

# COLUMNISTS

## What's fair in workplace?

No charge against a religious institution is more cutting than the charge of hypocrisy — of not practicing what it preaches. It is a charge that has been leveled with increasing frequency at Catholic dioceses and parishes for the way they treat some of their lay and religious ministers, against Catholic schools for the treatment of their teachers and support staff, and against Catholic hospitals for the treatment of their nurses, technical staff and general work force.

A recent document issued by the U.S. Catholic Conference's Committee for Domestic Policy (Origins, 9/2/99) represents a good-faith effort to begin addressing the problem. Entitled, "A Fair and Just Workplace: Principles and Practices for Catholic Health Care," it is a set of reflections for bishops, managers, union leaders and workers.

The paper itself was the product of a "candid and constructive dialogue" among leaders of Catholic health care, the AFL-CIO, and the Catholic bishops' conference. "Candid and constructive" are typical diplomatic terms meaning that there were occasionally sharp differences expressed in the discussions, some of which were not resolved.

The quality of this document (and of the dialogue on which it was based) is a



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

reflection of the membership of the subcommittee appointed to undertake the task. The three bishop-members, for example, are among the finest in the country: William Skylstad, of Spokane, John McRaith, of Owensboro, Ky., and Joseph Sullivan, auxiliary of Brooklyn.

The document succinctly states the purpose of Catholic health-care systems: "In Catholic social teaching, health care is a human right — not just another commodity; providing health care is both a service and a ministry. The mission of Catholic health care is to continue the healing ministry of Jesus ...."

The document is also realistic: "This mission of Catholic health care is carried out within a moral framework set by church teaching and within an economic framework shaped by the market, pub-

lic policy and available resources. This tension between the mission and the market frames many important issues in Catholic health care today."

Among the new challenges are "innovations in clinical practice, technological advances, mergers and consolidations of insurers and institutions, the growing number of uninsured and a more competitive market environment."

The document does not flinch, however, from naming what is perhaps the major moral challenge. There is, the paper admits, "a gap between general principles [of Catholic social teaching] and practices at the local level."

Nowhere is this gap more evident than in the continued resistance to unionization and to employees' efforts to achieve "a just and fair workplace" that includes "fair wages, adequate benefits, safe and decent working conditions, and the right to participate in decisions which affect one's work as well as opportunities for advancement, learning and growth."

Whether and how health care workers seek to unionize are matters for the workers themselves to decide. It is not up to "bishops, managers, union business agents or management consultants."

To be sure, the work force has responsibilities as well as rights in relation

to the health-care institutions. These responsibilities include, for example, maximizing quality through efficient and effective work practices. On the other hand, there is hardly an equal balance of power between workers and institutions, which is why Catholic social teaching has consistently weighed in on the side of the less powerful.

The document expresses concern over the use of the law "as a weapon or a means of delay rather than as a protector of rights" and of management consultants who are unaware of, or unsympathetic with, Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers, including especially the right to unionize.

The working paper concludes on a ringing note: "We believe that fair wages, decent working conditions and a real sense of participation — however they are realized — are not burdens for Catholic health care, but signs of a community which is serious about its Catholic identity and mission."

This also applies, of course, to dioceses, parishes and schools, where the same gap between teaching and practice exists.

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

## R.S.V.P. (please reply) to God's invitation

28th Sunday of the Year (Oct. 10): (R3) Matthew 1:14. (R1) Isaiah 25:6-10. (R2) Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20.

Our Lord said that the kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. The son's marriage was a proud moment for the king. Everybody was invited. Who would refuse the king's invitation?

In our Lord's day people would be invited to a wedding without knowing the exact time and day. When everything was ready, the servants would go out and spread the word. And everyone was supposed to come. But in our Lord's parable there was a problem: Nobody showed up! Imagine how you would feel if you spent a lot of time and money on a wedding reception and no one showed up. The king was furious.

Notice, first of all, that everyone was invited to the feast. This is important. God plays no favorites. The banquet table of God is open to all. But not everyone showed up.

Although persons from the entire kingdom were invited no one showed up. Who would refuse a once in a lifetime event like this? It would be like accepting an invitation from the White House and then standing the president



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

up. No one would do such a thing. And yet when the servants announced that the feast was ready, some of the people mocked the king, "I wouldn't attend his rotten son's wedding if you paid me a million dollars," they said. "Who does that good-for-nothing king think he is raising our taxes, and then having the nerve to expect us to go to his son's wedding?" Other people told the servants that they were just too busy with other more important things. The point is that they exercised their freedom to refuse the invitation. That happens, doesn't it?

Once a deeply devout young man named Jeff attended a local university. His dormitory roommate was Timothy Conway, a worldly young man whose main interest was living life to the fullest

come what may. Often Tim and his friends would make fun of Jeff.

One afternoon, Tim came back to the dorm room to find Jeff lying on the floor. He called for the ambulance. But it was too late. Jeff had suffered a massive coronary.

Tim and some of his buddies attended the funeral. On the coffin was a telephone with the receiver dangling and a red ribbon with the words, "JESUS CALLED. JEFF ANSWERED."

Tim overheard two aunts talking about Jeff. One said how glad Jeff would be to see Jesus. The other replied, "But I'll bet Jesus was glad to see Jeff, too." Tim was touched.

Later that night, he couldn't sleep as the words "JESUS CALLED. JEFF ANSWERED" went over and over in his mind. He noticed Jeff's Bible sitting on the desk where he had placed it, intending to return it to Jeff's parents. He opened the Bible to Hebrews 9:27. It read, "It is appointed that human beings die once..." Beside the verse Jeff had written, "We must keep our appointment with God." This was too much for Tim. He knelt by his bunk and that night promised to give his life to God.

Jesus called. Jeff answered. But a lot

of people don't answer. A lot of people have taken the phone off the hook. And that is sad. Everyone is invited to the banquet. Some, however, will choose not to attend.

It is important that somewhere down the road we say yes to God's invitation. There is no other way that life will ever make sense. There is no other way to joy. Saying yes to God is the garment that keeps us from wandering forever in a terrible darkness.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

### Daily Readings

**Monday, October 11**  
Romans 1:1-7; Luke 11:29-32  
**Tuesday, October 12**  
Romans 1:16-25; Luke 11:37-41  
**Wednesday, October 13**  
Romans 2:1-11; Luke 11:42-46  
**Thursday, October 14**  
Romans 3:21-30; Luke 11:47-54  
**Friday, October 15**  
Romans 4:1-8; Luke 12:1-7  
**Saturday, October 16**  
Romans 4:13, 16-18; Luke 12:8-12

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## QUESTION

## abortion.

Pro-life, pro-woman, pro-child. Because women don't have  
to settle for less. Because there is a better way.

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