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What is said in the pulpit stays in the pulpit

Nicole Sotelo | Aug. 30, 2012 Young Voices

Last week, news broke in Minnesota that its state campaign finance agency decided [1] a contributor to a marriage equality campaign could remain anonymous. The contributor feared his donation to the pro-gay Minnesotans United might become known by his employer and he would be fired. As we celebrate the 130th anniversary of Labor Day this weekend, it is sobering to note that one of the last frontiers for worker justice remains the Catholic church.

While Labor Day began as a secular holiday, the American Federation of Labor passed a resolution in 1909 that initiated "Labor Sunday." Since then, many churches have embraced Labor Sunday, and pastors have used the opportunity to preach about church teaching that supports worker justice.

What a bishop or priest might say about fair labor practices on Sunday, however, is sometimes conveniently forgotten by Monday morning. Among Catholic church employees, from your parish secretary to your diocesan newspaper reporter, few see the same workplace protections as secular workers.

Unfortunately, when it comes to worker justice in the Catholic church, too often what is said in the pulpit stays in the pulpit. This summer has been a case in point.

At the beginning of June, officials at Duquesne University, a Catholic institution in Pennsylvania run by the Spiritans religious order, broke an agreement [2] with the National Labor Relations Board. They fired the lawyer that had negotiated the agreement and hired a new lawyer known for his anti-labor practice.

The agreement had been brought to the university by the majority of adjunct faculty regarding concerns over low wages, lack of health care and contracts that allowed workers to be fired at any time. As an example, an adjunct faculty member teaching the maximum number of courses may only earn up to $10,000 a year, far below the poverty line.

Later in June, the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis transferred [3] its Catholic newspaper employees to its Office of Communications, not continuing the employees' union contract that had been in effect since 1965.

Later that same month, the Diocese of Joliet sent a letter to pastors and business managers that briefly outlined its new policy for diocesan exempt employees. After years of providing contracts, the Diocesan Curia Council decided to quietly revoke the possibility of contracts from its employees starting July 1. Without contracts, employees have even less security against unjust firings.

The good news is that there are a number of Catholic institutions that practice what is preached with regards to fair treatment of workers. The Catholic Labor Network hosts the "Catholic Employer Project," which highlights Catholic institutions that support worker justice. A list can be found at the network's website [4].
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Catholic teaching stands solidly in support of workers' rights, from the 1893 papal document *Rerum Novarum* to Pope John Paul II, who praised unions as "an indispensable element of social life."

The U.S. bishops' own statement from 1986, *Economic Justice for All*, concludes: "Justice, not charity, demands certain minimum wage guarantees. The provision of wages and other benefits sufficient to support a family in dignity is a basic necessity to prevent this exploitation of workers."

It then declares: "The dignity of workers also requires adequate health care, security for old age or disability, unemployment compensation ... and reasonable security against arbitrary dismissal."

Honoring this Catholic social justice teaching, many Catholic parishes will celebrate Labor Sunday this weekend, but could fail to celebrate and protect those workers closest to them: church employees.

It's time we hold our Catholic leaders accountable so what is preached in the pulpit is practiced outside of it.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates **WomenHealing.com** [5]. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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