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Priest-Labor Initiative reconvenes in Reno

Brian Roewe | Apr. 22, 2013 NCR Today
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A month shy of the one-year anniversary of its formation, the Priest-Labor Initiative has convened here in the desert of western Nevada.

The initiative, begun by the National Federation of Priests' Councils and founded on the principles of Catholic social teaching, seeks to place priests beside workers, especially those facing unfair wages, hours and working conditions.

Today, those traits often describe the situation confronting immigrant workers.

Fr. Anthony Cutcher, president of the priests' councils federation, told *NCR* that for many immigrants, the Catholic church has always been the place they turn to when in trouble. For many priests, though, they are uncertain how they can help.

"This is an attempt to really equip [priests] with the tools and the understanding and the theology, so that they can stand with and for the people who are coming to them for help," Cutcher said.

Fittingly, the meeting comes on the heels of immigration reform legislation proposed in the U.S. senate. The "Gang of 8" plan [1] calls for a 13-year pathway to citizenship for the 11 million people illegally living in the country, as well as increased border security and an overhaul of the legal immigration system.

The gathering will offer priests an opportunity to share with one another their experiences -- successes, frustrations and challenges -- in ministering to workers, as well as discuss and coordinate the areas for worker-pastoral solidarity ahead of them.

Last May, 27 priests attended the inaugural meeting [2] of the Labor-Priest Initiative, held in Chicago. The event brought scholars, labor groups and workers themselves to meet with the priests, offering some an introduction to the labor priest movement and a refresher for others.

A primary goal was to unite the clergy in an online support network, which now acts as a way for labor priests to stay in touch outside of their annual gathering.

In an effort to expand that network, the initiative's organizers encouraged those who attended the Chicago meeting to bring a fellow priest or two with them to Reno.

Many of the original participants have come to Reno, a sign that Fr. Richard Vega, the former priest of the priests' councils federation, attributes to the fact that so many of the priests serve immigrant communities.

"There is that energizing element among many of the priests to recognize there are members of our community that need to have a voice and recognize that the church that they love is supportive of them in this whole area," Vega told *NCR*.

Originally scheduled to speak to the priests, Stockton, Calif., Bishop Stephen Blaire, chair of the U.S. bishops' conference Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development and author of its Labor Day statement [3], will not attend because of scheduling conflicts, but sent his remarks in a video message.

Others invited to the labor training workshop were attendees to the National Federation of Priests' Councils annual conference, which begins Monday evening and will bring another 100 priests to Reno.

Cutcher called it "a natural fit" that the Priest-Labor Initiative partner with the federation given its extensive network and ability to give greater weight to their labor concerns at higher levels, such as the U.S. bishops' conference.

The conference is celebrating its 45th anniversary, with a theme of "All things renewed in Christ." Fittingly held at a hotel and spa resort, the speakers and sessions will focus on renewing priests in their day-to-day activities to reinvigorate them in their ministry to parishioners and the lay community.

Scheduled speakers include Jesuit Fr. Gerard J. McGlone, executive director at Saint John Vianney Center, the Philadelphia-based behavioral health facility for clergy and religious; Sr. Theresa Rickard, executive director of RENEW International, a spiritual retreat ministry; and Indianapolis auxiliary Bishop Christopher Coyne.

Check back at NCRonline.org throughout the week for continuing coverage of the Labor-Priest Initiative and the priests' councils conference.

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