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The Core of Roman Catholic Teaching on Workers' Rights

A Statement by Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice
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The Vatican's COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH (2004) is a remarkable summary of 2000 years of official Catholic Social Teaching. To place Catholic teaching on labor unions in its proper context, the serious reader will consult the chapters on, "Principles of the Church's Social Doctrine" (pp. 71-94), and "Human Work," "Economic Life," and "Political Life." (pp. 115-182) Several principles emerge in this significant treatment of Catholic teaching on labor unions:

* **Unions are indispensable for the universal common good.** Catholic teaching states that labor unions are a "positive influence for social order and solidarity, and are therefore an *indispensable element of social life.*" (# 305) Further, Catholic teaching states that unions must play an active role "in the whole task of economic and social development and in the attainment of the universal common good." (#307) The Church teaches that unions are essential to a socially just society.

* **Unions are rooted in the right of free association.** In Catholic teaching the right to form unions is neither a privilege nor a mere product of positive civil law. The COMPENDIUM states, "*The Magisterium recognizes the fundamental role played by labor unions whose existence is connected with the right to form associations or unions to defend the vital interests of workers employed in the various professions.*" (#305) The Church teaches that free association is rooted in the natural law that cannot be abridged or denied by civil law. Further, employers may not invoke even a legally determined civil law in order to deny a right rooted in the natural law. Hence, any attempt to deny free association is a violation of natural law that is rooted in divine law.

* **Unions protect the right to fair wages and benefits.** The COMPENDIUM states, "*Remuneration is the most important means for achieving justice in work relationships. The 'just wage is the legitimate fruit of work.'* They commit grave injustice who refuse to pay a just

wage or who do not give it in due time and proportion to the work done (cf. *Lv* 19:13; *Dt* 24:14-15; *Jas* 5:4).” (#302) The Church further defines a just wage as such that workers “may be furnished the means to cultivate...material, social, cultural and spiritual life and that of his dependents...” The principle that “natural justice always is above the freedom of the contract” has led the Church to consistently reject a “minimum wage” that fails the higher standard of a just or living wage, even if that minimum wage was freely negotiated.

* **Unions foster solidarity through participation and subsidiarity.** Solidarity—especially expressed as a “preferential option for the poor”—has long been a cornerstone of Catholic Social Teaching. Solidarity is based on “*the intrinsic social nature of the human person*” and the “*bond of interdependence between individuals and peoples.*” (#192) Subsidiarity defends “smaller essential cells of society” that serve as “intermediate associations” between the individual and the state. The COMPENDIUM teaches that “*The characteristic implication of subsidiarity is participation...by means of which the citizen, either as an individual or in association with others, whether directly or through representation, contributes to the cultural, economic, political and social life of the civil community to which he belongs.*” (#189) The Church supports unions as intermediate associations that contribute to the solidarity of all through collective bargaining that contributes to the universal common good.

* **Unions must seek cooperative relations with employers.** The COMPENDIUM teaches that “*relations within the world of work must be marked by cooperation; hatred and attempts to eliminate the other are completely unacceptable.*” (#306) The concept of “class warfare” is rejected in Catholic teaching since, “both ‘labor’ and ‘capital’ represent indispensable components to the process of production.” Hence, unions must respect and work cooperatively with employers and employers must accept unions as essential social entities that have a *legitimate stake in the workplace*. When employers and employees collaborate together in the pursuit of their individual good the result is an increase in the universal common good.

* **The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops supports labor unions.** In 1986 the US bishops published a remarkable pastoral letter, ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL. In this statement the bishops gave their full support to “the right of workers to form unions” and stated, “We *vehemently oppose* violations of the freedom to associate, for they are an *intolerable attack* on social solidarity.” (#104)

In summary, Roman Catholic teaching not only supports the natural “right” of workers to form labor unions in order to bargain collectively for just wages and benefits, it actually *encourages* workers to form unions based on the right of free association. Any agency that denies this right is in violation of the natural law and *no civil law* and *no economic enterprise* may deny this right to pursue the universal common good.

For information about this statement contact:

CATHOLIC SCHOLARS FOR WORKER JUSTICE, c/o THE LABOR GUILD, 85 COMMERCIAL STREET, WEYMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS 02118 USA Phone +1 (781) 340.7887 Fax +1 (781) 340.5885 Email: info@catholicsscholarsforworkerjustice.org
Website: www.catholicsscholarsforworkerjustice.org