

Labor Day: A Time To Reflect On And Work For Economic Justice For All

By Bob Stewart

A Passion for Economic Justice

A priest friend of mine, the son of a coalminer in Southern Illinois, once told me that he thought John L. Lewis, the long-time labor leader of the United Mine Workers of America and a catalyst in the formation of the CIO in the 1930s, looked like what he envisioned to have been the appearance of a spirited Old Testament prophet. Lewis certainly had the vocabulary of a prophet and the spirit of one. He once broke off negotiations with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association with these scathing words: "To cavil further is futile. We trust that time, as it shrinks your purse, may modify your niggardly and anti-social propensities."

I am not sure if Lewis had ever read any documents setting forth Catholic social teaching, but he had a passion for justice and certainly understood, at least implicitly, the Church's doctrine: the worker has dignity and in justice the goods of this earth and the profits of employers are meant to be shared, not hoarded by a few. He did not waver in

demanding justice for his mineworkers and their families, and neither has the Church vacillated in defending the rights of workers to secure economic justice by negotiating with employers for a just wage, health and welfare benefits, and retirement benefits.

Economic Justice for Workers and Their Families

Justice for workers and their families is a major reason for celebrating Labor Day. It is an opportunity for all of us in the Church to reflect upon justice for the worker and the families of workers. Catholic social teaching can help us in our reflection. However, before considering the social teaching of the Church, it might be well to take a brief look at today's economy and evaluate the current state of affairs for the worker.

Steven Greenhouse, a labor and workplace correspondent for the New York Times since 1995, has provided us a report card on the economy and how it

measures up to the standard of protecting the dignity of the human person. The grade is not a good one. In his book, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker*, he documents (632 reference notes) a disturbing trend. His book details, as noted in the dust cover, "...how the social contract between employers and employees, guaranteeing steady work and good pensions, has eroded over the last three decades, damaged by massive layoffs of factory and office workers and Wall Street's demands for ever-higher profits."

Church Support of Economic Justice for Workers

However, Greenhouse has some heroes we can consider as models in working for justice. One particularly inspiring story Greenhouse told was that of Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston. Fiorenza supported immigrant workers providing janitorial services in the community, telling them that God was unhappy that they had such meager wages and no health benefits. His support, according to Greenhouse, "emboldened many frightened immigrant janitors to openly embrace the unionization drive."

Why the involvement by Church leaders in such activity? What does support of workers have to do with faith? "Our faith calls us to measure this economy,

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not by what it produces but also by how it touches human life and whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person.” This statement appeared in the first paragraph of Economic Justice for All, the pastoral letter on Catholic social teaching and the U.S. economy that was issued by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in 1986. Archbishop Fiorenza breathed some life into this teaching, and so can we.

Criteria for Evaluating the Economy

The following are some criteria we can use in evaluating the economy. It is up to all of us to breath some life into Catholic social teaching, not just the bishops, and to make the social teaching of the Church come alive in our society.

1. Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person.
2. Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community. The human person is not only sacred but also social. We have many partial ways to measure and debate the health of our economy: Gross National Product, per capita income, stock market prices, and so forth. The Christian vision of economic life looks beyond them all and asks, “Does economic life enhance or threaten our life together as a community?”
3. All people have a right to participate in the economic life of society. Basic justice demands that people be assured a minimum level of participation in the economy. It is wrong for a person or a group to be excluded unfairly or to be unable to participate or contribute to the economy.
4. All members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable. From the Scriptures and church teaching, we learn that the justice of a society is tested by the treatment of the poor.
5. Human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community. In Catholic teaching, human rights include not only civil and political rights but also economic rights. As Pope John XXIII declared, “All people have a right to life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, education, and employment.”
6. Society as a whole, acting through public and private institutions, has the moral responsibility to enhance human dignity and protect human rights. In addition to the clear responsibility of private institutions, government has an essential responsibility in this area.

Faith and Justice

Some questions to consider as we celebrate Labor Day: What does action on behalf of justice have to do with practicing our faith? Isn’t participation in the Sunday liturgy and the sacramental life of the Church sufficient? Should justice for workers and their families be a focus of our faith?

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“Our faith,” according to the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter Economic Justice for All, “is not just a weekend obligation, a mystery to be celebrated around the altar on Sunday. It is a pervasive reality to be practiced every day in homes, offices, factories, schools, and businesses... We cannot separate what we believe from how we act in the marketplace and the broader community” (#25).

Stewart worked as a field service representative for 10 years for the multi-employer trust for the mineworkers—the United Mine Workers of America Health and Retirement Funds. He recently retired as director of retirement programs for represented and nonrepresented employees of one of the Fortune 100 companies, after 29 years of service. He and his wife of over 40 years, Charlene, are members of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Georgetown. He now spends part of his time in retirement working as an Ignatian Volunteer at the Center of Concern in Washington, DC.

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