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Rerum Novarum's Birthday Party

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Distinctly Catholic

My colleague Jerry Filteau will be filing a news story about the Rerum Novarum conference at Catholic University yesterday. I was one of the event's organizers, so I can't "cover" news I helped to generate. But, I can give some impressions of yesterday's conference which, incidentally, continues tonight with a keynote address from Cardinal Peter Turkson at 6 p.m. at the Przybyla Center on campus. If you did not register in advance, just come anyway.

Of course, yesterday morning, the news of Osama bin Laden's demise dominated conversation over coffee and pastries as the event attendees gathered. As a rule, most people expressed a sense of pride in our brave military and satisfaction in the result. But, soon, the most overheard comment was "Oh my, how are you? It has been too long?" One of the purposes of a conference like this is to provide analysis and perspective, to be sure, but one of the principal aims is to get people in the same room. Many business cards were exchanged yesterday and hopefully, in the days ahead, a series of smaller conversations will flow from the large conversation we all shared yesterday.

Labor and the Church share more than a conversation: They share a history. Many speakers recalled their associations with Msgr. George Higgins who served as the liaison between the Church and the labor movement for the last half of the twentieth century. The CUA archivist reminded the assembled of the influences on Higgins, starting with Father, later Bishop, Haas and Msgr. John A. Ryan. CUA's archives has the papers of both men. There were fond reminiscences of others such as Cardinal John O'Connor whose commitment to unions led him to throw a scab camera crew out of his home and Cardinal James Hickey, many of whose pastors and advisors complained about his "union only" policy for church construction projects, but Hickey himself never wavered. Harold Meyerson and E.J. Dionne both recalled Cesar Chavez and his equally strong devotion to his farm workers and to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Others, noting that Pope John Paul II had been beatified the previous day, recalled commitment to labor unions. As John Carr of the USCCB pointed out, some of the portraits of Pope John Paul II have lately painted him as this quasi-mystical, ethereal figure when, in fact, he was tough as nails and the instrument he helped put into the hands of the Polish nation to bring down communism was a labor union. The Church's commitment to labor is not only theoretical but very practical. In fact, Carr's career and that of so many of the others in the room, demonstrates the real life importance of the Church's commitment to the rights of workers and well being of society.

Many of the panelists noted that role of both the Church and organized labor in fashioning and championing the social contract we Americans enjoy, Social Security, unemployment benefits, Medicare and Medicaid, all of which is suddenly under attack. Many of the speakers called on the Church and labor to stand against the social Darwinism we see today. That stance is critical if the Church's commitment to solidarity is to mean anything.

Of course, it is more fun to attend these kinds of conferences than to have to help organize them! I got pulled away to deal with a crisis and completely missed the talk by Father Gerry Fogarty, S.J., the noted historian from UVA who is something of a hero to me, although I did get to meet him. But, I am making a belated New Year's resolution to attend such conferences, no matter how many other things are pressing, because they seem to serve as the foundation upon which the personal relationships that constitute organizational links are built. If the Church is to re-forge its ties to organized labor, which all agreed was essential, the people who will do it were in the Great Room at Catholic University's Przybyla Center yesterday.

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