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Bishop links workforce to 'Rerum Novarum'

by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- The head of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, in an annual Labor Day statement, likened today's workers and the difficulties they face to those who inspired Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical of 120 years ago, "Rerum Novarum", ("On New Things").

The encyclical on capital and labor ushered in the era of Catholic social teaching.

"Over 9 percent of Americans are looking for work and cannot find it. Other workers fear they could lose their jobs. Joblessness is higher among African-American and Hispanic workers. Wages are not keeping up with expenses for many," said Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., committee chairman, in the statement.

"Countless families have lost their homes, and others owe more on their homes than they are worth. Union workers are part of a smaller labor movement and experience new efforts to restrict collective bargaining rights," he continued. "Hunger and homelessness are a part of life for too many children.

"Most Americans fear our nation and economy are headed in the wrong direction. Many are confused and dismayed by polarization over how our nation can work together to deal with joblessness and declining wages, debt and deficits, economic stagnation, and global fiscal crises. Workers are rightfully anxious and fearful about the future," he added.

But, Bishop Blaire noted, "at the time of the Industrial Revolution workers also faced great difficulties. Pope Leo XIII identified the situation of workers as the key moral challenge of that time and issued his groundbreaking encyclical 'Rerum Novarum.' This letter has served as the cornerstone for more than a century of Catholic social teaching."

"This timely encyclical lifted up the inherent dignity of the worker in the midst of massive economic changes," he said. "This encyclical is best remembered for Pope Leo's prophetic call for the church to support workers' associations for the protection of workers and the advancement of the common good."

Dated for Labor Day, Sept. 5, Bishop Blaire's 3,400-word statement on "Human Costs and Moral Challenges of a Broken Economy" was released Aug. 24 in Washington.

"Beginning in 'Rerum Novarum,' the church has consistently supported efforts of workers to join together to defend their rights and protect their dignity. Pope Leo XIII taught that the right of workers to choose to join a union was based on a natural right and that it was the government's obligation to protect that right rather than undermine it," Bishop Blaire said.

"This teaching has been affirmed consistently by his successors," he added, including Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, the latter of whom said in his 2009 encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" ("Charity in Truth"), "The repeated calls issued within the church's social doctrine, beginning with 'Rerum Novarum,' for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past."

"Our church continues to teach that unions remain an effective instrument to protect the dignity of work and the rights of workers," Bishop Blaire said. "At their best, unions are important not just for the economic protections and benefits they can provide for their members, but especially for the voice and participation they can offer to workers. They are important not only for what they achieve for their members, but also for the contributions they make to the whole society."

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But by the same token, he added, "unions, like other human institutions, can be misused or can abuse their role. The church has urged leaders of the labor movement to avoid the temptations of excessive partisanship and the pursuit of only narrow interests."

In those instances in which some unions have taken public positions the church cannot support, church and labor leaders "should address them in principled, respectful and candid dialogue," Bishop Blaire said. "This should not keep us from working on our own and together to advance common priorities of protecting worker rights, economic and social justice, overcoming poverty, and creating economic opportunity for all."

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