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A new generation of labor priests

Brian Roewe | Aug. 31, 2012

Fr. Ty Hullinger (left) listens to fellow priests May 22 during the first Priest Laborer Social Justice Continuing Formation meeting in Chicago. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

On July 23, housekeepers and other workers at Hyatt Hotels began a global boycott of the hotel chain. Citing unjust hiring practices, unfair wages and unsafe working conditions, the workers have marched, picketed and petitioned organizers and travelers to join them. At many of these demonstrations, standing by the workers' sides were Catholic priests.
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In Washington, it was Fr. Clete Kiley, director of immigration policy at UNITE HERE, the union representing Hyatt workers. In Baltimore, it was Fr. Ty Hullinger and Fr. Patrick Besel.

The priests aligned with the Hyatt workers and other industry workers represent a new generation of labor priests -- pastors who preach not only for a just working environment for their parishioners, but stand beside them in their struggle.

"I cannot be preaching about God if I am not helping my brothers and sisters, and be in solidarity with them," said Fr. Ernesto Jaramillo, pastor of Our Lady of Grace Church in Encino, Calif., and one of the labor priests who attended a May meeting in Chicago.

Organized by the National Federation of Priests' Councils, the gathering brought Jaramillo and 26 fellow priests from across the country -- from New Jersey to Iowa to Hawaii -- to listen and learn of the struggles of today's

worker and how they can help.

The weeklong training, endorsed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, brought the priests in contact with prominent labor organizations -- Interfaith Worker Justice, Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, the Catholic Labor Network, Pax Romana -- as well as workers.

But more than anything, it brought priests with similar goals together, laying the groundwork for a network to collaborate and address labor issues nationally. Currently, the National Federation of Priests' Councils is working with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development to create an online community for labor priests, whom the federation numbers at nearly 35, to share their experiences and work to address far-reaching labor issues connected to wide-ranging corporations.

Kiley said the increasing corporate culture requires today's priests to take the local-level experiences and connect them to what their fellow priests see elsewhere.

"When you begin to connect those with each other, you begin to identify that there are corporate strategies or a culture within an organization that has regard or disregard for workers," Kiley said.

Continuing the tradition

The growth of national and international corporations presents one of the new challenges today's labor priests face that those in past generations did not.

"It's not like years ago, [when] there was a farm in Washington, or a meat-packing plant in Iowa that was just free-standing," Kiley said.

The heyday of labor priests from the 1930s to the 1950s produced signature labor activists like Msgr. Charles Owen Rice and Msgr. George G. Higgins. Joseph McCartin, an associate professor of history at Georgetown University, said these priests were impacted by the Great Depression, when unemployment in the U.S. rose to nearly 25 percent of the labor force.

"Most of them came from working-class homes, and the Depression was not something that was alien to them," he said.

"They felt that fighting for workers was part of their spiritual calling," said

Kimball Baker, author of 'Go to the Worker': America's Labor Apostles, a book that chronicles the early generation of labor priests, like Fr. Philip Carey.

In an interview Baker's book, Carey described his father's work as a trolley conductor, with two days off a year, no paid lunch breaks and the struggles of the 1916 strike.

Hullinger, a priest of the Baltimore archdiocese, can relate to Carey's background, himself coming from a working-class family in central Illinois. He remembered seeing the difficult labor relations in nearby Decatur, home of numerous factories.

"Some members of my family were affected by that at times, so I guess I've known always in the back of my mind, work issues were very important for everybody," Hullinger said.

Many of that generation's priests had immigrant ties, too, a similarity McCartin saw among the priests he spoke to at the Chicago conference.

"If you look at the group [at the Chicago meeting], about half is immigrant itself," Kiley said. "That's a starting point for some -- they're my people."

Historically, the need for labor priests has paralleled the growth of immigrant populations in the United States. Fr. Les Schmidt, a labor priest of nearly 50 years, focuses his ministry today on addressing immigration reform on behalf of the Southern bishops. In a show of solidarity with the undocumented, Schmidt is participating with a group of undocumented workers bussing from Phoenix to Charlotte, N.C., for the Democratic National Convention Sept. 4-6, where they will attend Mass and then pose for a photo outside the church.

"To know that not only are they welcome in the church, like sanctuary, but also on Main Street, they count as much as you or I, papers or no papers," Schmidt said.

Working for the worker

Today, the rejuvenation of the labor priest movement is in its infancy. With an online community still in the works, some of the priests have stayed in contact through email and calls. A follow-up to the Chicago meeting is tentatively scheduled for April 2013 in Reno, Nev., just prior to National Federation of Priests' Councils' convention. Each priest is encouraged to bring others with him to broaden the community.

Some, like Jaramillo, 39, have already begun to connect with priests in their area about the labor priest movement. Along with Fr. Richard Vega, the former federation president, he is working to plan a meeting for interested priests he knows from St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, Calif., and the Los Angeles area.

"They know the reality, especially now, of many of their parishioners and some of them are working in areas where there is a need for that," Jaramillo said.

Since returning to Baltimore from the Chicago training, Hullinger has connected with local UNITE HERE organizers and Hyatt workers, and has rallied, marched and directly confronted Hyatt managers with the workers.

"As we walked over, I myself was probably just a little nervous, a little anxious, a little unsure. I've never had gone into a meeting like that before so it was all new," Hullinger said of approaching the Hyatt management with a delegation that included workers, city council members and other clergy.

While the meeting didn't result in a response from management, Hullinger said that wasn't the point -- rather, it was creating a forum for each worker to speak directly to management and articulate their concerns.

In Vancouver, Wash., Fr. Gary Lazzeroni similarly worked to address a labor dispute with a hotel, the city-owned Hilton where workers had requested modest wage increases.

Not seeing his role as an organizer, Lazzeroni instead met with city council members he knew and others to encourage compromise, stressing Catholic social teaching.

"I went to the victory party for UNITE HERE after I returned from Chicago and I was able to assure the workers that the church is with them and will always be with them when they are being treated unjustly," he said in an email.

Power of the collar

From their early experiences, priests like Hullinger and Lazzeroni have seen what role they have as men of faith in the labor conversation.

While Lazzeroni didn't see himself having much of an impact in the grand scheme of the Hilton negotiations, he demonstrated skills that make priests a match for addressing labor issues, Kiley said.

"They may have connections with community organizations. They may have connections with business people. They may have connections with political leaders," he said. "And they have the capacity, I think, because of their role and often maybe because of their own skills to convoke people to action, to address real social issues."

Kiley added that today's labor priests must also work with Catholic business leaders to help them practice Catholic social teaching in the business world. Organizing meetings between managers and workers is one path to solidarity.

"That kind of interaction humanizes any kind of decision-making, in actually seeing people as human beings, face to face," he said.

More than anything, the presence priests offer when they sit down and meet with workers can have the most profound impact.

"One of the things I believe I can do is be there whenever they will have a march or a process or a meeting, just to try to be there present and just try to be a support for them so they won't feel they are fighting alone," Jaramillo said.

"It's just a real validation that their concerns are legitimate," Hullinger said.

"It really goes back to the ministry of Jesus," Lazzeroni said. "His care for those who were oppressed and marginalized is why we do what we do in supporting those in need -- like the working poor."

Kiley pointed to the iconic power of the collar, a value the previous generation of labor priests recognized.

"Higgins," whom Kiley worked with in Chicago, "was a great writer and a great thinker, but there are also probably thousands of photographs of him in the fields with Caesar Chavez, or sitting with workers and listening," Kiley said.

"That is very significant, because when a priest arrives, it says the church is there," he said.

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