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Church employees on Labor Day

Richard McBrien | Aug. 31, 2009 Essays in Theology

Just before every Labor Day weekend in the United States and Canada, this column devotes its full attention to the general issue of justice in the Catholic church and to the particular situation of ecclesial ministers and other church employees in parishes, dioceses, schools, hospitals, and similar Catholic institutions.

There are observations made in last year's column and in 2006 that I believe need to be repeated this year.

I noted last year that I receive fewer complaints of violations of justice, not because such violations no longer exist, but because so many of those who once worked for the church no longer do so, and a depressingly large number of those are probably less active in the church or no longer active at all.

This relative silence might also mean that church employees may not know to whom to complain, or believe that registering a complaint would not do any good anyway. And so they keep their heads down, and do their work as best they can, hoping against hope that they will not be fired, particularly if their livelihood depends upon their having the job.

But there is another important factor that may explain the feelings of demoralization among some of the church's ecclesial ministers and other employees.

I wrote last year that "the hierarchical population has changed dramatically since the 1980s. The conservatism of many of the priests who were appointed as bishops during the previous pontificate was not confined to their theology or their unquestioning loyalty to the Holy See.

"Opposition to key elements of Catholic social teaching was supposedly as much a disqualifier for episcopal appointment as one's openness to the ordination of women, optional celibacy for priests, and/or the reconsideration of the church's official teaching on contraception.

"But at least some of these John Paul II bishops believe that abortion is a moral issue that 'trumps' all others, including social justice, war and peace, the environment, and such traditional Catholic teachings as the right to unionize. In this context, the word 'trumps' effectively means that these other issues are really of no moral account.

"Such bishops have no qualms about opposing political candidates who are pro-choice (not pro-abortion), and also no qualms about supporting candidates who voted for the war in Iraq and support tax policies that unduly favor the wealthiest of citizens." [This happened again in the 2008 Presidential campaign.]

"For such bishops, the word 'liberal' has about the same negative ring to it as 'pervert.' They believe that Catholicism and liberalism are incompatible." And they treat ecclesial ministers accordingly, if they think that the label "liberal" also applies to them.

I referred in my Labor Day column in 2006 to a document issued several months earlier by the U.S. Catholic

bishops entitled, "Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord" (*Origins*, 12/1/05), self-described as a "pastoral and theological reflection on the reality of lay ministry."

I compared that document with an earlier document on ministry, "As I Have Done for You," published with the input and authorization of Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles (see *Origins*, 5/4/00).

"To be sure," I wrote, "there is much good material in 'Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord'. ..." Thus, it attributed much of the advance in the church's understanding of ministry to a "rediscovery" of the theology of Baptism and the consequent recognition that "ministry is not just for the ordained."

Like "Co-workers," the Los Angeles document "defined and described lay ecclesial ministry within the broader concept of ministry itself. While acknowledging the distinctive ministry of the ordained, it cautioned against viewing the ordained as 'above' or 'apart from' the church rather than 'in' the church. When the church gathers for Eucharistic worship, it is the whole church -- head and members -- that celebrates, not just the priest.

"The Los Angeles document, which was the product of much antecedent consultation and collaboration within the archdiocese, was explicit in identifying hard pastoral cases for examination and discussion. 'Co-workers,' on the other hand, tends to avoid specific examples of problems frequently encountered by lay ecclesial ministers at the parish and diocesan levels.

"There is only a glancing reference in 'Co-workers' to the church's need to treat its 'committed and skilled workers ... fairly.' At the same time, it is emphatic in pointing out that every diocese is free to develop its own personnel policies -- or to have none at all.

"Many lay ecclesial ministers know from unhappy personal experience that pastors and bishops do not always practice what the church officially teaches about justice for the church's own employees, be they in formal ministry or not."

Some thoughts for Labor Day, 2009.

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