

## Notes from the 2005 Catholic Labor Network Gathering: A Summary of Proceedings

Father John O'Brien opened with a discussion of his new book *Currents in Catholic Social Teaching*, a talk titled "The World Gonna Be Great Someday!"

Despite the trauma we witness and experience in the modern world, we continue to indulge the theological virtue of hope as our faith entitles us. The "theological anthropology" of Pope John Paul II allows us to hope. The Church proclaims itself an "expert" on humanity, which can be understood only by appreciating that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. Humans are social by nature and do not determine their own *telos* – they exist in relationship with others with a God-given *telos*. The Holy Father tells us that we have a right to work because the obligation to work is part of human nature, a way man fulfills himself. The human person is the *subject* of work. People have a duty to cooperate with others and join together in solidarity – both in the process of work and to serve justice in the workplace. The challenge before us is not freedom or society, but a society that brings us together or leaves some behind. Everyone has an equal right to sit at the banquet – no one must be condemned lay outside the door like Lazarus. Solidarity is not pity or unease at injustice but a firm determination to pursue the common good.

The project that lies ahead...

The Methodological Challenge. Papal encyclicals by nature are presented for the whole Church, they are universal and abstract statements of principle by nature. We are obliged to create a "theology from below," to conceive what kind of theological document would be crafted if written with concrete experience of the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed.

Catholic social teaching leaves us significant theological challenges:

- Social Justice begins with the family. In the family the life of virtue is cultivated and encouraged. It is the "domestic church."
- Narratives of testimony illustrate the "soulcape of the two-thirds world," an epistemic revolution. (The *two-thirds* world that exists outside first-world plenty.)
- The principle of mercy must accompany our pursuit of justice. Tears are needed in worship as well as praise; ours is an age of lament.
- Postmodernism seems to deny the possibility of solidarity by stressing the particularity of social identity. But we need the blessing of a genuine human reason that can inform our solidarity. The natural law must be purged of prejudice and sectarianism and be made a fitting instrument for us to pursue the common good.

### **The Dream of the Earth: Imagining a new horizon...**

With Cesar Chavez a new turn in Catholic Social Thought emerged. Chavez linked social justice and labor to environmental causes; the Earth is displacing man from the center of the theological imagination. An environmental theology that sees the Earth as a primary

revelation of God, one that precedes and helps us understand Scripture. Environmental Justice will occupy a central place in Catholic social thought. We are moving from an anthropocentric to a biocentric theology. Almost paradoxically, humans have a special obligation to pursue this vision because we are unique among the species in God's creation – we alone are reflective and make conscious decisions that affect the commons and the cosmos.

## **Panel Presentations on Issues Confronting Working People**

Judy Conti of the DC Employment Justice Center spoke on her center's work on behalf of area laborers. The Employment Justice Center advocates for workers in the metro-DC area: helping them resolve claims for unpaid wages, redress for general mistreatment, and advocates for just policies. Their model is one of self-help, educating workers to act on their own behalf as much as possible – a process that is practically more effective than simply representing them, and also allows them to recover some dignity that has been stolen from them. Hundreds of volunteers, lawyers and nonlawyers, can address a multitude of cases. The majority of the constituency is African American and recent immigrant workers. Unpaid wages are a primary problem.

Lori Khamala of the National Farm Worker Ministry spoke about the Ministry's work on the successful FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee) organizing campaign and accompanying Mt. Olive Pickle Boycott. In September the boycott ended when FLOC signed an agreement with the North Carolina Growers Organization bringing labor union protection to over 8000 immigrant farmworkers in the US on temporary labor visas. The support of the Church was a necessary ingredient of the boycott's success.

Father Gerry Creedon spoke about the living wage campaign in Virginia. The Tenants and Workers Support Committee sought out his support as Pastor of St. Charles for a Living Wage campaign in Alexandria. The large number of Catholics who had passed through St. Charles and were now in positions of power could be tapped, and Alexandria passed a living wage law – thinking it might be overturned by the state. Arlington quickly followed with a similar law. When leading Catholics in the legislature tried to introduce legislation to overturn the living wage, the Virginia Interfaith Committee for Public Policy (VICPP) successfully thwarted the effort.