Opinion
NCR Voices



Construction workers exit St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City after attending the annual Construction Workers Memorial Mass April 29, 2026. ((OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Last week, I began looking at what the Democrats need to do to clean up their act, reconnect with working-class voters and start winning elections again. Today, I want to dig more deeply into the one idea I mentioned — proposing a new social contract — with some help from Pope Leo XIV.

The reasons for a new social contract are obvious: Demographic changes such as the loss of extended families living in proximity to one another, the entrance of women into the workforce, the decline of organized labor as a percentage of the private sector workforce, all point to the need for a new social contract. Additionally, new technologies have altered the landscape of our culture in ways that have further concentrated power in the hands of wealthy, powerful interests while convincing Americans that these technologies have increased their range of choices.

What are the key hallmarks of this contract? As mentioned last week, providing child care and elder care is critical. In Leo's encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, the pope surveyed the history of Catholic social doctrine and reminded us that the family is the most basic structure in society. He also reminded us of the importance of subsidiarity, of allowing higher organizations like government to help without overwhelming lower organizations like families and civic groups. If the Democrats would listen to the pope, they would realize that these twin focuses on family and subsidiarity would help them shed their image as cultural libertarians with a preference for big government.



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How? Let the government fund programs for child care and elder care, but let intermediate social organizations like labor unions, churches, business groups and civic organizations operate the agencies that provide the care. That would give parents a range of choices and it would strengthen the social fabric by empowering civil society groups. Those who go down to the union hall or to Our Lady of Lourdes to drop off their kids might not be bowling alone within a few years.

Second, one job should be enough. Too many working-class people have to work two or even three jobs in order to pay the bills. This robs parents of essential time with their children. Insisting on a living wage has been a hallmark of Catholic social doctrine since *Rerum Novarum* called for it in 1891. In his new encyclical, Pope Leo XIV did not use the term "just wage" or "living wage" but he did call for "a healthy way of living, for without a proper balance between work, leisure and rest, families are weakened and young people struggle to develop a sense of responsibility." Wages need to be seen not primarily in relationship to business profit-and-loss

statements, but in terms of family budgets.

Third, as Leo also pointed out in his encyclical, we need to articulate ways of measuring the economy that tell us what matters. Leo wrote: "It is important to move beyond the current metrics of development — which for more than eighty years have been tied to the concept of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) — since these metrics almost systematically neglect aspects essential to the overall wellbeing of people and the environment." GDP was selected as a key metric because it is easy to measure, and the social sciences have been keen to appear scientific. Measuring happiness and fulfillment are necessarily more subjective. But Leo is right: Metrics that measure human flourishing are what are needed, not just GDP. The Democrats need to continually question the use of GDP as an adequate measure of our economic success, again and again making the point that in America today, wealth is so unevenly distributed that measuring the whole tells us next to nothing about whether most Americans are flourishing or not.

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Lastly, a new social contract should aim to meaningfully overcome the divide between blue- and white-collar workers, between those who shower after work and those who shower before. If you want to forgive student loan debt (and I don't), you must match it with a policy that does something for those who do not go to college. If you want to go to war, there should be a draft so that it is not just the sons and daughters of poorer folk who fight on behalf of our nation. Taxes on investment income and capital gains should be treated the same as wages.

The chances of the Democrats turning to the pope for inspiration are not high: They may like what he says about AI and unions but don't want to listen to what he has to say about abortion. In this great free country of ours, that is their right. But there is not a single Democrat I can think of who really has put his or her finger on the crux of the challenges facing the nation. Leo just put his finger on AI and its socio-cultural, ethical and anthropological challenges. The Democrats are still fighting about their 2024 autopsy. They should click their heels together and say together: "There is no place like Rome, no place like Rome."

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