

Labor Day Statement

Labor Day 2007: A Time to Remember; A Time to Recommit

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Labor Day is a holiday with an important, but sometimes forgotten purpose. It was established in New York in 1882 as a day to honor work and workers and also a time to celebrate the contributions of the American Labor Movement. For too many, Labor Day has become just another day off or a time to buy school supplies, rather than a day to honor the hard work of school teachers, janitors, cafeteria workers, and others. Unfortunately, it often takes a horrible mining disaster or a terrible attack like 9/11 to remind us of the everyday heroism and hard work of people who still labor under the earth, who go into burning buildings, or who contribute to the common good by their everyday work and enterprise. There are exceptions; many cities and towns have traditional Labor Day parades and a number of Catholic dioceses mark this holiday by celebrating the ties between the Church and the labor movement with a special Mass and prayers for workers.

I hope in these brief reflections to recall the importance of Labor Day and remind us that the moral dimensions of work and workers' rights are at the center of our Catholic social tradition. As we gather this Labor Day weekend, we should not forget how our nation's economy and commerce, our standard of living, and even our time off are in many ways the hard won gains of workers organized into unions to bargain for decent wages, working conditions, and benefits, such as vacation time and health care coverage.

Let us also remember that too many people in our midst—and millions around the world—still lack decent work or fair wages, toil in terrible conditions, and have no real voice in their economic life. For example, more than 40 million people in our own nation lack genuine health care coverage. Our economy is strong in many ways, despite the serious and growing problems in the housing and credit markets. However, that strength is not shared as widely and deeply as our American tradition of "liberty and justice for all" and Catholic teaching on solidarity and human dignity would require.

Recalling Catholic Teaching

Just as we need to remind ourselves as Americans that Labor Day is about workers and their unions, it is also important to remember as Catholics that the dignity of work and the rights of workers are central elements of Church teaching that continue to challenge all Catholics. For more than a century, the Church has insisted that "human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question" (Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 3). Our tradition has defended the right of workers to join together to secure decent work, wages, and a voice in economic life.

This year is the 40th Anniversary of Pope Paul VI's powerful encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* – On the Development of Peoples. He called Catholics to defend the lives and dignity of poor and vulnerable workers in our own societies and around the world. Paul VI called us to be in solidarity with those who seek to "escape from hunger, misery, endemic disease, and ignorance." (*Populorum Progressio*, 1)

This message of solidarity and the pursuit of the global common good builds on the tradition begun by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and extends through the Twentieth Century in a powerful series of papal encyclicals. It was embraced and expanded by the prophetic words and wisdom of Pope John Paul II, an apostle of solidarity, who constantly stood with workers and the poor. His writings called for a society of "work, of enterprise, and of participation" (*Centesimus Annus*, 35) and insisted that unions and other worker associations are an "indispensable element of social life." (*Laborem Exercens*, 20)

Our present Holy Father, Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, has placed the Church's social doctrine in the context of God's love for us and our duty to love the 'least of these.' "[W]ithin the community of believers there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified life." (*Deus Caritas Est*, 20)

Our Bishops' Conference has outlined *A Catholic Framework for Economic Life* that seeks to summarize this essential part of Church teaching as "principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and directions for action." (<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/ACatholicFrameworkforEconomicLife.pdf>) Among the key principles, these are especially appropriate for Labor Day:

- *The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy.*
- *A fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring.*
- *All people have a right to life and to secure the basic necessities of life (e.g. food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, safe environment, economic security).*
- *All people have the right to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefit, to decent working conditions, as well as to organize and join union or other associations.*

These principles and related moral criteria outlined in the framework ought to guide our actions and choices in economic and public life.

A Look Back: A Failed Immigration Debate

Labor Day, while not as clear in its purpose as it might be, still marks a turning point in the calendar and our lives. In some ways, Labor Day may seem like a second New Year's Day, a time for looking back at what has happened and looking ahead at the work that lies before us. In this reflection, I would like to look back to something that did not go well for our nation and look ahead to some signs of hope.

What did not go well was the national debate over immigration reform. I focus on this as we approach Labor Day because at its core immigration is about workers who come to our land to try to secure better lives for themselves and their families by their labor. This vital national immigration discussion polarized our people, paralyzed the Congress, and failed our nation. This debate was truly a case of "more heat than light," more passion than progress. In my view, sometimes anger trumped wisdom, myths overwhelmed facts, and slogans replaced solutions. After this debate, we are a society more divided, a people more confused, and a nation unable to move forward on one of the most serious and complicated issues we face as a nation.

This should not surprise us, but it should not dissuade us either. I have spent much of my life and ministry working on immigration programs and policies. I know how frustrating and complicated, how emotional and fundamental these issues are. But we have to do better. We have to find a way to re-start the discussion, to re-engage the hard issues, to search for practical and realistic solutions. This debate brought out some of the worst in us. Now we need to draw on the best in us if we are ever going to move forward as a whole, healthy society and nation.

Let me suggest a few starting points for a new and better immigration discussion: reality, civility, morality, and consistency.

First, reality. I have heard it said, "You are entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts." There is a temptation for all of us to look at reality through the eyes of ideology, fear, or wishful thinking. However, there are some inescapable facts:

- The immigration status quo is unacceptable and unsustainable. The 'system' is broken. We need far-reaching and comprehensive reform.
- Immigrants come to our nation because they find work here that allows them to offer some hope and dignity to their families. The work they do is a contribution to our society.
- There are some 12 million undocumented people among us, most of whom are workers. Our economy and communities depend on them. They bus our dishes, pick our vegetables, clean our offices and homes, and care for our children among other jobs. We cannot wish them away or simply send them away. For practical, economic, and moral reasons, we have to find ways to bring these people out of the shadows, to protect them from exploitation, and to regularize their status for their sake and ours.

- Like the rest of society, immigrant populations include a small number of people who do damage to our communities and engage in dangerous behavior. These people, like others who harm our society, must be caught and punished, but their reprehensible acts cannot be used to demonize millions who contribute to our economy and society.
- One-dimensional 'solutions' may be simple, but they are often illusions and can make things worse. There is no fence long enough or high enough that can wall out the human and economic forces that drive immigration.
- Immigration reform cannot start or stop at our borders. U.S. policy must help overcome the pervasive poverty and deprivation, the violence and oppression that push people to leave their own lands. Policies on debt and development, foreign aid and global trade are essential elements of any effective immigration reform.

Second, civility. Passion and strong convictions can be good things. I have plenty of both, based on my ministry among immigrants for decades. However, anger is no substitute for wisdom, attacks are no substitute for dialogue, and feeding fears will not help us find solutions. Respect for different points of view is a mark of civil society.

Both sides in the last debate fell short sometimes. Immigration issues should not be used for partisan advantage, a ratings boost, or a fundraising tactic. We have to guard against policy disputes that encourage or excuse ethnic hostility or discrimination. We have seen the use of demeaning stereotypes, appeals to the worst in us, and one-sided advocacy pretending to be journalism.

Advocates must continue to take seriously legitimate concerns about protecting our borders, curbing the flow of unlawful immigration, the potential displacement of native workers, and the possibility of exploitation within guest worker programs. These issues are not to be ignored, exaggerated, dismissed, or used as political weapons. Disagreement should not degenerate into accusations of bigotry or charges of betrayal of national identity. For our part, a Church which calls for greater charity and justice in national life ought to practice charity and justice in public life.

Third, morality. By morality, I do not mean that faith and moral principles give us easy answers to difficult problems, or that people of good will cannot disagree over the best ways forward. Rather, I am suggesting that how we analyze and act on these issues ought to be shaped and measured by fundamental moral principles. For example, human dignity is a gift from God, not a status to be earned. Fundamental rights to work, decent wages, safe working conditions, to have a voice in decisions, and the freedom to choose to join a union do not depend on where you were born or when you came to our nation. Human dignity and human rights are not commodities to be allocated according to where you come from, when you got here, or what documents you possess.

Basic morality insists that the search for the common good should prevail over the pursuit of narrow economic and political interests. In addition, immigration policies and practices need to promote family unity and protect children. Policies and practices—including recent raids—that pull families apart ought to be rejected and resisted. Protecting “family values” should not depend on a family’s nationality or immigration status. The measure of immigration reform is not how it touches the secure and powerful, but the weak and vulnerable.

These and other principles can help re-start an immigration discussion that brings us together to address a serious and common problem rather than to pull us apart by appealing to our fears and narrow interests.

Fourth, Consistency. The failure of national immigration reform has generated a deluge of local and state proposals, controversies, and disputes. Immigration policy should not depend on where in the United States you work or live. A patchwork of conflicting policies, punitive measures, and local disputes cannot fix a broken federal system, but they can further enflame the divisions that make real progress more difficult.

We need a different debate, a constructive discussion that neither diminishes our nation nor divides our people, but achieves realistic, practical, and principled steps towards reform. A national discussion that is based on reality, civility, morality, and consistency—properly understood—can lay the groundwork for real progress.

I am proud of the Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform (*Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope*) which provided impressive and constructive ways for Catholics to make the case for just and comprehensive reform. However, we are also going to have to review and assess our own efforts and demonstrate a willingness to think more deeply, search more broadly, and reach out more effectively, as we seek to respond to this fundamental challenge. After all, this is about what kind of people we are, what kind of country we are becoming. This is about what it means to be American and what are the best ways to welcome newcomers and help them become a full part of our national family, contributing to our strengths and unity as a people.

Signs of Hope

Just as the failed immigration debate fed our fears, there were signs of hope over the last year. For example, after much delay and strong advocacy by our Bishops’ Conference, the labor movement and many others, the lowest paid workers in our society finally received the first of three modest increases in the minimum wage.

Another less well known sign of hope is the progress of a small but courageous group of workers called the “Coalition of Immokalee Workers.” After years of hard work, they have reached landmark agreements with McDonald’s Corporation and Yum! Brands, Inc., the company that owns Taco Bell, to address wages and working conditions for the farmworkers who pick tomatoes in Florida.

These agreements promise a “penny a pound” more for Florida tomatoes and a new code of conduct in the fields. This sign of hope is, first and foremost, the achievement of the Coalition and the workers themselves. They organized, protested, fasted, demonstrated, insisted, and would not be pushed aside. When no one gave them much of a chance, they stood up for their own lives, dignity, and rights. It is also the result of good judgment and corporate social responsibility by the companies who eventually responded to the workers and working conditions by reaching these ground-breaking agreements.

In a small way, this is also a sign of hope for our Church that has supported and stood with these workers in their just cause and legitimate aspirations. Our Catholic Campaign for Human Development offered initial, vital support. CCHD saw in the Coalition of Immokalee Workers the kind of empowering, bottom-up effort to overcome poverty that is at the heart of CCHD’s mission.

The Catholic Bishops of Florida, the broader religious community, the labor movement, and many others called for dialogue and greater justice. Bishop John Nevins of the Diocese of Venice in Florida and his successor, Bishop Frank J. Dewane, have consistently stood with the workers, praying with them and supporting their just cause. As Chairman of the Bishops’ Domestic Policy Committee, I wrote to the leaders of McDonald’s Corporation and Yum! Brands, Inc. urging dialogue and agreement. In many small ways, the Catholic community, the labor movement and others also stood with these workers. But in the final analysis, it is the workers who created this sign of hope for the rest of us. They are an example of how courage, sacrifice, and a passion for justice can make a difference. There is much more to be done and a long way to go for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and for all farmworkers who remain among the most invisible, neglected, and vulnerable workers in our nation. However, as we mark Labor Day in 2007, this small but impressive sign of hope is worth celebrating. It offers a call to all of us to stand with vulnerable workers who deserve our support and solidarity.

Conclusion

Labor Day 2007 is a time to look back, look around, and look ahead. It is a day to celebrate the work and the workers who are at the heart of this holiday. It is a time to recall the powerful and consistent teaching of our Church on the dignity of work and the rights of workers. It is an opportunity to remember when we have fallen short and when we have made a difference. Most of all, like New Year’s Day, it is a time to resolve to do better. For Catholics, Labor Day 2007 is a time to recommit in our own small ways – to our own work, to treat others justly, and to defend the lives, dignity, and rights of workers, especially the most vulnerable. This is a requirement of our faith and a way to advance the promise of our nation,