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Cardinal: Labor disputes must have 'give and take'

Beth Griffin Catholic News Service | Mar. 21, 2011

QUEENS, N.Y. -- Cardinal Edward M. Egan told a March 19 conference in Queens that "all labor issues" are resolved in passages in the Book of Genesis, St. Mathew's Gospel and St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians "if only we have the faith and confidence in God to realize it."

The retired archbishop of New York spoke on the second day of a two-day conference on "The Theology of Work and the Dignity of Workers" at St. John's University School of Law.

Cardinal Egan said Chapter 1 of Genesis establishes that humans are made in the image of God, "created with divinity as the pattern."

He said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his listeners they are the most precious and unique of God's creatures, and in Chapter 2 of Philippians St. Paul "pounds home" the message by describing Jesus' willingness to "despoil himself of all signs of divinity and be murdered for us," he said.

Labor and management can resolve disputes if workers are recognized as excellent, unique, noble human beings, with the ability to think and choose, Cardinal Egan said.

Regarding corporations, he said, "Capital has a right to profit. Capital has a right to work out agreements with those who work for it. It does not have a right to deal with employees as anything other than what they are."

Cardinal Egan said the current labor struggle in Wisconsin over collective bargaining for public employee unions is complicated and both sides have made good points. He said a worker's compensation must always reflect that the worker is a human being, made in the image of God.

He described late-night, closed-door conflict resolution during the mayoralty of Richard Daley in his native Chicago.

"I would hope that anything that will be as far-reaching as the current discussion of collective bargaining could be done in Mayor Daley fashion: solved quietly with giving and taking. ... If both sides understand what's at issue, I believe human cleverness can resolve problems, carefully, craftily and honorably," he said. Individual interests can be protected by mutually accepted compromise.

The conference at the law school was organized its Center for Labor and Employment Law. The conference included panels on "Restoring the Common Good," "Religion in a Pluralistic Workplace," "Catholic Social Teaching Applied," "Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire" and the "Intersection of Labor, Civil and Human Rights."

Six bishops took part in the featured panel discussing the theology of work and the dignity of workers.

Bishop John M. Botean of the Romanian Catholic Diocese of St. George's in Canton, Ohio, marveled that a "gentle" explanation of Catholic social teaching by the bishops of Ohio "aroused both ire and admiration"

among the faithful.

In Ohio, like in Wisconsin, there are efforts to reduce some collective bargaining for public employee unions. As lawmakers debated the legislation calling for such changes, the Ohio bishops said the debate must promote common good.

Bishop Botean said, "Losing track of humans and their labor in the pursuit of the good life ... is at the heart of a lot of what's going on. We forget, with a kind of collective amnesia, that every chair we sit on, every microphone we speak into, every pencil we push and every inch of every road we travel is the result of some human being's labor."

Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., said the church has always had a duty to scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel. "That's why we have Catholic social teaching," he said, which is rooted in apostolic times and clearly articulated beginning in the late 19th century with "Rerum Novarum," the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII.

"The role of the church is to present teachings and principles, but not find technical solutions, which are the role of governments, the laity and others," said Bishop Blaire, who is chairman of the U.S. bishops' domestic policy committee.

For example, he said, "we say people have the right to organize, but that doesn't mean we canonize everything a union does."

Bishop Blaire also said diocesan bishops have to approach budgets as moral documents and bring them in line with priorities established by the mission of the diocese.

Bishop R. Daniel Conlon of Steubenville, Ohio, called the Book of Genesis "the church's earliest document" and said it upheld the dignity of work: God worked in creating the world and specified that Adam work to till and keep the Garden of Eden. Work was not a punishment for original sin, but something that gave pleasure and satisfaction to Adam and Eve and was integral to their life. Work only became drudgery after original sin was committed, he said.

Because God worked in creation and Jesus worked as a preacher, carpenter and healer, work is one of the ways humans reflect that they are made in the image and likeness of God, Bishop Conlon said.

Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio said work is not a curse but a blessing and part of our spirituality. "Work has been denigrated in our society. People don't see it as contributing to the common good."

He drew a connection between work, immigration and the common good. He said more than 50 percent of the New York City workforce is made up of immigrants. "People come here to work and contribute to our society."

Bishop Ronald P. Herzog of Alexandria, La., said Catholics make up less than 10 percent of the population of his small diocese, but the church has an opportunity to have a voice by getting to know legislators on a one-to-one basis. "Issues have to be solved on the ground with real people," he said.

Bishop Joseph A. Pepe of Las Vegas traced the centrality of the dignity of the human person through papal documents. He said the popes fulfilled a prophetic role and "placed on our shoulders the proclamation of the truth of the dignity of work and the value of workers."

Nonetheless, such a burden is light and the yoke is easy because people maintain hope in God's kingdom of peace and justice.

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