

# Is the church a 'just' employer?



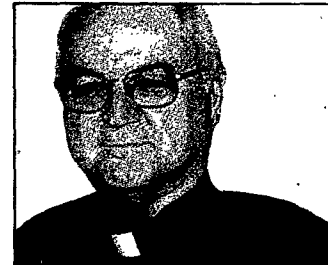
Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Catholic social teaching has been in the process of development for more than a century, since Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891. In 1971 the Third-World Synod of Bishops issued "Justice in the World," which devoted an entire section to the rights of workers employed by the church.

"While the Church is bound to give witness to justice," the bishops declared, "it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes." (III, para. 2). Even within the church, rights must be preserved: "No one should be deprived of their ordinary rights because they are associated with the Church in one way or another" (para. 3).

Moreover, those who serve the church "should receive a sufficient livelihood and enjoy that social security which is customary in their region. Lay people should be given fair wages and a system for promotion. We reiterate the recommendations that lay people should exercise more important functions with regard to church property and should share in its administration."

The U.S. Catholic bishops drew directly from the 1971 synodal document in drafting their own pastoral letter of 1986, "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy." A remarkable subsection on "The Church as



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## Essays in Theology

Economic Actor" insisted that "All of 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).

But it went beyond the synodal document and insisted on the rights of church employees to organize and to bargain collectively. There have been instances, however, where individual bishops have refused to negotiate with Catholic-school teachers because they disapproved of the bargaining agents the teachers had selected.

While the synodal document urged that "women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church" (III, para. 4), the pastoral letter went beyond that in condemning "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).

Since about 80 percent of those employed by the church are women — the overwhelming majority of them lay — the most common victims of unjust labor practices in the church are lay women.

As we approach Labor Day, the church has another opportunity to reflect on its own record:

Does it provide a just wage, adequate health-care benefits and true job security for all of its teachers, parish ministers, secretarial staff, hospital personnel, newspaper editors and reporters, and maintenance workers?

Does it honor its written contracts, especially after a new bishop, pastor or administrator begins to "clean house"?

Does the church advise employees at the time they sign contracts that they are enforceable in a civil court and, when relief is sought in civil courts, does the church routinely appeal to the First Amendment, arguing that the principle of separation of church and state immunizes the church from the scrutiny of the courts, effectively placing the church above the law?

As the synod declared, "anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes." Nothing teaches like example.

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

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