to the United States. He declared that America cannot morally afford to become a nation indifferent to its international and social responsibilities, particularly to immigrants and the poor.

The new "management priests" and their lay allies, however, have never approved of the U.S. Catholic bishops' social teachings, particularly their 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy. Indeed, one of them even tried to argue that the pope's 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* was a kind of repudiation of that pastoral letter.

When later challenged by Msgr. Higgins to prove his case through a comparative analysis of the two texts, he declined. No wonder.

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