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Bishop calls on church to live its teachings on labor in health care

Beth Griffin Catholic News Service | May. 29, 2008

NEW YORK (CNS) -- "We're great on supporting unions when they are in commercial operations. We're not so great when they're in our own institutions," said Bishop Joseph M. Sullivan May 23.

The retired auxiliary bishop of Brooklyn, N.Y., was the closing speaker at the 24th Catholic Healthcare Administrative Personnel program held May 19-23 at St. John's University in New York with joint sponsorship by St. Vincent Catholic Medical Centers. Fifty administrators and pastoral care professionals from dioceses across the United States participated.

Bishop Sullivan is the former board chairman of the Catholic Health Association and a member of the U.S. bishops' Task Force on Health Care. He spoke on "Creating a Just Workplace: Church Teaching, Union Negotiations and the Realities of the Marketplace -- From Confrontation to Cooperation."

"There has to be a consistency between what we say and what we do," he said. "People point out that (the church has) all the documents to show that we think about these (issues), but when we come to doing, there's a slip between the cup and the lip."

He added, "One of the great, needed virtues in the church today is the courage to do what's needed."

Bishop Sullivan said that nationally 13.2 percent of Catholic hospitals are unionized. He also said 8 percent of the entire country's labor force is unionized, down from more than 30 percent in the 1950s.

He said that for many years the conventional wisdom in management was "if you got a union, it was because you deserved it. You weren't running a good shop."

Bishop Sullivan said unions target health care for unionizing efforts because it comprises one-sixth of the American economy. "And unions are especially trying to organize Catholic health care systems because they have philosophies that are compatible. They hold up a mirror to see if they are who they claim to be," he said.

"Union people say that you can't have a just workplace without a union. Employers disagree. Historically, Catholic management said, 'We treat our people justly and we don't need a third party coming in and dividing the workplace.'"

Bishop Sullivan said that while there is legitimate disagreement among people of good will about whether a just workplace requires a union the workers themselves must have the opportunity to make the decision to unionize or not. "There has to be a basic right to a free, fair, confidential election," he said.

The bishop traced the beginning of both Catholic health care and social teaching to the ministry of Jesus and said, "When you talk about the social teaching of the church, people think of 'Rerum Novarum,' but it really starts with the Acts of the Apostles.

"The disciples were complaining (in Acts) that their people weren't served and they dealt with tremendous

diversity (among the followers of Jesus) by picking seven Greeks" to distribute the community's goods according to need, he added.

"Rerum Novarum" is an encyclical on capital and labor issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891.

"Leo XIII followed a conservative pope, Pius IX, and came in with the idea that the church had to find a way to protect the rights of the working class who were being exploited," Bishop Sullivan said. "In 'Rerum Novarum,' he denounced the socialist approach where the state was seen as more important than the workers."

The Catholic Church has to function in the reality of the world in which it exists, said Bishop Sullivan. As an example, he said New York "is a wealthy city, but 25 percent of the people live in poverty. The social determinants of health depend on the context of housing, jobs, nutrition, a place to live and access to health care when you need it."

He said allocating resources differently, with a focus on education rather than defense, would help people out of poverty and into healthier lives. "Education is the path to go to escape an impoverished life," he said.

"Where do you put the money that you have to make it more effective?" Bishop Sullivan asked. "A lot of kids wouldn't be coming to our emergency rooms if we didn't have housing with lead paint."

Bishop Sullivan said that communication is critical for employers and employees. He quoted Irish patriot John Hume, who said, "The only way you can come to agreement is when you own the grievance of your adversary."

"Distrust is the problem between labor and management," he said. "The way to remedy that is dialogue and communication that is factual, truthful, nondisparaging and sticks to the topics on the table."

Bishop Sullivan said distrust is magnified by the disparity between the salaries of the highest- and lowest-paid workers in an organization. In the United States, some executives are paid up to 475 times the compensation of the employee with the lowest salary. In Britain, he said, the figure is up to 11 times.

"I believe the only way we'll reform health care is collaboratively," he said, citing the call in the U.S. bishops' 1986 economics pastoral for "a new model, a new paradigm, based on nonadversarial, civil dialogue."

"There is no place more challenging than health care," he added.

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