



The Rank and File Catholic

(Connecting the teaching of the Church with the struggles of Labor)

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Retiree Links Labor and Religious Tradition
From: The Electrical Worker monthly newsletter
IBEW WEB Site: WWW.IBEW.org

David Grief, a retired member of Paducah, Ky., Local 816, isn't one to tuck his politics, his union ties and his religion away in separate pouches. When his former parish priest, Rev. Anthony Shonis, suggested in 2005 that it might be a good idea to connect the teachings of Catholicism with the struggles of labor, Grief didn't need a lot of convincing.

"As Catholics, we are told to read papal teachings on the rights of workers," says Grief, who began working for the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1978 as a member of Chattanooga Local 721. "They tell us that people should not be treated like machines. It's a justice issue," he says.

Shonis, the son of a baker and a garment worker—both union members—suggested to Grief and two other trade unionists that they start a newsletter, The Rank and File Catholic. Now in its sixth year, with Grief serving as publisher, the newsletter is distributed twice yearly by mail and online to several hundred subscribers, most in their region, but some in other parts of the nation and world.

"We've had a great response," says Grief—who credits Mike Robey, an Owensboro, Ky., Local 1701 organizer, who died last year, and Todd Johnson, a sprinkler fitter organizer and the newsletter's editor, with helping Shonis spread his pro-worker message.

In the March issue of the Rank and File Catholic, Johnson discusses the recent moves by governors in several states to strip workers of collective bargaining rights. Johnson reflects upon the protests waged by workers in Kentucky when former Gov. Ernie Fletcher attempted similar efforts in 2006. Then, Johnson lists the accomplishments of current Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear, elected with strong labor support in 2007.

"As a Catholic union worker in the state of Kentucky, I thank Gov. Beshear for not only his union support, but also for defending the dignity and respect of all Kentucky workers," writes Johnson.

Grief, the son of a Teamster, was a senior instrument mechanic, a foreman and instructor at the TVA where he started out working in Tennessee on simulators for nuclear power plants. He retired in 2004.

"I miss my work," says Grief, who took an 18 percent pay cut after a reduction in TVA's work force, but ended up back in Paducah as an instructor teaching EPA procedures at the Shawnee Fossil Plant.

Grief and his two brothers and two sisters spent 12 years in Catholic schools. "I'm happy to do what I can to raise awareness of Catholic workers, the general Catholic community and the church itself about its role in labor," he says.

Shonis doesn't just talk a good game, says Grief. The pastor has helped to push the church to better scrutinize its use of contractors who work on parish properties to ensure that their employees are paid decently and have adequate benefits. Shonis is highly respected in the state. David O'Brien Suetholz, the general counsel of the Kentucky Labor Cabinet, also contributes articles to the newsletter.

In a blog posting on AFL-CIO Now entitled "Father Tony Doesn't Forget He is Son of Union Members, Shonis says, "Families are the bread and butter of the union movement in this country and they are also the social foundation of the church."

Shonis, who visits AFL-CIO central labor council meetings and parishioners' work sites in every town he is assigned to, calls upon union members of all faiths to invite their clergy to local union and council meetings.

Continued on Page 2 of 2 column 2.

You Don't Know What You've Got 'Till It's Gone
By: Linda Houck, (lhouck9630@aol.com)
Director of Liturgy/Music, Holy Family Parish,
Luzerne, PA (Fr. Shonis's home Parish)

I returned not long ago from a week in Chicago at the NEA national convention. I am sad to say that I believe the NEA (National Education Association) and PSEA (the Pennsylvania Education Association) are in grave danger of losing their teeth. So many of those in leadership positions present positions of "go along and get along." As a union leader, while I would like to get along with my administrators and supervisors, I'm not willing to overlook our workers' rights to do that.

NEA has watered down its positions on merit pay and teacher evaluations, and the leaders asked for an early endorsement of Obama for 2012. There was a lot of contentiousness, especially regarding the early endorsement, because Obama's Secretary of Ed has not been a friend to public school teachers, and Obama himself has come out on the wrong side of some union fences, including in Rhode Island. They got the endorsement, although 30% of us voted against it.

It's not like the 30% expect a better candidate to come out of the Republican ranks, especially given the current field of candidates, but I personally don't see why we should give an endorsement to someone who is not clearly our champion. If people have to vote for him because he's the lesser of two evils, then so be it, but to come out as an organization and endorse someone who has actually made statements that are opposed to your positions and hurt your members is something else entirely.

I believe that the Catholic Church is missing a big chance here, to field a candidate who respects both life AND human dignity issues that lend to the quality of life, such as workers' rights. Right now neither R nor D candidates are acceptable; but when forced to make a choice I have to "vote my job," as best as possible.

Like many union members, I was a member of the rank and file and trusted in the leadership to protect and guide us in things that impacted our jobs. All that changed when I became President of my local and had to field questions about some of the things in our contract and how the administration tries to override or ignore them. I came to see that the only thing the workers have are the rights they negotiate that are printed in the contract, and those rights are easily lost if they are not defended. I became the "Queen of Grievances" in my first year - I wrote 11 grievances, some of which had to go to arbitration to be won by the Association.

Knowing how hard workers fight for the rights to living wages and equitable working conditions, it is disheartening to see those in leadership at the state and national level get in bed with the politicians, saying that this "gives us a voice at the table." "Go along and get along" is the mantra these days - if we are friendly to them, they are more likely to come around. But those of us who have trained our dogs know that we don't reward the dog before he behaves properly - otherwise he never will. If the politicians know that they have our vote, they have no incentive to change. Why should they? They only have to be a little bit more in our favor than the other guys.

I guess I remember the days when the politicians came looking for the unions to support them, not vice versa. And one thing I've learned in my 7 years at the head of my union is that no one will respect you more because you yielded contractual rights or looked the other way. The administration and School Board don't have to like me, but I make sure that they respect the written contract, because that is all the workers have - and if the political climate keeps going this way, we may not even have that.

Continued on Page 2 of 2 column 1.

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

**Meet TRAFc New Publisher
By: Mary Anne McMurray PHD
President of local conference of the
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Holy Name Parish, Henderson KY**

My name is Mary Anne McMurray. Father Tony Shonis has asked me to serve as publisher for The Rank and File Catholic, and I've agreed to honor his request.

Although an academician, I've not been immune to labor issues. A personal experience of having been unjustly terminated from a private college in Louisiana where I had taught for twelve years led me to seek a teaching position in Kentucky. After a couple of years spent in temporary teaching positions while completing the work for my doctorate in science education, I found what became for me a very rewarding position as a biology professor with the Kentucky Community and Technical College System. I've recently retired from KCTCS, having taught with them for more than twenty years.

During my time in Kentucky I've become increasingly more active in the life of Holy Name Parish here in Henderson. I'm currently serving as the president of our local conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

I look forward to contributing, at least in this small way – as publisher of your Rank and File Catholic – toward justice for those who can so easily be overlooked in consideration of economic issues.

WELCOME ABOARD MARY ANNE TRAFc STAFF

You Don't Know What You've Got 'Till It's Gone Continued from Page 1 column 2.

My county government is going to Home Rule in January, and in our recent primary election, 11 candidates ran on a Working Families ticket that was endorsed by labor unions. Four of the eleven will now be on the ballot for November general election, running for eleven seats. Although getting four endorsed candidates on the ticket was an accomplishment, it was disheartening that labor did not make a better showing of support for all 11. But it's a start to help the political climate improve for workers, at least in our little corner of the nation. That kind of active political improvement is needed on every level of government and in every aspect of our society, especially considering the vicious attacks on collective bargaining rights of public employees and teachers in other states.

The attack on the bargaining rights of public employees and teachers will have a terrible trickle-down effect if it's successful - prevailing wage will be gone, and we will always be back to serving at the whim of the employer.

Maybe this sounds like I got a little carried away, but unionization is something critical to the well-being of our society, and I fear many people will not know what they had till it's gone.

Adios Amigo The Chaplain's Corner By: Fr. Anthony Shonis

David Grief is stepping down as publisher of the "Rank and File Catholic". David was a founding member of the "Rank and File Catholic" back in 2005 when we first began to discuss a newsletter that would be both Catholic and Pro-Union.

The "Rank and File Catholic" only came into existence because David took it upon himself to learn how to publish and distribute a newsletter. Recently his fellow workers from the IBEW recognized him for his contribution to worker justice with a feature article in their own newsletter.

What makes David so valuable a member of the "Rank and File Catholic" staff is that he is fully Catholic and fully Pro-Labor. Moreover he exemplifies the virtues that are the foundation of all unions; namely teamwork and loyalty. The Catholic Church is not simply another organization or club that a person belongs to; it is a community of the disciples of Jesus Christ that have been entrusted with a mission and that mission includes making the world more just. And David understood that by supporting the rights of workers to organize, he was fulfilling the mission Christ entrusted to the Church.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that the just person doesn't have to reason to what is just, he just knows it instinctively because he himself is just. That's David Grief.

Retiree Links Labor and Religious Tradition Continued from Page 2 of 2, column 1.

While the social justice tradition in Catholicism goes back to papal teachings of the late 1800's, says Shonis, Protestant and Jewish communities have also supported the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively. He says:

"Union members are decent, hard-working, God-fearing people who simply want a better life not only for themselves and their families but also for all American families."

"I'm not an expert on union stuff," says Grief, "but I've always believed that union members drive better looking trucks"!

Grief says he is "severely bothered" by what is going on in Wisconsin and other places where workers' pension plans and collective bargaining rights are under attack. He hopes Todd Johnson is right in saying that the tide is turning back in favor of unions.

"I believe we should do the best with what we have. That's what God wants," says Grief. "You don't have to know how to build a bridge, but you should help the guy who is building it."

To read The Rank and File Catholic, visit the link on:

<http://www.catholiclabor.org>

PUBLISHER'S NOTES:

The major expense we have in the publication of this newsletter is the cost of distribution! It would be helpful if we could e-mail it to as many as possible. If e-mail would work for you, please send your e-mail address to:

TheRankAndFileCatholic@gmail.com

We are very thankful to "The Catholic Labor Network", <http://www.catholiclabor.org/> and Fr. Sinclair Outré, J.C.L. for hosting these newsletters.