

# COLUMNISTS

## Church must practice its labor preaching

The Labor Day holiday in the United States should stimulate an annual examination of conscience regarding the way the Catholic Church treats its own employees in parishes, schools, diocesan offices, hospitals, and other institutions and agencies.

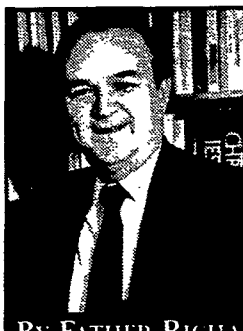
Do we provide a just wage and adequate health care benefits for all of our Catholic school teachers, parish ministers, nurses, diocesan staff and so forth?

Do we guarantee job security through written contracts that are designed to protect the employee's rights, especially with regard to arbitrary dismissal, which too often happens after a new bishop, pastor, principal or hospital administrator appears on the scene?

Are these contracts enforceable in civil court? If not, are the employees informed of the nonenforceability of their contracts at the time they sign them?

When church employees who believe that they were unjustly dismissed from their jobs seek relief in the civil courts, do we routinely appeal to the First Amendment, arguing that the separation of church and state immunizes us from standards of equity and fairness that comparable institutions are required to meet with regard to their own employees?

Worse still, do we attempt to besmirch the reputations of those who bring legal action against us, and even try to prevent them from securing employment elsewhere?



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in  
theology

Do we penalize in any way, either through dismissal or some other negative remedy, those who attempt to form a union in our schools and hospitals or a diocesanwide association of religious educators, for example?

Do we employ hard-nosed law firms, known even among their peers as (expletive deleted) firms, in order to intimidate and punish not only the alleged victims of injustice but their supporters and sometimes even their families as well?

The remarkable pastoral letter issued by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 1986 ("Economic Justice for All") established standards of justice for church employees that are still not being universally honored in our dioceses, parishes and ecclesiastical institutions.

"All the moral principles that govern the just operation of any economic endeavor," the pastoral letter declared in italics, "apply to the church and its agencies and institutions; indeed the church should be exemplary" (n. 347).

The bishops drew support for their teaching from the 1971 World Synod of Bishops' document, "Justice in the World": "While the church is bound to give witness to justice, 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."

The U.S. bishops thereupon pledged themselves to fulfill the principle that those who serve the church "should receive a sufficient livelihood and the social benefits provided by responsible employers in our nation" (n. 351).

"All church institutions," the bishops continued, "must also fully recognize the rights of employees to organize and bargain collectively with the institution through whatever association or organization they freely choose."

Indeed, the bishops challenged church institutions, in the light of the "new creative models of collaboration between labor and management" (described earlier in the pastoral letter), "to adopt new, fruitful modes of cooperation."

And in seeking greater justice in wages and benefits, the bishops urged that church employers 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).

There are hundreds, more likely thousands, of Catholic school teachers who would not agree that these standards are being met in the parish schools and diocesan high schools where they work, especially with regard to wages and benefits, as well as job security.

There are also hundreds, and perhaps many more, of parish directors of religious education and other lay ministers who would not agree that these standards are being met in the parishes where they serve, especially with regard to job security, as well as wages and benefits.

There are also hundreds, and perhaps many more, of employees of Catholic hospitals who would not agree that these standards are being met, especially with regard to the right to unionize, as well as wages and benefits and job security.

The 1971 World Synod insisted that the church must be exemplary in applying the virtue of justice to its own employees.

Therefore, it is never permissible to say that working for the church requires people to accept less than what is just. Nor can the church excuse itself by claiming that it is no worse than some other employers in the area. The church is always called to a higher standard, which is the Gospel itself.

...  
Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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The Consistent Life Ethic, which promotes dignity of all human life from conception until natural death, is a key priority for the Diocese of Rochester. This special section, timed in conjunction with Respect Life Month, will deal with protecting and nurturing life through advocacy and direct action on such issues as abortion, militarism, capital punishment, euthanasia and aid to the poor.

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Women interested in participating can call Wanda Rivers at 275-7891.