

Recommitting to the value of labor

Every few weeks for some time now, I have had the privilege of praying with the men and women who are laboring to revitalize our wonderful Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Amid the expected dust and debris of construction, they have shared with me their hopes and dreams, and intercessions for their families and friends. With bowed heads in this edifice that has been the place of so many prayers over time, we pray together that God will keep them safe, provide a sense of peace and security for their loved ones, heal their hurts, fill their needs and help them do good and lasting work. I always leave them to their labor filled with awe at their skill, their commitment and their sense of work as a vital part of their lives.

I think these are the things that each of us longs for each day when we wake and go off to our work, whether our labor be on a construction site or in a classroom, in a towering office building or factory assembly line, or on the verdant land that rolls gently through our diocese.

We work so that we can feed and clothe our families and ourselves, of course. More, we work to contribute in some way to the larger scheme of things we call an economy, and in even larger terms to do our part to care for and build God's good creation. Our work life, like family life, "is one of the chief areas where we live out our faith, love our neighbor, confront temptation, fulfill God's creative design and achieve our holiness" (USCCB, *Economic Justice for All*, #6).

All of this, of course, is with the expectation that our workplaces and employers will help us succeed and not take advantage of us, will understand the needed balance between work and family; will justly



Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

compensate us for our work and provide a safe environment as well as proper training and equipment. In turn, our faith teaches us an ethic in which work is an expression of God's individual gifts to us, so that we must work to our potential, diligently and with loyalty to those who provide our living.

I am reminded of all these issues because, in a few days, we'll celebrate Labor Day. In fact, this month's *Catholic Courier* has several articles about the workplace and labor-related issues.

Perhaps many of you do not know that this year marks the 110th anniversary of the national holiday authorized by Congress in 1894 with the support and encouragement of organized labor. Over time, this long holiday weekend for many of us has evolved into a lovely and restful weekend from our work, which we rightly treat as a last hurrah for the waning summer. Still, it is good to remember that Labor Day was set aside to hold up and celebrate the worker and to remember the many struggles in our nation to reform the workplace in such areas as safety, equitable wages, reasonable work hours and worker rights.

These issues have always been important to our church and remain so. In the Catholic Church in the

United States, for example, we have a long tradition of support for the dignity of all men and women in the workplace, equal opportunity, fair treatment — of making the workplace a better and safer place to be.

Not too long ago, as the history of the church goes, persistent voices of such people as Dorothy Day in the Catholic Worker movement and the involvement of Catholic men and women in the development of organized labor raised a nation's consciousness about the treatment of workers and the need for economic reform that would open the gates of opportunity to all.

Today, we persist. In our own diocese and throughout the nation, there is ongoing concern for the plight of migrant workers and support — including nearly 10,000 signatures on a petition from more than 50 faith communities in our local church — for legislation that would help all immigrant workers. I thank those who have supported our efforts and encourage all to learn more about these issues.

Even more recently, leaders of many faith groups in our community, myself included, called upon our state leaders to override Gov. Pataki's veto of the minimum-wage bill. We know that the vast majority of those earning near minimum wage are poor adults, not teenagers from well-off families as many might conjecture. Nearly half of the workers earning a minimum wage are the main breadwinners for their families.

As church, we also continue to pray for ways in which we can stabilize our nation's economy, and for ways we can find a reasonable balance between the need for corporate profitability and the downsizing of recent years that so tragically affects workers and their families.

My brother bishops and I have many times expressed our concern for our economy and its impact on workers. We have called upon Catholics to pray for and to actively seek justice for all — workers and employers — so that our nation will continue to flourish and all of our labors will not be in vain. As bishops, we have spoken out on the need for continued action that will ensure we do not perpetuate an economy of "haves and have nots" or one in which people toil their lives away and never seem to get ahead.

Our Holy Father, too, was a tremendous force for change in his native Poland by encouraging the Solidarity movement. He has spoken powerfully and bluntly about

the priorities we must set as a People of God in the new, global economy: "The needs of the poor," John Paul II has said, "take priority over the desires of the rich; the rights of workers over the maximization of profits; the preservation of the environment over uncontrolled industrial expansion; and production to meet social needs over production for military purposes."

In our own community, as you know all too well, we have seen negative economic forces play out painfully for many people. This has made our work harder, jobs scarcer and has forced people to move elsewhere. With these changes, a new insecurity has come to a region that once boasted a manufacturing boom. We have seen a growing and worrisome poverty, a strain on all families both financial and emotional — and the ripple effects all these troubles bring. On a more positive note, many new smaller and mid-sized companies have emerged, a credit to entrepreneurs willing to invest in our community and its workers, and to provide good wages and good futures for many.

As Catholics, we must continue to pray for economic justice for all, that our economy will indeed flourish and that more people will be able to benefit from employment. We must continue to pray for and work through our government representatives to develop an economic system that neither strips employers of their right to profit from their businesses — and thereby contribute to the good of our economy and create more jobs — nor condone or encourage any practice that crushes human rights; endangers workers; denies employment to people based on background, race or sex; or unjustly puts profits over people.

On this Labor Day, let's celebrate our work by taking time off from it, if we are so able. Let us surround ourselves with the people we love and work hard for, our families and all who depend on us. Let's also remember those who cannot take the day off, from our emergency personnel to our service-industry workers, to those who simply do not have the luxury of a day off because of financial need.

Let's also recommit to educating ourselves about the forces that shape our economy and learn more about our Catholic social teachings that call upon us to look out for the poor and vulnerable above all.

Happy Labor Day, and may God bless your work always and keep you safe.

Peace to all.

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