Opinion
Guest Voices

A nurse practitioner pickets outside MultiCare Indigo Urgent Care Puyallup in Puyallup, Wash.

Catholic hospital and nursing home employees have a right to organize under the National Labor Relations Act, but management routinely hires anti-union consultants to fight workers who try to form unions, the authors write. Here, a nurse practitioner pickets outside MultiCare Indigo Urgent Care Puyallup in Puyallup, Wash., Nov. 23, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/David Ryder)



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After receiving an invitation from the U.S. bishops' Department of Justice, Peace & Human Development, the Catholic Labor Network this spring held five synod listening sessions with our members and friends. And if there was one theme that stood out, emerging at each and every meeting, it was this: The church has a beautiful social teaching on labor and work issues. But too often, when the church is

the employer, that teaching is not followed — and when it isn't, the church's witness is compromised.

That is no small matter. If you add up all the people employed in Catholic churches, schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, nursing homes, social service agencies, media and other enterprises, we estimate that more than 1 million American workers are employed by the Catholic Church. And when we don't follow church teaching with our own employees, people notice. It's not a good look.

This is the cover of the 2021 Gaudium et Spes Labor Report: Catholic Institutions with Employ

This is the cover of the 2021 Gaudium et Spes Labor Report: Catholic Institutions with Employee Unions. (CNS screen grab/The Catholic Labor Network)

One listening session brought together Catholic union members; another brought together priests who had worked closely with the labor movement. Others included many lay social ministry leaders, some who were volunteers and others who were employed by church institutions. All were to some degree knowledgeable regarding Catholic social teaching on worker justice. And eventually, every group came to this point: How does the church treat its own employees?

Certain elements of Catholic social doctrine are abundantly clear. The right of workers to organize and form trade unions has been part of church teaching since Pope Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. Leo similarly insisted that every worker had a right to a living wage — and Pope John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens* clarified that this meant a wage capable of supporting a family. These principles are fundamental, and no amount of muttering about "prudential judgment" can make them go away.

Should anyone wonder whether these principles apply to those who work for the church, the U.S. bishops addressed this explicitly in their 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*:

> On the parish and diocesan level, through its agencies and institutions, the Church employs many people; it has investments; it has extensive properties for worship and mission. All 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 … We bishops commit ourselves to the principle that those who serve the Church—laity, clergy, and religious—should receive a sufficient livelihood and the social benefits provided by responsible employers in our nation…. All church institutions must also fully recognize the rights of employees to organize and bargain collectively with the institution through whatever association or organization they freely choose. (347, 351, 353)

Thus the teaching. What is the practice?

Let's look at schools. Most school teachers in our K-12 public schools enjoy union representation. If "all Church institutions must fully recognize the rights of employees to organize and bargain collectively," we should expect the same to be true for our Catholic schools, should we not? Yet the opposite is, in fact. the case. Unions in Catholic schools are few and far between.

There is a simple explanation for this. Most states have laws protecting the rights of public school teachers to join unions and bargain collectively, and the teachers generally exercise this right. But as church institutions protected by the First Amendment, Catholic schools are exempt from civil laws that would protect their teachers' right to organize. Catholic school teachers' union rights are entirely dependent on whether school administrators choose to respect Catholic social teaching on the subject — and most of them do not.

> When we don't follow church teaching with our own employees, people notice. It's not a good look.
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There is nothing particularly special about the school administrators. Unlike Catholic school teachers, Catholic hospital and nursing home employees *do* have a right to organize under the National Labor Relations Act — but management routinely hires anti-union consultants to fight workers who try to form unions. The dominant ethos in American business holds that preventing your employees from organizing in unions is just good management, and those running Catholic institutions have fallen into line with our secular culture instead of offering an alternative based on Gospel

values and Catholic social teaching.

So much for the right to organize. What about the living wage?

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Many participants in our listening sessions were employed in some ministry in the church. If the testimony of these witnesses is representative, we aren't doing so well on that front either. No one enters ministry expecting to earn a salary comparable to that in a for-profit enterprise, but few people employed at the parish level reported earning even a family-supporting wage. More typically, they explained that their vocation was a luxury they could pursue only because a spouse with a more lucrative career was covering the household's expenses.

The participants in our listening sessions clearly loved the Gospel and loved the church. But they were disturbed at its failure to practice the beautiful social teaching enunciated in its encyclicals and letters. This was anticipated by the Bishops in *Economic Justice for All*, as they cited the 1971 Synod of Bishops: "While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence, we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the Church herself."

Or as one of the listening session participants put it, "We willfully ignore our own teaching because it's easier or convenient. It's frustrating because that hypocrisy is what pushes people away from the Church."

Read this next: Number of Catholic institutions with union representation grows