

## Priests meet in Chicago to discuss labor ministry

Brian Roewe | Jun. 7, 2012



Fr. Evelio Menjivar of Washington D.C. talks about his experience working for laborers' rights with two fellow priests during a labor priests training project in Chicago. (NCR photos/Brian Roewe)

**CHICAGO** -- Twenty-seven priests from around the country met in Chicago May 21-25 for the first Priest Laborer Social Justice Continuing Formation, a project developed to recruit priests to labor issues and create a network of support for one another and the workers they intend to reach.

"The concerns of workers have always been close to the church," said Fr. Clete Kiley, director of immigration policy at UNITE HERE and a founder of the labor priests project, which emerged through the National Federation of Priests' Councils.

Support from the American Federation of Labor and others in organized labor funded the \$95,000 project, while multiple Catholic groups endorsed it, including the U.S. bishops' conference. Each of the priests, the majority coming from the West and Southwest, received his bishop's permission to attend the conference and engage the call to address labor issues.

The week provided an introduction for some and a refresher for others to the church's historical, philosophical and theological traditions of supporting laborers' rights. Of particular focus was Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which Joe Holland, president of Pax Romana, called the "Magna Carta of Catholic social teaching." Other sessions chronicled the traditions of labor priests such as Cardinal James Gibbons, Fr. Edward McGlynn, Msgr. Charles Owen Rice and Msgr. George G. Higgins.

"It's a tradition that this nation strongly needs today," said Joseph McCartin, an associate professor of history at Georgetown University, who spoke at the conference.

Further discussions addressed real-life dilemmas the priests, ranging in age from 32 to 71 and bringing a variety of experience, would face in their ministry. Those included "rent-a-collar" requests, addressing stigmas associated with unions, and preaching in a situation where a Catholic organization or ally is at odds with its workforce.

Aside from educational sessions, the program placed the priests in direct conversation with the workers and Catholic labor leaders they will serve. That included offering their support to workers in a labor battle with Hyatt Hotels, and joining a Chicago public school teachers union rally.



"I believe we have laid the groundwork for a new evangelization among workers as well as a support network for priests drawn to this aspect of the church's social teaching," Kiley said.

While labor priests have stood alongside workers throughout the labor movements in the U.S., McCartin called the gathering in Chicago "hugely significant."

"I think nothing like this has happened in recent times," he said, calling the project "a sign that there is a spirit at work in the parishes where these priests are working, with so many immigrant people who are struggling financially but are committed Catholics, and look to the church for some leadership around these issues."

For Fr. Evelio Menjivar, a parochial vicar at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, D.C., the project showed him that he is not alone in his concerns for laborers.

"I believe that we as priests and as Catholics need to be very much engaged in the struggles with the people who are fighting for justice and fighting for what is right, for what is moral," he said.

Once an illegal immigrant himself to the U.S. in 1988 but now a U.S. citizen, Menjivar said his experience helps him connect to the struggles many workers continue to face today, particularly the fear to speak up about violations.

"I consider myself an immigrant, as somebody who came to try to create a better future, and I ended up as a

priest. ... I feel very much empowered, and I feel very much that I'm doing something for my community," he said.

Kiley said the strength a priest can bring to a labor group often comes just by his presence. He recalled over the years meeting with groups of immigrant workers and recognizing the power of his collar -- "like the cavalry has arrived."

"You say, "Do you know that the pope is behind you? Do you know that the church is behind you? Do you know that you are on the right ground, and we are here with you?" I mean, people feel a sense of courage where they didn't before," he said.

Moving forward, Kiley said the hope of the project becomes reaching out to more priests to join the new community, building an online presence and for those who attended to begin establishing relationships with labor leaders in their area.

In speaking with others about the initiative to form a new generation of labor priests, Kiley said some labeled the term *labor priest* outdated.

"I don't know what to call us yet, but whatever we are, we are people who are going to be paying attention to the struggles of working people, and in a particular way of immigrant workers, who are part of our parishes, part of the life of our church, certainly a part of our nation."

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