

Labor Day & The Church

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 3, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Monday is Labor Day. It was once a day when the vast majority of Roman Catholics would take part in some kind of special Mass or parade or both to mark the occasion. Here in Washington, D.C. there will be a special Mass led by Archbishop Donald Wuerl, but the Mass is next weekend, not this. It will take place at the Cathedral, not as it traditionally did at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart, where after the Mass, the entire congregation would process outside to lay a wreath at the statue of Cardinal Gibbons, the man who championed the rights of labor and won the hearts of the workingman at the turn of the century.

In the *San Francisco Monitor*, Bill Issel, professor emeritus of history at San Francisco State University, has [an article in the Catholic newspaper](#) [1] in the beautiful city by the bay that details how Labor Day was celebrated in San Francisco when he was growing up. I especially liked Issel's recollection that his father and uncles could quote whole portions of Pope Leo XIII's seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* from memory.

In our own day, I don't think I know anyone who can quote the Holy Father's encyclical on social justice, *Caritas in Veritate*, from memory. Even though we can access encyclicals at the click of button on our computers and when we have a Pope who writes lucidly, and accessibly, compared to the stilted, formal language employed by Leo and Pius, the ignorance of the average Roman Catholic about the Church's social teachings is astounding.

The late Cardinal Nguyen van Thuan, charged with the task of drawing up a compendium of the Church's social teaching, would tell his friends a tale that I have no reason to doubt. When Pope John Paul II instructed him to draw up the compendium, with the goal of making those teachings more accessible, the cardinal asked the Holy Father whether the text should be designed for seminary students or lay people. Pope John Paul II replied that he intended to use the compendium to teach the social justice traditions to the bishops!

The role of the Catholic Church in the United States is an especially proud one regarding the history of the labor movement. It was Cardinal Gibbons who fought back the efforts of some to have the Holy See condemn the first labor union in America, the Knights of Labor. As well, the fact that Catholics played such a prominent role in the American labor movement meant that the AFL-CIO would be a bulwark against communism. In Europe, labor movements were as often as not aligned with the communist parties of western Europe.

Alas, there has been a decline. Yes, [Bishop Murphy issued a fine statement](#) [2] on behalf of the USCCB. But, some of the steam seems to have gone out of the engine. As often as not, the most prominent spokesmen for Catholicism are men like George Weigel, who poked fun at *Caritas in Veritate*, Michael Novak, who thinks modern corporations resemble the suffering servant in Isaiah, and Father Robert Sirico, whose embrace of libertarian economic ideas puts him decisively at odds with more than 100 years of official Church teaching. The alliance between labor and the Catholic Church has not been the same since Msgr. George Higgins went to glory.

We ? and by we I mean all who are genuinely concerned about the Church's social teaching ? should ask

ourselves what can be done to renew the once vital relationship between the Catholic Church and organized labor. Priests like Father Clete Kiley, who appeared in [the Q & A segment](#) [3] on immigration and who, like Msgr. Higgins, is a priest from the Archdiocese of Chicago, have been doing a great deal of work with unions. Father Kiley directs immigration policy at UNITE HERE. An organization, Interfaith Worker Justice, has teamed up with the AFL-CIO to provide union leaders to speak at churches or, in the alternative, materials for sermons that focus on the human dignity of the worker. The program called [?Labor in the Pulpit, on the Bimah, & in the Minbar](#) [4] has a website with tons of information and resources that would be useful not just to a preacher but to any parish social justice committee. The group has signed up more than 1,000 churches to participate, but it should be 10,000 churches, or 100,000. If your pastor does not talk about labor this weekend, complain to him directly and tell him you will say a prayer to St. Joseph the Worker for his conversion of heart!

This and other such efforts must receive the support of bishops, of Catholic universities and colleges, of Catholic media. Labor Day should once again become an important day in the life of the Church, an indication that the well being of the labor movement is once again an important concern of the Church. I always want us to remember to lay flowers at the monument to Cardinal Gibbons, but I should also like one day to contribute to the erection of another statue, to a future cardinal, maybe someone who is not even a bishop yet, who earns the love and devotion of the labor movement as Gibbons did. I hope to always enter a Church and see materials on social justice in the vestibule, pro-life pamphlets next to pro-labor pamphlets because both positions reflect the Church's commitment to authentic human dignity. And, I'd better hear some reiteration of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Laborem Exercens* this weekend from the pulpit!

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- [1] http://www.catholic-sf.org/news_select.php?newsid=6&id=57527
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