



the
Catholic
Labor
Network

Catholic Labor Network Labor Day Letter 2009

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings and blessings to you on this Labor Day! As Americans we take the first Monday in September to honor the working people who serve God and their nation whose toils of the hand and the mind are responsible for the abundance we enjoy. We in the Catholic Labor Network take Labor Day as an opportunity to review events impacting

working people in the past year and look with the eye of faith toward the year ahead.

In many ways this Labor Day is a somber one, for working people have borne the brunt of the worldwide economic crisis that has unfolded over the past 18 months. A catastrophe that began in our own nation with what one might call ‘a speculative use of financial resources that yield[ed] to the temptation of seeking only short term profit,’ [*Caritas in Veritate*, 40] has since engulfed the globe. As a result workers not just from Portland to Pittsburgh, but from Marseilles to Mexico City, from Central America to China, and everywhere in between, find themselves displaced. At home, with unemployment levels nearing 10% for the first time in a quarter century, American working families who have faithfully served their community and nation with their labors are enduring sudden loss of income and often attendant loss of home through foreclosure. Our prayers go out to all families suffering as a result of this economic disaster.

But into this darkness in 2009 came a ray of hope, in the form of Pope Benedict XVI’s long-awaited social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. In his letter the Holy Father alludes to the Apostle’s message that through the teaching of the Church “we may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interest of deceitful scheming,” we may instead attain “mature manhood... living the truth in love [*Veritas in caritate*].” (Eph 4:13-15). Just so, Benedict explains, we are called to the “inverse and complementary sequence of *caritas in veritate*... In this way, not only do we do a service to charity enlightened by truth, but we also help give credibility to truth, demonstrating its persuasive and authenticating power in the practical setting of social living [3].” The principles of charity illuminated by Catholic Social Teaching are not accidental or optional or relative, but are truths at the heart of our lived faith.

The riches of *Caritas in Veritate*, with its ringing call to turn from the economic self-seeking elicited by the unfettered market, and reorient all our economic decisions toward justice and the common good, cannot be summarized in a brief letter. His Holiness notes the special challenges to Charity in Truth arising from economic globalization, but those of us involved the trade union movement are inspired and encouraged by the Holy Father:

Through the combination of social and economic change, trade union organizations experience greater difficulty in carrying out their task of representing the interests of workers, partly because Governments, for reasons of economic utility, often limit the freedom or the negotiating capacity of labour unions. Hence traditional networks of solidarity have more and more obstacles to

overcome. The repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum*[60], for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honoured today even more than in the past [25]

Benedict's concern that economic change and unfavorable public policy has caused trade union organizations greater difficulty in carrying out their proper tasks is well-founded. Here in America, ineffective or absent legal protection for the rights of workers allows firms to fire tens of thousands of workers every year for exercising their lawful right to associate in labor unions. A culture of impunity regarding worker justice has taken root in the great corporations of our land, and these wealthy scofflaws have successfully thwarted the efforts of millions of workers to organize. When workers sought relief from this manifest injustice through legislation – the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) – these same scofflaws spent hundreds of millions of dollars in political contributions and public disinformation to resist this effort. Sadder still, all too many political and business leaders professing the Catholic faith ignored Benedict's call “for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights... to be honoured today even more than in the past,” helping lead the fight against EFCA, yet offering no practical and constructive alternative to promote workers' associations that could effectively defend the rights of workers.

Such actions create a considerable danger of scandal to the faithful. Many of us, at times, are tempted to pick and choose among the treasures of our faith, assenting only to those that please us, or conform to our interests, or match our chosen political identity. But living in, as Benedict reminds us, “a social and cultural context which relativizes truth, often paying little heed to it and showing increasing reluctance to acknowledge its existence [3]” this is hardly an effective way of bearing witness!

We have this year been blessed by a more effective form of witness in the field of Catholic health care. Here the shift from a religious to lay workforce has – at certain Catholic health care institutions – sometimes generated hostility, bitterness and violations of labor law that seemed to echo those common in the secular world. We are pleased to note that many years of dialogue between the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Health Care leaders, and the leaders of the American trade union movement, have borne fruit in a set of model guidelines, *Protecting the Just Rights of Workers: Guidance and Options for Catholic Health Care and Unions*. We fervently hope and pray that these steps lead to greater respect for the rights of workers at Catholic hospitals – and more, that the witness offered by these prominent Catholic employers can in the coming years become the instrument of conversion for the leaders of firms across our society.

In Christian Solidarity,

The Catholic Labor Network
www.catholiclabor.org

The Catholic Labor Network is a network of Catholic workers and trade union activists affiliated with of the World Movement of Christian Workers, an international association of the faithful registered in the Holy See with the Pontifical Council of the Laity.