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Bishops: "A good job at good wages" a "moral priority"

POSTED AT: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 07, 2010 10:26:36 AM
AUTHOR: [CLAYTON SINYA](#)

For America's Catholic workers September 6 marks the second of two 'labor days' of the calendar year. Most of the world honors the laboring man and woman on May 1, a feast duly marked in our liturgical calendar as the [Feast of St. Joseph the Worker](#). Later, the first Monday in September is not only an American national holiday but an occasion when the US Catholic Bishops [reflect on labor](#) and Catholic social teaching in light of current events. This year's statement, [A New "Social Contract" for Today's "New Things"](#) was issued over the signature of Bishop William Murphy, Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

Bishop Murphy begins by noting that the past year has been a harsh one for American workers – perhaps most strikingly for the dozens who died in [West Virginia's Sago Mine disaster](#) in April, but more broadly for the tens of millions who have suffered unemployment and loss of income. (A recent [Pew study](#) discovered that a whopping 25 percent of American workers lost their job at some point in the current recession!)

Bishop Murphy uses these stark facts as his point of departure. For perspective he turns to both the oldest and the youngest of the major Papal Social Encyclicals: Leo XIII's [Rerum Novarum](#) (1893) and Benedict XVI's [Caritas in Veritate](#) (2009) Murphy calls for "a new social contract," and in doing so, illustrates the gulf between the Catholic perspective on society and economy and that of contemporary secular discourse.

In today's television and newspaper coverage, political and social argument revolves around the limits and efficacy of government regulation of the economy – as if the state and the market were the only relevant actors on the scene. But they are not. Bishop Murphy observes:

The role of the market is clearly the major force for the development of a sound economy. The state has played and continues to play an important, perhaps increasingly important, role in the economy and in the regulation of markets. At times, the market and the state seem to be the only two factors; sometimes in collaboration, other times in tension with each other. Perhaps the most undervalued and overlooked sector in this framework is that of civil society. Could a reawakening and new development of the roles of intermediary institutions, including voluntary associations and unions, be a force to call the market to a greater understanding of the centrality of the worker? Could they be a means to restrain, mediate, or hold accountable both the state and the marketplace? Could their voices help create greater economic and social justice, a more mutually respectful and collaborative stance by all the actors toward the economy, work, and wealth creation around the world? Pope Benedict believes this. He suggests that the various components of civil society can work, along with those in the market and the state, to introduce elements in favor of an economy of gift and gratuitousness. Without excluding the essential roles of market and state, "civil society" may well be a different, but also essential voice to advance the good of all.

In the marketplace we trade our goods (or labor) with others to get what we want; we are impelled to look at others as means to our private ends, to value others for what they have and what we can get from them. In the state, ideally, we employ democratic deliberations and seek the common good instead of private interests; even so, these are not ultimately voluntary relations but carry the force of law.



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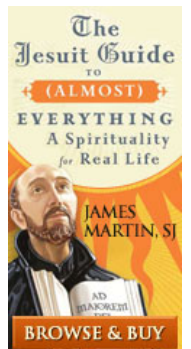
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But in civil society we have a remarkable sphere in which we can voluntarily come together to deliberate upon and pursue the common good. And it is important, as Murphy observes, that labor unions are institutions less of the market than of civil society. (Note that unlike markets, where individuals calculate advantage and make decisions for themselves alone, trade unions are institutions where workers are called to deliberate together, electing leaders and voting on contracts using democratic procedures.)

The rich civil society that flowered between state and market has been the glory of American culture since the founding, so it is perhaps curious that it should take a German pope to remind us of its enduring value. Curious, but not unprecedented. After all, was it not the French Catholic visitor Alexis de Tocqueville who, in his classic study of *Democracy in America*, explained to us and to the world that the American genius for forming voluntary associations was the essential foundation of our successful republic?

Murphy cites another important Benedictine nugget from the encyclical: "I would like to remind everyone, especially governments engaged in boosting the world's economic and social assets, that the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity (Caritas in Veritate #25, emphasis in original)." For those who might be tempted to miss the point, Murphy offers a more prosaic version of his own. "A good job at good wages for everyone who is willing and able to work should be our national goal and a moral priority."

This is indeed a sound Catholic starting point for the discussion of American economic and social policy. A family-supporting income is a critical support for enduring marriages and healthy child-rearing. Equally important, when a parent is willing to work yet cannot command a living wage, we teach children that hard work and playing by the rules is for suckers and that the way to get ahead is by gaming the system. (Whether one does that by selling subprime mortgages or other illicit substances is a matter of taste and opportunity.) Abstract discussions of the role of government and the rights of property have their place, but are secondary to this rather fundamental premise of social justice. A nation as wealthy as ours that will not find a way to guarantee a respectable income to every working man and woman mocks the work ethic and dishonors the worker.



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Finally, Bishop Murphy's special observations on the shocking prevalence of unpaid labor in our society should not escape notice. Though every worker deserves a living wage, each year millions of workers perform work for which they are paid no wage at all, living or otherwise! The problem stretches the gamut from the small contractor who issues his workers a paycheck that bounces to chains like Wal-Mart that demand employees work off the clock at the start or end of their shift. The practice is not just monstrously unjust but unlawful, yet in this terrible recession many workers fear to refuse such demands, not to say report them to the authorities. While community and labor activists across America have been struggling with this issue for years, today's campaign against 'wage theft' by Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) has secured new prominence for this pressing issue. Congratulations to IWJ, and blessings to Bishop Murphy and the USCCB for drawing attention to this very basic premise of worker justice.

Clayton Sinyai

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Comments

1. To Quote, "Though every worker deserves a living wage, each year millions of workers perform work for which they are paid no wage at all, living or otherwise! The problem stretches the gamut from the small contractor who issues his workers a paycheck that bounces to chains like Wal-Mart that demand employees work off the clock at the start or end of their shift." And,

one needs to add, by religious institutions of all sorts, especially Catholic; one needs to attend to one's own house.

My first shock in this regard was knowing that a retreat house was paying illegal immigrant workers fifty cents an hour to work in their orchard! Of course I was a volunteer of sorts at that time, trading half a day's labor each day for a 30 day retreat. Fair enough, I had negotiated this and felt it just. After all, I had even spent my own money to work and to volunteer! I had paid my airfare to travel to foreign lands to work in medical missions for free. So, I personally know of the conflict between wanting to work at something that seems to serve God, and to receiving wages. And, between wanting to be part of something and receiving recompense. The trouble is, this leads to all kinds of trouble.

Religious institutions easily can garner volunteers and money all the while taking advantage of many with generous hearts. In our country, for instance, what religious doesn't have health insurance, education benefits, free trips to meetings, etc. And, on the other hand, what religious institution refuses volunteers, even volunteers who deserve and need to be paid and who may be being taken advantage of.

For instance, I once thrashed the prior of a religious order who was paying \$5 a day plus room and board to a homeless guy in exchange for his laboring for them all day. I in turn was thrashed by the homeless guy when he heard what I had done. He told me, "This is better than nothing, and I will be back on the street if I complain and maybe because you complained". Walmart, indeed!

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Posted By **John Stangle** | Tuesday, September 07, 2010 11:41:27 AM

2. There are several things that sound strange to me in this post. While it is well and good to wish everyone a good wage, how does one make that happen. You can not force people to pay someone or to pay them more than it will help them in a business situation. A system has to be created which will encourage such things such as the wage of a worker will result in more revenue for the employer than the cost of the job. Unfortunately like killing the Golden Goose, there is too much hurry to get more out of the system quickly. Witness the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and you have a concrete example of meddling in the economic system to bring about 'social justice' and you ended up with 25% of the people losing their jobs.

If you want to encourage a situation where business will hire more employees then make it profitable for them. There is no one here who would pay someone more than they are worth to them. If you do then that is charity and while charity definitely has its place in our lives, it is not how businesses are run or can be run. If a business does not make a profit it goes out of business and people lose jobs. If a business makes good money, it hires more people. Successful businesses is what drives employment and living wages, not government mandates or good wishes.

So if we are going to use the term 'social justice,' then we must find a system that enables employers to prudently employ people and make a profit. If we enact a system that stifles successful businesses, then it is the opposite of social justice.

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Posted By **JR Cosgrove** | Tuesday, September 07, 2010 12:35:15 PM

3. So, if the minimum wage is raised to say, \$11.00 per hour, doesn't that simply mean McDonalds will have to abandon their dollar menu? If every worker is covered with health insurance, won't that small cost be added to the price of every item? Certainly! But thereon is the choice by the consumer or user to support companies that pay a living wage and produce quality products made locally. Why does this outcome seem so unreasonable? And after all, aren't we subsidizing these low-paying firms anyway with public welfare? With some academic in depth analysis it might be possible that doing the right thing might also be fair and even profitable!

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Posted By **Mike Evans** | Tuesday, September 07, 2010 01:56:20 PM

4. This past April's mine explosion was at the Upper Big Branch Mine, killing 29 miners. The Sago explosion occurred in January of 2006.

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Posted By **[Jonathon](#)** | Tuesday, September 07, 2010 04:56:23 PM

5. Before WWII one of the great questions of day was the "labor question"; in recent decades that attention has practically vanished as the Age of the Consumer made workers' issue practically invisible.

Mike Evans is correct: we need to examine the real, hidden cost-on workers and the environment-for cheap goods.

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Posted By **[Vince Killoran](#)** | Tuesday, September 07, 2010 07:19:22 PM

6. It is almost impossible to pay a living wage in the free market, especially for small businesses. In this, tax policy should have a role - with a large enough tax credit at each level of government for each child (and dependent spouse) so that in the aggregate, work pays enough, even if the base wage is only enough to support an individual. That would be about \$500 a month per child federal and the same amount for some states. Other states with a lower cost of living could pay a lower credit. All of this should come out of an employer based tax, thus encouraging lower wages for the childless (who are breaking the zeroeth commandment - be fruitful and multiply).

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Posted By **[Michael Bindner](#)** | Tuesday, September 07, 2010 09:59:50 PM

7. A provocative and well-selected topics. I hope to read many more blogs by Clayton Sinyai in the future. best, bill

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Posted By **[bill van ornum](#)** | Wednesday, September 08, 2010 10:06:09 PM

8. The worker and the employer have gotten out of balance in the US, with the employer having, it seems, almost full control. That can't be good for markets, which depend on perpetual readjusting to stay healthy. It seems to me that we badly need new labor movements adapted to contemporary working conditions. A consensus understanding of social justice would be an essential part of any new arrangements.

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Posted By **[David Smith](#)** | Wednesday, September 08, 2010 11:58:39 PM

9. The actual federal government worker makes twice as much as his or her counterpart in private industry. State and municipal workers including teachers make 50-75% more than their counterparts in private industry. No living wage problem there and in fact these high salaries are freezing out the hiring of others because there is no money to do so. Teacher unions fight over pay raises as they lay off tenured teachers to comply with budget cuts. They are eating their own.

There is a 100 trillion dollar liability in federal and local pension requirements that is not funded. This means that governments have to set aside monies for these exorbitant payouts or else increase taxes to pay as you go. That is another reason why people can not be hired because the money has to go to these contractual obligations.

There is uncertain new regulations in recently passed legislation that will add additional costs to business owners, many of which have not been determined yet. It is not a joke when Nancy Pelosi says now that the bill has passed, we have to find out what is in it. Already they are finding new taxes that no one knew about.

These are the greatest threats to job creation there is. I would think the bishops should go after these trends in our society as this is what is choking off investment in the future and reducing expectations for those coming of age. It is not very pretty and it makes the financial crisis of 2008 look like a misdemeanor.

Something just does not come from nothing as Stephen Hawkins believes the universe did. It has to be created and if our society is intent on destroying the creators, we will reap the reward.

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Posted By **JR Cosgrove** | Thursday, September 09, 2010 11:19:54 AM

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