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Living in Limbo

by Nicole Sotelo

In Catholic thought, limbo was the state of those who had died but, because they were not yet baptized, were denied entrance to heaven. While the Vatican put the traditional theory of limbo to rest in 2007 with a document declaring that “unbaptized infants who die will be saved,” it continues to consign large swathes of the faithful to their own terrible wilderness: lay ministers in the church today live in an earthly limbo, suspended between the promises of church teaching for worker justice and the reality of injustice within church structures.

Ruth Kolpack, the church employee who was recently fired for her thesis on inclusive language, is just one of the 30,000 lay ministers in the United States who live without workplace protections, including no right to unionize, no right to just wages, no recourse for unjust terminations. Well, at least that is what often happens in day to day practice.

What is striking is that Catholic teaching supports workers’ rights, even within the church itself. In the document “Economic Justice for All, the U.S. bishops state:

“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.*” (Economic Justice for All, #347).

The document goes on to quote the 1971 Synod of Bishops that proclaimed: “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.”

So, let us hold the Church and its officials to their own pronouncements and precepts by considering a few recent examples of laity pressing for their rights:

Hundreds of Catholic school teachers in Scranton, Pa., lost **their right to unionize** last year when Bishop Joseph F. Martino refused to recognize the long-established Scranton Diocese Association of Catholic Teachers. The teachers appealed, but in September the Vatican upheld the bishop's decision. Contrast this with the Catholic document *Rerum Novarum* which says that among all the workers' associations, "[t]he most important of all are workingman's unions" (*Rerum Novarum*, 49).

Or consider a friend of mine who as a Catholic chaplain struggled to support her family on less than \$30,000 a year. Because as a lay minister she was without recourse to a living wage, she eventually had to leave her position. Compare this to the Catechism of the Church that declares that "[a] just wage is the legitimate fruit of work. To refuse or withhold it can be a grave injustice" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2434).

I think also of **Charles Philyaw**, a well-loved parish liturgist in the Madison diocese, who Bishop Robert Morlino fired eight months ago for being gay. There was no appellate system to challenge the decision, and yet, Catholic canon law pledges the right of church employees not to have their employment terminated without due process (C. 231:2).

When lay ministers do try to seek redress, they find themselves caught between civil law courts that will not hear the case due to the separation of church and state and canon law courts that will often side with a bishop, despite the Church's own legal code on worker justice.

Until lay ministers unite for worker protections, they will continue to be fired at the whim of priests and bishops. They live in the gap between what is professed by the church and what proceeds on a day to day basis, the wretched interstice between theory and practice. The Vatican may have abolished the theory of limbo for unbaptized children, but it is a lived reality for thousands of lay leaders in our church.

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