

Cardinal Tagle, clergy stress church social teaching on Philippines' Labor Day

N.J. Viehland | May. 3, 2013

Manila, Philippines

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle kept the spotlight on "God's work of creation" and St. Joseph's role in mission during a Mass on Monday, International Labor Day, ahead of the annual marches and street protests of labor unions.

The first laborer was God, who was "not just sitting pretty" but who busied himself creating heaven, things in the world and human beings, whom he made in his image, Tagle said.

"The Son of God became part of the family of a worker, and his work is to establish the reign of God," Tagle continued. This mission gives dignity to labor and makes it noble and holy.

Tagle preached at the Mass in Quiapo Church, which was concelebrated with 30 priests for workers, students, nuns, other religious groups and regular Massgoers in one of Manila's busiest commercial districts. Tagle noted that Labor Day, traditionally marked by protests, coincides with the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker, the carpenter who raised Jesus as his son.

The Mass, co-organized by the National Clergy Discernment Group, Church People Workers Solidarity, Promotion of Church People's Response and the Kilusang Mayo Uno labor organization, kicked off a program of activities that included speeches and an ecumenical "solidarity lunch" under a tent set up on the church grounds. Later, thousands of workers and their supporters marched to Plaza Lawton for a "festive protest" featuring singers and other artists before marching Mendiola Bridge near the presidential office.

At the end of the rally, marchers burned the effigy of President Benigno Aquino III to protest his government's labor policies, which they say favor foreigners at workers' expense. Aquino rejected workers' demands for wage increases, "junking contractual employment, and stopping trade union repression," said Elmer Labog, chairman of the Kilusang Mayo Uno labor organization.

Confederation for Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees, an organization of public sector unions, seeks to raise minimum pay for state workers by 6,000 pesos (about \$150) to cope with the 28,710-peso cost of living per month, estimated by government in 2011. They currently receive a gross minimum pay of 9,000 pesos.

Private sector workers called for a 125-peso wage increase. In the Manila region, workers said they have to stretch their minimum wage of 456 pesos when the cost of living is reportedly 761 pesos.

Aquino in a lunch with labor leaders Tuesday appealed to workers to wait for a package of non-wage benefits that the labor department is preparing. Higher wages could force business to close down or outsource to foreign companies in countries with lower production costs, he said.

Protesters also burned an effigy of President Barack Obama to demonstrate "workers' continuing struggle against US imperialism."

In his homily, Tagle said the church's concerns and involvement in labor issues "is not mere interference. It is part of the mission to establish and to do the work of Christ, the reign of God."

"Reign of God is not just food, drink, but also reason, justice, peace, and human development," Tagle said. "That is the work of Jesus."

Establishing the reign of God is the fundamental work of all laborers, and each field of work should "reflect on, discern and become an experience of the movement of God in the world," he added.

Economic growth for whom?

Despite the reported 6.6 percent growth in gross domestic product in 2012, the Philippines registered [a 7.1 percent unemployment rate](#) [1], the highest in East Asia. Among [the 40 million people who have work](#) [2], close to 21 percent were classified as underemployed in the January 2013 report of the National Statistics Office.

Workers and nongovernmental organization leaders at the Mass recited prayers for workers in the country, their families and for millions of overseas workers. The prayer leader appealed to God for help with the creation of steady and decent jobs in the Philippines that would give workers just wages and benefits so that Filipinos would not have to leave their families to earn a living.

Carmelite Fr. Rico Ponce, who was among the priests who celebrated Mass, serves as vice-chair of Task Force on Urban Conscientization, the support group for urban poor communities sponsored by Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines.

Ponce told *NCR* that job loss is among the problems of settlers in communities around the region, especially when the government demolishes illegally built houses. Church groups and nongovernmental organizations have been calling on the government to halt demolitions until livable relocation sites have been developed. Residents complain they are usually relocated in areas far from work and services, and because of this, many lose employment

Globalization

Tagle in his homily offered advice to people involved in labor matters based on [church social teaching](#) [3].

"Do not forget that it is not profit that is the first norm or criterion," he said. "The primacy of the human person over capital and profit, that is first."

He said different classifications of workers have evolved, particularly in factories and offices. One trend has been "reclassifying" tenured employees into contract workers, leaving them without benefits and job security. Some companies have closed down and outsourced entire departments.

"It looks like it continues to evolve, these various classifications, but whatever the classification of the worker, he is a person and he has rights," Tagle said. He reiterated that classification does not lessen the worker's dignity.

He also acknowledged the world of work has grown to be "very fluid ... where it's as if you have nothing to hang on to as you face insecurity and instability, not only as a worker, but also of the family, of the future and, businesspeople also say, instability (for their business)."

Once, while helping negotiations between an employer and employees, "I thought the dialogue would run for a long time, but the people I was dialoguing with told me: 'Bishop, the church has so many demands for laborers. It's simple: We will close the factory and we will just move to another country where wages are lower and there aren't all those demands.' "

Tagle stopped negotiating after the laborers asked him to stop because, they told him, "Even if our wages are low, at least we have work."

"I was speechless," Tagle said. "I said to myself, That's why I'm here, to dialogue. Now they are pleading: Bishop, just keep quiet."

The experience underscores the power of "international forces" in labor and industry today, Tagle said.

"It is no longer enough to tackle the concerns locally. We have to elevate the concerns to the international level," Tagle said.

Fr. Joe Dizon of the National Clergy Discernment Group, which co-organized the Mass, directed the labor ministry of Imus while Tagle headed the diocese from 2001 to 2011. Hundreds of thousands of workers are employed there in close to 400 factories built in the [Cavite Economic Zone](#) [4] and [Cavite Economic Zone II](#) [5].

"I understand Cardinal's frustration," Dizon told *NCR*.

He said globalization largely generates the problems, and workers have sought help from his ministry and the Workers Assistance Center, a nongovernmental organization he also heads that helps workers with problems related to their jobs or with information on their rights as laborers.

"Unions and strikes are prohibited in the eco zone, even if that's against the Constitution," Dizon said. "Their wages are below the prescribed minimum ... Some work conditions are bad. Bathroom breaks are limited; the work hours reach 12 hours. Some workers who approached us for help have gotten so sick."

The priest said he supports Tagle's recommendation for international collaboration. He cited the case of the [Chong Won Korean garment factory strike](#) [6] taken up by various groups in North America.

Another movement, [Clean Clothes Campaign](#) [7], is also watching out for abuse and other injustices in workplaces. However, "workers hope international campaigns coordinate with the local representatives because it is the workers and their families who suffer the consequences of the campaigns," Dizon said.

In his homily, Tagle expressed hope that, "in this time of globalization, hopefully the concerns and problems of labor will become the concern of international agencies and international groups."

All who have a role in labor -- workers, the various associations and organizations of workers advocating for rights and dignity of the worker, nongovernmental organizations, faith groups, government agencies and the business sector -- would get together with church leaders.

"Together, let us search for the common good and the dignity of the person and the good of our nation, and in one open and dignified effort, we can find the right path toward the very difficult labor question," Tagle said.

He thanked workers and drew vigorous and long applause from the congregation when he told workers, "This day, I don't want you to just listen to problems ... a deep, sincere recognition and thanksgiving to you." He said the workers are "heaven-sent" and "the face of God

"Thank you very, very much to all workers," he said.

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[1] <http://www.census.gov.ph/content/employment-rate-january-2013-estimated-929-percent-results-january-2013-labor-force-survey>

[2] http://www.bles.dole.gov.ph/PUBLICATIONS/LABSTAT%20UPDATES/vol17_6.pdf

[3] http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendiott-soc_en.html

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[6] <http://www.bulatlat.com/news/6-35/6-35-cepz.htm>

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