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A year later, labor priest movement gains momentum

by Brian Roewe

NCR Today

Reno, Nev. — If the first meeting of the Priest-Labor Initiative served as a crash course into what it means to be a labor priest, its second resembled somewhat the presentations elementary students give their first week back to school on how they spent their summer vacation.

Coming together as a group for the first time since May 2012, part of the annual conference of the National Federation of Priests' Councils, the priests brought with them more than curiosity; they brought stories of their experiences from the past year.

In the Seattle diocese, Fr. Gary Lazzeroni has worked with food service employees at the University of Portland. On the opposite coast, Fr. Evelio Menjivar of Washington, D.C., joined an interfaith group pushing for immigration reform, while Fr. Ty Hullinger has attended rallies and worked in opposing a new casino in the Baltimore area.

Farther south down Interstate 95, in his diocese of Camden, N.J., Fr. John Thomas attempted to persuade a Catholic high school to relocate a class reunion from an Atlantic City hotel at odds with the union UNITE HERE. New to the group, Fr. Jerry Tobin, who learned of the initiative by reading *NCR*, has aligned with workers in Mississippi trying to unionize at Nissan auto plants.

And back on the West Coast, Fr. Jon Pedigo has spent his time navigating the Silicon Valley landscape of his San Jose, Calif., diocese, planning prayer vigils for workers, attending press conferences for grocery workers, and acting as a facilitator among the workers and labor unions and his bishop and fellow priests.

"I think that priests and bishops need to hear directly from the people who are affected. And it's the stories, it's not just worker rights, it's about the workers have rights because they want to put food on the table for the family," he told *NCR*.

As the stories played out from familiar and new faces, Fr. Cleve Kiley, a founder of the initiative based in Chicago and director of immigration policy at UNITE HERE, reflected on the map the group created.

"What struck me was geographically, [the movement has] expanded, and that was our hope and our intention," he said.

The second meeting of the Priest-Labor Initiative offered points of progress.

Aside from the men having gained real experience working and meeting with laborers in their respective communities, there was a new logo and an official name.

And there was a mission statement: "To form, train, coordinate and encourage a community of priests across the United States who stand with and advocate for workers, especially immigrant workers, according to the principles of Catholic social teaching."

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Though evolving, the movement still has hurdles to cross.

After hearing from and sharing lunch with Las Vegas casino workers, much of the afternoon discussion focused on the challenges of organizing and the fears that accompany taking action, whether their own, their fellow priests' or that of the workers they seek to stand beside.

One of the barriers discussed centered on hearsay and unfounded assumptions of what being a labor priest entailed. Several shared accounts of peer priests questioning why they were involved or sticking them with the "activist" label.

"The struggle is not coming across as a radical priest ... but to make it an issue of pastoral concern for our people," Pedigo said.

The recent push in Congress toward immigration reform could offer a context to better articulate their intentions, several labor priests said.

"I think immigration is totally tied to this and the workers most vulnerable are the immigrant workers. It's just so clear to me," Kiley told *NCR*.

"In the Catholic community, the immigration question is a moral imperative, and in many ways, it's settled. The question about workers and their rights, people are in different places on that.

"But the minute you start focusing on immigrants, and then you ask what happens to them when they go to work, we are in to all the Catholic social teaching about the rights of workers," Kiley said.

"I think the opportunity is now. ... It's up to us though to go back and talk to our brother priests and try to engage them into this and draw them in, that's going to be a lot of work," Hullinger said.

Another context offering traction and legitimacy to their work has been the words of Pope Francis -- among them his message to priests and religious people to live "with the smell of the sheep" and to go "to the outskirts where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight" -- which have resonated with the priests and what they are doing.

At his parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe on San Jose's east side, primarily consisting of immigrant workers, Pedigo said he knows what it's like to have the smell of your people: "There is a smell of oil, soil, the smell of cars all over, the gasoline smell, the smell of working in restaurants. ... And if you are repulsed by that, then you don't get why we're doing what we're doing."

"I think we have a pope that identifies with the poor and the worker and isn't afraid to talk about it," said Hullinger, who recalled reading Francis would celebrate Mass in Argentina on the feast day of St. Cajetan (patron saint of the unemployed) with hundreds of thousands gathered praying for work.

Kiley said, "[In my morning address,] I used the words of Pope Leo XIII who said go to the worker, the poor workers, the poorest workers. So I think [Leo and Francis are] on the same page, and I think we see ourselves very much doing exactly what that Chrism Mass homily was about."

Kiley and others hope the message sparks others to join them, whether priests long involved in workers' rights issues or younger priests with a focus on social justice.

"I have a total passion for social justice and human rights. It screams at me every time I read the gospels and every time I read the prophets," said Tobin, self-described as the only Catholic labor priest in Mississippi.

He told *NCR* his hope is that the Priest-Labor Initiative will offer him support in his ministry as well as give it credibility, given its ties to the National Federation of Priests' Councils and the U.S. bishops' conference.

The next steps for the group focus on strengthening its own organizational structures and clearly defining its purpose and the means to make it reality. They believe those efforts will go a long way in helping their fellow priests and bishops understand their mission and why they feel compelled to stand beside workers today, as other priests have done in the past.

"It's still in kind of a movement phase. It's evolving, it hasn't taken a strong structure yet, but I think it's moving ... and that gives me great hope," Kiley said.

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