NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Hoping for church support of workers this Labor Day

Richard McBrien | Aug. 29, 2011 Essays in Theology

For the past several years this column has observed Labor Day weekend in the United States and Canada by focusing on justice in the church.

Last year I expressed the hope that the U.S. Catholic bishops would issue an annual Labor Day statement that focused on this aspect of Catholic social teaching. Unfortunately, they failed to do so -- again.

Pope Paul VI reminded us in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (literally, ?Of proclaiming the Gospel?) that it belongs to the essence of the Church?s mission of evangelization that it must begin ?by being evangelized itself? (n. 15).

In the same document, the pope pointed out that people listen ?more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if [they do] listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.?

?It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus -- the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity? (n. 41).

The document ?Justice in the World? of the Third World Synod of Bishops in 1971 had been even more explicit about the connection between Catholic social teaching and the practice of the church.

?While the Church is bound to give witness to justice,? the document stated, ?she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes....No one should be deprived of [their] ordinary rights because [they are] associated with the Church in one way or the other? (Chapter III, ?The Practice of Justice,? paragraphs 2 and 3).

The 1986 statement of the U.S. Catholic bishops, ?Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy,? drew directly from the synodal document, ?Justice in the World.?

This document declared -- in italics: ?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? (n. 347).

Neither document, however, properly grounded its argument in the principle of sacramentality. It is because the church itself is a sacrament, a visible sign of the invisible presence of the triune God, that it has a missionary obligation to practice what it preaches and teaches.

On the other hand, the U.S. bishops have a more immediate problem, as I pointed out in a previous column. One of the main elements of Catholic social teaching is that workers have a natural right to form labor unions and to engage in collective bargaining with their employers.

This right was articulated by Pope Leo XIII in his landmark 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* and has been

reaffirmed by almost every pope since then, including the current pope, Benedict XVI.

And yet the right to collective bargaining has been voided by Republican governors and legislatures in many of the U.S. states including Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, Maine, Michigan, Indiana, New Jersey, and elsewhere, but without a table-pounding protest from the bishops of those states or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The bishops can be counted on to protest gay marriage legislation, but not these direct violations of Catholic social teaching.

Is it because of the changed composition of the U.S. hierarchy? In the 1940s and 1950s it was commonly thought that almost all the American bishops came from households where the breadwinner was an ordinary workingperson.

This meant, as I pointed out in last year?s Labor Day column, that the bishops of those years were more likely to view social and political issues from the viewpoint of those on the lower end of the economic ladder and to support the rights of workers over the interests of their corporate employers.

One could not imagine the bishops of that era being silent in the face of direct assaults on the rights of men and women in the workforce, whether in the public or the private sectors.

Indeed, some of the bishops of that time assigned one of their priests to run labor schools to instruct Catholic workers on the Church?s social teachings and to identify the rights they possess in the marketplace.

Unfortunately, some bishops today tend not only to be more conservative theologically, but politically as well.

On this Labor Day, 2011, many Catholics nevertheless look to their bishops to follow in the footsteps of Pope Paul VI, the Third World Synod of Bishops, and their own predecessors in the hierarchy.

As the saying goes, hope springs eternal.

© 2011 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved. Fr. McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Fr. McBrien's column, "Essays in Theology," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow the directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [1]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Essays in Theol-ogy" to your list.

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup

Source URL (retrieved on *10/28/2016 - 07:53*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/hoping-church-support-workers-labor-day