

Labor finds a place on the Lord's Day

Zoe Ryan | Sep. 2, 2011



Unite Here workers outside of the Park Hyatt Hotel in downtown Chicago in September 2009 protest the firing of 100 Hyatt housekeepers in Boston. (EPA/Kamil Krzaczyński)

With the unemployment rate at 9.1 percent, an economy in the doldrums, fights over collective bargaining rights, state's budget problems and immigration enforcement laws, preachers are finding ample themes for their sermons on Labor Day weekend this year.

Fr. Larry Dowling of St. Agatha Catholic Church in Chicago has been preaching about labor issues on Labor Day and numerous other Sundays since he became a priest 20 years ago.

This Labor Day, he'll focus on the scriptures and "definitely make the connection in the current environment of the real abuse of labor in our society in general," he said.

For the last 10 years, Dowling has participated in Labor in the Pulpits/on the Bimah/in the Minbar, an annual program of Labor Day preaching resources sponsored by Interfaith Worker Justice, a Chicago-based organization, since 1996.

The Web site of Interfaith Worker Justice (www.iwj.org) provides resources on current labor issues, sample sermons, prayers and other aids. The organization also has other ongoing programs throughout the year focusing on labor issues.

"I think workers are becoming more and more at risk and as Christians we need to step up to support those who are struggling" with unemployment, wage theft and other worker injustices, Dowling said.

A lot of his influences are from his background: his father, who was a laborer; the number of people he's met along the way who have undergone "a lot of horrible conditions and horrible treatment"; and Msgr. John Egan, "one of the great labor priests in Chicago," he said.

"A lot of this directly affects people in my community," he said. "A lot of people in my community are either unemployed or underemployed. At this point, many work in service industries."

Dowling participates in actions outside the parish. He, parishioners, and members of the community have been successful getting fair contracts for workers with most hotels in Chicago they've approached, and he often accompanies people when they are talking to their employer about getting fair wages or benefits.

Since St. Agatha is a parish that likes to reach out to the community, he said, Labor Day preaching isn't just speaking of a theory for one day out of the year.

"Part of the message is how do we encourage people to get involved in supporting workers, and I think this particular Labor Day we're going to be focusing pretty heavily on actually forming a ministry around supporting workers, particularly people in the parish and in the community around us," Dowling said.

The parish discussed the idea for the past six months and decided autumn would be a good time to "jump-start" the ministry, Dowling said.

Dowling's parish is engaged in the kind of work Fr. Clete Kiley, a priest known in Catholic circles as one of the labor priests of the 21st century, says is necessary. "Preaching on a single occasion like Labor Day has a larger impact when the community itself is prepped for this preaching," Kiley said.

Other opportunities to address labor issues include an adult education series on Catholic social teaching; a town hall for parishioners to share their experiences as workers; an active peace and justice program; and when a significant labor-related issue in the community occurs, he said.

Preaching about labor issues this year is important, he said, "because there are a number of disturbing developments in our country related to workers and their rights." Some of these he listed in an e-mail: the assault on collective bargaining in Wisconsin and on unions elsewhere, the largest income gap in the history of the U.S., companies' illegal practices, and the assaults on the middle class and on immigrants.

He pointed out that many of the issues Pope Benedict XVI addressed in his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, "are borne out right in front of us this year: government interfering in unions' ability to work on behalf of their members; massive numbers of migrant workers globally; the growth in income disparity. That is why this year is different: All the concerns he raised are full-blown and right in front of us, even here in the U.S.," Kiley said.

Baldwin Park, Calif., is an area with 16 percent unemployment, said Fr. Michael Gutierrez, pastor of St. John the Baptist Church there. A number of his congregants are undocumented; about 80 percent of his congregation is Spanish-speaking and the other 20 percent is Filipino.

He preaches on labor issues throughout the year, and especially now, he said, because many parishioners are worried about the supermarket strike involving Albertsons, Ralphs and Vons employees in Southern California.

"Corporations, especially big conglomerates, don't always care about the little guy or little gal, and our church has always been, historically, with the worker," Gutierrez said.

It's confusing for parishioners sometimes, he said, because during an election, some may vote for a very anti-labor candidate who appeals to them because of another issue. Also, speaking of labor "leads to opposition at times" because people, when the issue doesn't affect them, aren't aware that the issue might affect other congregants, he said.

If parishes really want to touch lives, he said, he believes that "finding justice" in the workplace, in obtaining citizenship, and, basically, in the rights for everyone to have a place in U.S. society, will be effective, he said.

One example of his parish performing outreach was when an employer of a well-known company harassed a

parishioner and her fellow parishioners stood with her. The worker was Filipino, not Latino, he said, so this event got parishioners' attention because it shows that everyone, not just Latinos, can be targeted.

Corporations go after any type of worker who opens their mouth, saying treat me right," he said, and sometimes "the manager paints them as rebellious and not really a team player."

"That's the sadness today," he said.

Fr. Richard Vosko, sacramental minister at St. Vincent de Paul Church in Albany, N.Y., has been preaching about labor and justice issues the whole 42 years he's been a priest. This year he's not preaching on Labor Day, but will be preaching about the Sept. 11 anniversary. But labor has a tie-in with Sept. 11 because of the firefighters, police officers and others who served on that day.

"I intend to talk about the workers at the sites whose lives were lost or whose lives were completely changed because of the experience," Vosko said. Sometime in September he's more than likely to talk about labor issues, which is what he usually does, he said.

For his homily, he intends to honor those whose lives were lost on Sept. 11 and also talk about the fear Americans have of Muslims. He'll draw from at least two documents: a statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Divine Worship, "which suggests that we talk about the injustices that we heap upon our neighbors and that our neighbors heap upon us and how we should forgive them?"; and Pax Christi's statement "On the Tenth Anniversary of 9-11: The Things That Make for Peace," which recognizes the magnitude of the country's grief and also that now people need to find the courage to "break the spiral of violence," according to the statement.

That Sunday's Gospel is the story in which Jesus tells his disciples to forgive their offenders 77 times.

Vosko takes current events and relates them to the local congregation, which represents at least 50 different zip codes, he said. He also is a liturgical design consultant, working with churches and synagogues, so construction labor is another issue of which he is closely aware.

"If our worship of God involves remembering the life and death and suffering and miracles and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, then we can't ignore what we were taught by Jesus as we relate those stories and the Gospels in our sermons," Vosko said.

He views giving a homily as a privilege, he said, and although whenever a homily is given it is just one person voicing his views, he thinks it would be an interesting idea to have a "talk back" session where parishioners can say what they agree or disagree with regarding the homily and why.

"I see my job as raising up the issues, connecting God's word to our everyday situations, not making it ethereal," Vosko said.

There's this notion Americans have, Vosko said, of considering how lucky they are that something didn't happen to them. However, Vosko said, that can create this difficulty: How do you get someone to get involved when the issue doesn't directly affect them?

Having the Labor Day message extend beyond that Monday in September is a challenge, Vosko and others said, but Vosko hopes by offering specific questions and specific examples as well as parishioners being actively present at the Mass, people will be challenged and inspired to do some form of justice work.

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