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For Labor Day, church should embody social teachings

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

I keep hoping that one of these years the U.S. Catholic Bishops will issue a Labor Day statement that focuses on the church's responsibility to practice what it preaches and teaches about social justice and human rights.

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Such a statement would ground its message in the theology of sacramentality, that is, in the church's call to be a credible sign and instrument of God's presence and saving activity on behalf of the whole world.

The time has come when the bishops need to stop addressing other agencies and institutions in society on *their* obligations, and begin turning the klieg lights on the church itself.

As Pope Paul VI reminded us in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, "Of proclaiming the Gospel", it is the essence of the church's mission to evangelize, but the Church must begin "by being evangelized itself" (n. 15).

In the same document, the pope pointed out that people listen "more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if [they do] listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

"It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world," Paul VI continued, "in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus -- the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity" (n. 41).

Pope Paul VI understood and embraced the principle of sacramentality. It is high time -- some 35 years later -- that our bishops did as well.

One of the obstacles is that the U.S. hierarchy has changed so much under Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI.

Some readers might recall the claim that was persuasively made back in the 1940's and 50's that most American bishops came from households where the breadwinner was an ordinary work-ingman.

This meant that the bishops of those years were more likely to view social and political issues from the viewpoint of those on the lower end of the economic ladder. They were more readily disposed to support the rights of workers than the interests of their corporate employers.

Yesterday's bishops would have gone to bat, so to speak, for the right of workers -- many of whom were Catholic -- to form labor unions. Some assigned priests in their dioceses to run labor schools to instruct Catholic workers on the church's social teachings and to identify the rights they possess in the marketplace.

Today's bishops, however, are not only more *theologically* conservative than their counterparts in the 1940's and 50's; they are also more *politically* conservative.

It is no accident that in recent presidential elections many bishops (and cardinals) have clearly sided with the Republican candidates over the Democratic candidates. For such bishops the litmus test is the abortion issue. They are critical of the late Cardinal Bernardin's consistent-ethic-of-life approach.

Officials of the Republican Party are, of course, delighted. They were delighted when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops opposed President Barack Obama's health-care reform legislation this year. And they were delighted when some 80 bishops openly criticized the University of Notre Dame last year for having Obama as its commencement speaker and for conferring on him an honorary degree.

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One archbishop, who must remain anonymous, subsequently acknowledged to a mutual friend the great pressure he had been under -- from operatives of the Republican Party -- to add his name to the then-growing list of episcopal critics of Notre Dame and the president. He did not succumb.

This dramatic change in the composition of the U.S. hierarchy may explain, at least in part, why there is now a critical mass of bishops who take refuge behind their lawyers in opposing efforts by their lay employees to form labor unions -- just as they took refuge behind their lawyers in fighting settlements of sexual-abuse cases.

On this Labor Day many Catholics look to their bishops to follow in the footsteps of the late Pope Paul VI and explicitly acknowledge, as he did, that the church can never be a compelling teacher of morality unless it practices what it preaches to others.

The principle of sacramentality is of urgent importance today. The church must embody in its own life those teachings that are central to Catholic social doctrine.

It can begin not only by recognizing but also strongly supporting the efforts of its own employ-ees to secure the rights that the church itself insists belong to all workers -- whatever race, color, or religion they may be.

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