Opinion
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Msgr. George Higgins, center, smiles after receiving the nation's highest civilian honor, the Pr

Msgr. George Higgins smiles after receiving the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, from President Bill Clinton in 2000. The priest, recognized for his lifelong commitment to workers' rights, is flanked by honorees Rev. Jesse Jackson (left) and economist John Kenneth Galbraith. (CNS/Leslie Kossoff)



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May 1 is the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker. Because this year it falls on a Sunday, the Mass will be for the third Sunday of Easter, but in Washington, D.C., St. Matthew's Cathedral is hosting a special Mass that not only celebrates the feast, but also honors the memory of Msgr. George Higgins, longtime chaplain to the AFL-CIO, who died 20 years ago on this very feast.

The next day, Liz Shuler, the president of the AFL-CIO, will co-host a panel discussion with the Catholic Labor Network about Higgins' legacy at the federation's national office across the street from the White House. Both the Mass and the panel will be livestreamed.

The principal celebrant at the Mass will be Cardinal Wilton Gregory who, like Higgins, was a priest of Chicago. In fact, Msgr. John Hayes, who was a mentor to Higgins, was also the pastor to whom a young man studying at St. Carthage Grammar School confided his desire to become a priest someday. Hayes told the young man he needed to become a Catholic before he could become a priest. That young man was Wilton Gregory.

A depiction of St. Joseph holding a carpenter's square is seen in a stained-glass window in the

A depiction of St. Joseph holding a carpenter's square is seen in a stained-glass window in the chapel of St. Joseph's College in Patchogue, N.Y., in this 2020 photo. Work "anoints us" with dignity, Pope Francis once said in an address for the feast of St. Joseph the Worker. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

This is more than just a story about a coincidence. It is really a story about relationships. It is impossible to understand the historic relationship of the Catholic Church and organized labor unless you understand first the personal relationships that stood behind someone like Higgins in his day. Those relationships both build and are built by the sense of solidarity, which is the value where the church and labor most obviously intersect.

"As we grapple with the grief and injustices exposed by the pandemic, I am hopeful that this is a moment of renewed partnership between the Catholic Church and the American labor movement. A commitment to solidarity and to the dignity of work unites us in profound ways," said Meghan Clark, a moral theologian who teaches at St. John's University and a panelist at the upcoming AFL-CIO event.

"Catholic social teaching can help the labor movement articulate a sense of justice as participation, which is not only about fighting for just wages and working conditions but also having a voice in shaping what work means in our place of employment and more broadly, in the 21st century," she said.

Clark added: "And the American church needs the labor movement to help it remember that Catholic social teaching on unions and work applies to the church and its institutions as well."

In recent years, the Catholic Labor Network has seen signs of new life as the group's executive director, Clayton Sinyai, tirelessly builds bridges between church groups

and labor organizations.

"Bringing together two entities, the Archdiocese of Washington and the AFL-CIO, both committed to justice, to lifting up the most vulnerable, who may not normally work together, to celebrate Monsignor Higgins' legacy gives me hope about what more could be done going forward," Adrienne Alexander, president of the network, told NCR in an email.

"Because there is plenty to be done in archdioceses across the country, and the work that Clayton Sinyai is doing as executive director of the CLN, barely staffed, but training more labor priests, supporting striking workers, working on issues of wage theft and collective bargaining, is a testament to that," she said.

> Our society suffers from a deficit in solidarity that both church and labor can help supply.
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The panel at the AFL-CIO will be moderated by Fr. Clete Kiley — also a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the immigration policy director at UNITEHERE and one of the key organizers of the three "Erroneous Autonomy" conferences co-sponsored by the Catholic University of America's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies and the AFL-CIO. Those conferences helped rekindle some of the church-labor energy that had dimmed after Higgins' death. And, as a newly ordained priest, Kiley was assigned to Hayes' parish!

I asked Kiley about the Mass and the panel discussion in a phone interview and what most excited him was that Higgins' legacy is being passed on to a new generation of leaders. "Several years ago, a labor leader lamented to me that with Msgr. Higgins gone, the labor priests are all dead," Kiley said. "But this week in our commemoration of the passing of Msgr. Higgins, it is clear the 'Mantle of Elijah' has been passed along to a new generation."

"Labor priest Fr. Evelio Menjivar, an immigrant from El Salvador, and a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, Dr. Meghan Clark … Chuck Hendricks, lay Catholic union leader from UNITEHERE and member of the board of the Catholic Labor Network, and Ingrid Delgado, a Catholic laywoman who holds the labor desk at the USCCB, carry on Msgr. Higgins' legacy today," said Kiley. "[Higgins] would be thrilled

to see this!"

Menjivar views his ministry to workers, and the inspiration of predecessors like Higgins, as aligning with the vision of the Holy Father. He said: "I find Msgr. Higgins' ministry to workers and his devotion to labor justice to go hand in hand with Pope Francis' mandate to all priests to 'be shepherds living the lives with the smell of the sheep.' "

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Menjivar said he first learned about Higgins in 2012, when he participated in a labor priest training program organized by Kiley.

"Since then, I have found both much inspiration and much guidance from the network of labor priests in my own ministry to workers, especially immigrant workers, in their struggles for fair wages and better working conditions," Menjivar said. "This has been especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many who were considered essential workers had their rights violated as they were forced to work under much pressure and many times in unsafe conditions."

Strengthening the relationship between the church and the labor movement should become an ever more important priority for the U.S. bishops' conference and for individual bishops in their dioceses. Our society suffers from a deficit in solidarity that both church and labor can help supply.

This year has happily seen new victories for organized labor at some of our era's most iconic corporations like Amazon and Starbucks, but there is more work to be done. Are local pastors joining these struggles? Is the U.S. bishops' conference lobbying hard for passage of the PRO Act, which will make it easier for workers to organize?

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII published *Rerum Novarum*, firmly aligning the Catholic Church with the growing trade union movement. That commitment has been renewed by virtually every pope since, with especially profound additions to the church's magisterium on the dignity of work coming from Pope Pius XI, Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis.

That commitment has withstood the temptations of neoliberalism to which many other well-intentioned people succumbed. Sunday and Monday, in our nation's

capital, that commitment is being strengthened. From heaven, Higgins is surely smiling.

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