NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

LA Labor Leaders Invite Pope Francis to Visit Their City

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 5, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

In January, the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, released the results of a report they had commissioned from the prestigious Economic Roundtable. The report looked at wages in the City of Angels and demonstrated what many had long suspected: Los Angeles is the poverty-wage capital of the world.

Among the principal findings of the report:

46% of all workers in Los Angeles, 811,000 workers, make less than $15 per hour.

More than half of those workers, 454,000, are full-time workers.

The average pay for low-wage, full-time workers is $9.55 and it is yet lower for part-time, low wage workers.

The low wage workers are concentrated in the hotel, restaurant, janitorial, security and construction sectors of the economy, in other words, globalization and out-sourcing is not the problem: The job of a hotel maid or an office janitor can?t be shipped off to Bangladesh.

The report looked at the consequences of raising the minimum wage to $15 an hour, which is not exactly going to get you enough to buy a place in Beverly Hills, but it would come close to a living wage, something the Catholic Church has long taught is an obvious moral norm of economic life. Workers should be able to live decently and support their families if they work full-time.

The report stated that certain outcomes of raising the minimum wage are likely to occur. First, the standard of living of law wage workers would improve. Second, more money would stay in Los Angeles, rather than being invested elsewhere. Third, ?[t]he low-wage workers who receive the pay increase are likely to spend all of the money ? households with incomes in the $30,000 to $39,999 range spend 106 percent of their pre-tax income. In contrast, households with incomes of $70,000 and higher, which include most stockholders, spend only 63 percent of their pre-tax income. More spending and economic stimulus occurs when money is in the pockets of lower-income workers than when it is in the pockets of higher income stockholders.? So, raising the minimum wage would generate more economic activity within the city, producing a more localized economy. Sounds like the traditional Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity to me.

When LA?s labor leaders received the report, they were not really surprised. But, they wanted to call attention to the findings and wondered who might share their concern about the lives of people living in poverty and get the message out that something needs to be done. Maria Elena Durazo had the idea to invite the pope to Los Angeles.

?My family was very poor,? Durazo told me. ?But they always had time to give to the Church. As poor as we were, my parents believed you always care for those who have less. When I heard Pope Francis speak about poor people and workers, it was like a dream come true. He was talking about my parents. Who ever talks about us??

I asked Durazo what made her want to invite the pope to LA? ?It wasn?t any one thing,? she told me. I go to this very poor parish just east of downtown. I?ve been hearing so much love for the pope, and not just there, but from non-Catholics and non-practicing Catholics too. He reaches beyond the Catholic community.?

So, Durazo wrote this letter to Pope Francis.

> *Dear Holy Father,*
>
> *I was born into a very rich, very poor immigrant family. We were farm workers who migrated with the crops but we always carried with us our faith, our hope, and our sense of obligation to those who had even less than we did.*
>
> *Since joining Cesar Chavez, I have dedicated myself to the simple idea that no one who works hard should stay poor.*
>
> *Your profound embrace of the moral imperative that work is worthy of a wage that allows every human to form and support a family inspires me to continue.*
>
> *I am writing to invite to come to our home, the City of the Angels. Nowhere in America are more working people making shamefully low wages as there are in Los Angeles.*
>
> *We hope you will take joy in our campaign to allow others in our community to join in our invitation to you. We call it "Los Angeles' On-Line Invitation To Pope Francis" - it befits a Pope who allows us to follow him first on Twitter and then follow him to make the world a better place.*
>
> *With love and in faith,*
>
> *Maria Elena Durazo*

The website is up and running: LosAngelesInvitesPopeFrancis.org. Ms. Durazo reached out to LA?s Archbishop Jose Gomez who has given his blessing to the effort. Like the kids in West Virginia who make solar panels for poor families in Africa, when someone wants to highlight a social justice concern, Pope Francis is becoming the go-to guy.

The Church in the U.S. has had a long history with organized labor. When the Vatican was worried about ?secret societies,? in the nineteenth century, many of which were designed to fight the Church, it was Cardinal James Gibbons who successfully kept the Vatican from condemning the Knights of Labor, an early labor union that needed to meet in secret for fear of retribution from management. Indeed, it was the discussion about the Knights that laid the groundwork for Pope Leo?s seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 which endorsed the rights of workers to organize.

In the wake of World War I, the U.S. bishops worked hand-in-glove with organized labor to put an end to child labor and to organize workers. How many union locals had their first meeting in the basement of a Church? Labor and most Catholic intellectuals enthusiastically embraced the New Deal. In the post-World War II era, the labor movement in the U.S. was unstained by Communism in large part because of the many Catholics who were union leaders. And, no one can talk about labor and the Church without remembering the work of Msgr.

George Higgins or that of his successor today, Fr. Clete Kiley. The Church of Chicago has given many gifts to the Church in the U.S., but these two great labor priests are at the top of my list of significant contributions.

Now, the labor unions of Los Angeles are reaching out beyond their members via this new website to invite a new champion of the poor and working poor to visit their city. The pope has indicated he does not intend to travel as much as his predecessors, but who knows? And, whether he comes or not, the fact that his presence is so desired tells us a lot about him and a lot about the yearnings of working people: They were not as indifferent to the life of the spirit as some who moan about secularization led us to believe. They just needed to find a spiritual leader who spoke to their concerns. And, in Pope Francis, they have found him. Let?s hope he makes the trip to LA. Unlike most visitors, he will probably pass on the bus tour of fancy homes belonging to Hollywood movie stars are located in Beverly Hills. Look for him at Durazo's parish in east LA, where the truly beautiful people are to be found.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/30/2015 - 18:13*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/la-labor-leaders-invite-pope-francis-visit-their-city