

The Importance of Unions in Catholic Social Teaching

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To truly know what someone values, observe them in a time of crisis. Working in campus ministry I have become all too familiar with the icebreaker questions of, “If your house was on fire, what is the one item you would save?” And, “If stranded on an island, what is one thing you would want?” Although fictional crises, these are situations in which one can learn much about what a person values. Not fictional are the current debates around legislation and budgets in our country. In these moments, the values of our country come to the surface. So what values are surfacing in our nation? What is it that we are going to “save” or “take with us on the island”? In these decisions, many wise pundits wonder if the nation isn’t “morally bankrupt.”¹ As a value so central to Catholic thought, it has been disheartening to see the recent struggle of workers’ unions, especially in Wisconsin. A fundamental theme of Catholic social teaching is worker justice, and more specifically the right to form unions. This essay is an attempt to trace the principles and applications of unions through the tradition of Catholic social teaching. The first half of this essay will be dedicated to tracing these principles in the history of Church teachings. The second half will treat the current context and some relevant considerations in applying these principles.

The issue of labor unions is a divisive one. Regardless of where one stands on this issue, it is hard to deny that worker justice is a central and recurring theme throughout the history of Catholic social teaching. Labor issues were the focus and center of the very first encyclical and can be traced throughout church teachings to the present day. What follows is a brief survey of the theme of unions through the tradition of Catholic social encyclicals as well as the teaching documents of the United States Bishops. To organize my analysis, I will proceed in three sections. Because of the brevity of this essay, I am choosing to focus on those

¹ See Thomas Massaro, S.J., “Some Kind of Deficit”, *America Magazine*, April 18, 2011, page 10.

documents that have the strongest voice for worker justice. First, I will consider the first three social encyclicals as they address labor issues in a strong way. My second section will treat the strong resurgence of labor issues with John Paul II. I will complete the analysis with a look at the most recent social encyclical as well as the voice of the U.S. Bishops in order to paint a more contemporary, local picture of the treatment of labor unions.

The first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Workers), was written in 1891 at a time when the working class faced conditions “little better than slavery itself” (RN 2). In this encyclical, Pope Leo XIII spoke strongly against the liberal capitalism that had created such dire conditions for the working class and created such a disparity between the rich and the poor. Within his message of worker rights, two significant new proposals that emerged regarded labor unions and the concept of the living, or family wage.

The prevalence of workers’ guilds was destroyed by the Industrial Revolution and nothing took the place of these groups in order to unite and protect the workers (RN 2). Leo XIII was strongly opposed to any violent or disruptive confrontation, so in RN he wanted to eliminate the issues that often caused workers to strike: hours and conditions of labor as well as insufficient wages (RN 31). The guilds and organizations that had protected these rights in former years had disappeared, and Leo saw a need for something to replace what had disappeared (RN 36). Workers, then, possess the right to form associations, and the state should recognize that “every precaution should be taken not to violate the rights of individuals” (RN 38). The only time it is appropriate for the state to intervene regarding the workers’ right to organize comes “when men join together for purpose which are evidently bad, unjust, or dangerous to the State” (RN 38). Pope Leo’s hesitation to endorse these associations is that they become directed towards “principles [that] are far from compatible

with Christianity and the public well-being” (RN 40). Otherwise, humanity has a right to association for individual and public well-being as long as they are not disruptive to the common good. In the words of the pope: “We may lay it down as a general and lasting law that working men's associations should be so organized and governed as to furnish the best and most suitable means for attaining what is aimed at, that is to say, for helping each individual member to better his condition to the utmost in body, soul, and property” (RN 42).

Forty years later, Pope Pius XI reaffirmed the church’s commitment to the issue of worker justice in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. This encyclical’s impact on labor unions was felt in the United States as *Time Magazine* stated that the “Most tangible U.S. result of *Quadragesimo Anno* is the growing Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.”² So what did Pius XI say in this encyclical to achieve this impact? He praised the achievements of the span of years since RN in establishing such unions (QA 31) but went on to claim that there are still rights that need to be safeguarded for workers while desiring more worker involvement in unions. An important theme developed in this encyclical is the ‘principle of subsidiarity’ (QA 79-80), which essentially states that autonomy on the lower or local levels be respected for decision making before others intervene. This is important for labor unions because they exist to uphold the rights of workers so that outside parties, like the state, don’t have to.

Pope John XXIII released *Mater et Magistra*, the last social encyclical before Vatican II, in 1961. MM affirms what had been proclaimed in the first two social encyclicals and elaborates the needs for protection of worker’s rights. While strides had been taken since these first two encyclicals, there was still a serious need for proper remuneration for work (MM 68-81) and worker association and participation (MM 85-103). One can even learn something about the stance of the Catholic Church on labor by seeing the document’s

² Time Magazine, "Religion: Pro-Labor Priests," *Time Magazine*, July 22, 1946.

congratulations and support of the International Labor Organization of the United Nations (MM 103). The remainder of the document delves into other social issues, but this document begins with issues of labor and, within that, the topic of unions is treated in some detail.

After these first three encyclicals that are centered on issues of worker justice, we see less discussion of unions until the papacy of John Paul II. While labor is certainly not ignored in the messages between these two eras, it does become more marginalized. It is important to note that, during this time period, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, provided a strongly worded section giving support for labor unions. It stated, “Among the fundamental rights of the individual must be numbered the right of workers to form truly representative unions” (GS 68). For a document from Vatican II (which holds more authority than a papal encyclical) to state this point carries much weight for union support.

As stated earlier, we see a resurgence on the issue of labor in the papacy of John Paul II. In 1981 John Paul II released *Laborem Exercens*. Fundamental in John Paul’s reasoning was his strong embrace of personalism. Essentially, personalism says that humans are not objects to be used but subjects to be respected. In terms of labor, a worker should not feel as if “he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above” (LE 15). Unions play a major factor in defending human subjectivity in the workplace. While he goes on to elaborate the many rights of workers, all of these rights point to a fundamentally important right: the right of association and to form unions (LE 20). He writes, “Their task is to defend the existential interests of workers in all sectors in which their rights are concerned. The experience of history teaches that organizations of this type are an indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrialized societies” (LE 20). While there are many rights that

workers deserve, like a fair wage and safe working conditions, the right of association and to unionize provide a means by which workers can speak out for these other rights.

John Paul II portrayed the development of unions as replacing the old guilds, echoing the thoughts of Leo XIII. He states, “[Unions] grew up from the struggle of the workers — workers in general but especially the industrial workers — to protect their just rights vis-à-vis the entrepreneurs and the owners of the means of production” (LE 20). In this same section he expresses the claim that unions serve an “indispensible element of social life” and are a “mouthpiece for the struggle of social justice”. This is not a struggle against or over another party so as to eliminate them, but to “secure the just rights of workers within the framework of the common good of the whole of society” so that “workers will not only have more, but above all be more.” He finishes this same chapter proclaiming workers’ rights to strike without penalty.

The final social encyclical of Pope John Paul II was *Centesimus Annuus* and was written to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the text *Rerum Novarum*. John Paul II reiterates the claims of Leo XIII in the first part of CA and explicates the importance of the inalienable right for humanity to associate, and within this right includes the right to form unions (CA, 7). He goes on to write about the “new things” of today and discusses further rights of workers. He says that trade unions not only ensure these rights through contracts, “but also [serve] as ‘places’ where workers can express themselves. They serve the development of an authentic culture of work and help workers to share in a fully human way in the life of their place of employment” (CA 15). Unions uphold the right for worker participation. It is right for unions to struggle against unjust situations that do not promote the “free and personal nature of human work” (CA 35).

What has been ignored thus far has been the current voice of Pope Benedict XVI as well as the response of the Catholic voice in the United States on the issue of labor unions. Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, emphasizes the Church's support for unions, but thinks they need to continue adapting and to be open to "new perspectives that are emerging in the world of work" (CV 64). He wants unions to be creative in addressing issues such as the changing global economy as well as the economy's emphasis on the consumer. While his support is equal to that of all pontiffs, he seems to be looking for proactive creativity.

While the teachings of the United States Bishops emerges much later than the voice of the universal church from Rome, the theme of worker justice is picked up strongly. The 1986 Pastoral Letter, *Economic Justice for All*, states:

"The Church fully supports the right of workers to form unions or other associations to secure their rights to fair wages and working conditions... Therefore, we firmly oppose organized efforts, such as those regrettably now seen in this country, to break existing unions and prevent workers from organizing" (EJA 104).

The U.S. Bishops have consistently held firm to the universal Church's stance on unions and its desire to uphold this right in light of the anti-union environment in the U.S. From the first social encyclical to the most recent, as well as in the local context of the U.S. Bishops, it is clear that unions have strong support within the Church universally and throughout history.

To summarize, one author describes the ethic of labor unions found in Catholic social teaching in *five principles*.³ *The right of association* respects the natural right for people to associate and participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In a spirit of *solidarity and the common good*, workers unite for justice and the betterment of society. *Worker participation and democracy* within unions serve as means to attain *just wages for workers*. And finally, to

³ Patricia Ann Lamoureux, "A Theological Ethic For Renewing Church-Labor Alliance," *Horizons* 30, no. 1 (2003), pages 80-84.

the extent that unions are successful, they reduce friction between workers and employers to ensure *peace and justice* in society.

As the first part of this essay has attempted to demonstrate, “Catholic Social Doctrine is forthright and unambiguous on labor unions... [as] essential to the universal common good.”⁴ So why is it that our current context is witnessing both a decline in numbers of union members as well as legislation attempting to prohibit them? Unions are commonly “associated with corruption, favoritism, and the threat of disruptive and potentially violent strikes. They are also accused of driving up the cost of doing business and sacrificing the international competitiveness of domestic industries because of the allegedly excessive wage demands they make”⁵ Yet what we find throughout Catholic social teaching is that unions are a crucial element to society.

A first response for the defense of unions arises as a matter of priorities. Catholic teaching has long taught that economies and markets exist for humanity, not the other way around. From a personalist perspective, humanity should not be treated as objects or means to an end. To deny workers’ basic human rights in the name of efficiency, profits, or markets is to place these things above human dignity. Since the right to associate is a natural law, any civil law that tries to bust unions impinges upon natural law. Natural law flows from eternal law and is always to be followed even if it breaks civil law.⁶ The mentality that treats labor simply as a means of production is what created the conditions that made unionization necessary in the first place.

⁴ Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, *Union Busting is a Mortal Sin*, (Massachusetts: Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, 2010), page 1.

⁵ Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2000), page 140.

⁶ Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, "Catholic Social Doctrine and Worker Justice: A Call to the Common Good," (July 2008), pages 4-5.

While it is true that the world and economy looks drastically different than they did in 1891, this is not reason enough to label unions as obsolete. In fact, unions must always be a part of society, as they reflect humanity's right to freely associate. Even if injustices and evils were eliminated, unions would still be necessary in order to make "positive and creative contributions" to society in an "organized and cooperative" manner (EJA 304). The argument is commonly framed by saying that class-based ideology - labor against management or worker against boss - is a thing of the past.⁷ While it might be true that discourse about such ideologies has disappeared, we still see much of the wealth and resources concentrated into the hands of a select few. For example, CEO pay in the U.S. was 344 times the average worker's wages in 2008.⁸ This example alone proves the need for union activism. The world does indeed look different today, but we still witness much of the wealth and power existing in the hands of few. As long as huge salaries are being given to corporate executives and business owners, workers will have the need to join together to form a collective voice speaking up for their rights.

While social, political, and economic matters have changed throughout history, the Church's support for unions in the social doctrine never wavers. "[N]o council, no pope, no synod, no episcopal conference, no bishop has ever rescinded or challenged these words...The Magisterium has amplified and strengthened its support...for the essential role that labor unions play in securing [worker's] rights."⁹ What has changed, however, and continues to evolve are the rights that unions fight to secure through collective bargaining. For example, *Rerum Novarum* is concerned primarily with living wages, hours of work, and

⁷ See the article by George G. Higgins, "Are Unions Obsolete?," *Commonweal*, November 3, 2000: 10.

⁸ Interfaith Worker Justice, *Why Unions Matter*, (<http://www.iwj.org/doc/WhyUnionsMatter09.pdf>, 2009), page 5.

⁹ Catholic Scholars, 'Catholic Social', page 7.

working conditions. These are still important rights, but unions need to continue adapting to new injustices that workers continue to face. In some of the most recent social encyclicals, we see themes develop such as the need for unions among migrant workers (EJA 104), farmers (EJA 249), and every profession (LE 20). Labor unions are challenged to educate and keep workers competitive and active in the changing economy (EJA 108; *Compendium* 307, LE 20). As already mentioned, Pope Benedict XVI asks for unions to explore the conflict between workers and consumers (CV 64). He asks that they address the global context of labor to explore the possibilities of national labor unions (CV 64).

Another common critique is that unions are excessively political today, so that, beyond protecting the rights of workers, they are trying to influence politics as well.¹⁰ While this may be the case, it is hard to imagine that this is unfair given the multi-million dollar industry that has been created in order to bust unions and legislate against them.¹¹ The Church teaches that unions have the duty to exercise influence in the political arena, so long as they do not “have the character of ‘political parties’ struggling for power” (*Compendium*, 307; LE 20). Unions can “identify civil society as the proper setting for their necessary activity of defending and promoting labor” (CV 64). While unions have the right to be active and present in society and politics, the Church would do well to further develop an understanding of what an appropriate relationship would be to political leaders and parties, especially given that certain parties are heavily anti-union. Regardless, unions have a “necessary activity of defending and promoting labor, especially on behalf of exploited and unrepresented workers...often ignored by...society” (CV 64).

As many capitalist pro-market arguments go, unions interfere with the natural function

¹⁰ A one-sided article from *The Heritage Foundation* states that unions planned to spend \$300 million to defeat John McCain. See *Do Americans today still need labor unions?* James Sherk. www.heritage.org . April 1, 2008.

¹¹ Interfaith, *Why*, page 6.

of the market. Capitalism “assumes a free market, equal bargaining power on both the supply and demand sides and freedom from an outcome-controlling power on either side.”¹² Our economy does not achieve this form of capitalism. There is an ‘outcome-controlling power’ that attempts to utilize workers as objects for cheaper production, especially low-skilled, uneducated workers. Unions serve not only to protect the weakest among these, but also help in equalizing the market by creating a counteracting voice to the powers in the market.¹³ While state-funded social programs may exist to ensure protection for those in need, such as minimum wage or even health care, labor unions step in to equalize the field and ensure these rights. This argument against labor unions fails to acknowledge that unions might actually reduce the state’s intervention in society by creating more equal voices in the markets and at bargaining tables. If more workers were ensured basic rights, and if more people were guaranteed work, we would have less need for social programs.

Yet how can we expect the rest of society to accept unions when our own Catholic institutions, school, and hospitals fight against them?¹⁴ One thing that hasn’t been addressed concretely in Catholic social teaching is a reaction against those Catholic institutions that are a stumbling block to the Catholic position on unions. As already mentioned, regardless of whether or not the workplace respects human dignity and operates justly, employees still have the natural law right to associate, and if not for security of worker rights, at least for the participation in and betterment of the common good.

While it is evident that no human institution will ever be perfect, this does not mean that basic institutions should cease to exist.¹⁵ While many critiques of unions may be valid,

¹² Amata Miller, "Organizing Principles: Why Unions Matter," *America Magazine*, September 1, 2008, page 12.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Catholic Scholars, “Catholic Social”, page 3.

we cannot let the ‘bad apples’ ruin it for the rest of workers. There has been poor leadership at times, there has been discrimination, corruption, and misrepresentation, but the fundamental right for workers to organize and receive just remuneration must be protected. I think there is a greater need for the authoritative Church to acknowledge the failed attempts at unionization, especially those within Catholic institutions, in hopes to put forth principles for more just and virtuous unions.

Unions are called to adapt to the signs of the time. The changes in the economy do not render unions obsolete. Regardless of how the workforce looks, humanity still has the right and necessity to organize. The first unions arose in response to working conditions and labor practices of the industrial period within factories and assembly lines. While those types of jobs don’t exist to the same extent today, other forms of unions have developed. There are unions for all fields of work. In fact, the fastest growing union in North America is a service-workers’ union called the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).¹⁶ This shows that, as markets and economies have changed, so have the unions evolved. Pope Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in Veritate*, exposes the issue of globalization and how it is affecting economies and workers. Labor unions must be creative in finding those ways that continue to place the dignity of the human being at the center of the market and labor issues, whether that calls for new kinds of unions or changes within existing unions.

Pastorally, we need to make known our Catholic social teaching heritage. This is a message to be spread to the greater world, but it must start among Catholics. If we expect society and the greater world to accept and respond to our teachings on unions, we must also expect our own faithful to have a knowledge and understanding of these teachings. There is

¹⁶ See <http://www.seiu.org/our-union/>

no good reason why Catholic social teaching should remain the Church's 'best kept secret'.¹⁷ Those Catholics who wish to join unions or support union activity must not be kept ignorant of the rich heritage of these teachings and should be able to look to their church communities for support.

I suspect that many of the opponents of unionization are indeed Catholic. As ministers we must appeal to the consciences of the faithful so that they see that unions exist as a basic human right of natural law which the Church has supported throughout recent history. Perhaps we might even implore them to consider whether or not it is sinful to oppose or try and eliminate unions.¹⁸ Perhaps more pastoral awareness and consciousness will form the consciences of Catholics so that change might begin with them, permeate into our own Catholic institutions, and then go out into the greater society and world. There is a need for a pastoral, yet prophetic voice.

Although striking a prophetic pose is important, it is not sufficient; we must also care for those in need. As people lose their jobs and unemployment numbers fluctuate, we need to reach out to those without work. Work is an essential part of being human; without it one might face despair or depression. Families without work will be faced with economic difficulties, and we must step in as ministers to empower Christian disciples to practice the virtue of charity alongside our fight for justice. The struggle for unions is to ensure the rights of all workers, but, while this struggle continues, we must not forget to care for those for whom we are working.

As our nation struggles, we should be concerned for those programs and institutions

¹⁷ George Weigel, "The Church's Social Doctrine in the Twenty-First Century," *Logos* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2003), page 24.

¹⁸ See Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, *Union Busting is a Mortal Sin*, (Massachusetts: Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, 2010).

that care for the vulnerable in our society. Is the current struggle for labor unions bringing to the surface our nation's and leader's values? I wish to conclude with an excerpt of inspiring words from an invocation that Fr. Cletus Kiley gave for the Building Trades National Legislative Conference on April 4, 2011. In it he addresses the status of the U.S. labor force, and the need to be prophetic for the rights of our workers and protection of unions. Voices like Fr. Kiley's allow me to express my pride as a Catholic, so that "as we contemplate the vast amount of work to be done, we are sustained by our faith that God is present alongside those who come together in his name to work for justice" (CV 78).

*"There was a time in this country when a man could work hard and could count for a fair day's pay; but not today. There was a time in this country when after a lifetime of hard work a man could look forward to retirement; but not today ... Somebody has changed the rules ... Something has gone terribly awry in the American house, but today we will not be silent about it. As you gave your prophets the courage to speak out, so give us the same courage ... Bless us now with courage. Bless us with righteous anger. For today we will not be quiet. Today we are one; and in your name we will act. Amen."*¹⁹

¹⁹ I personally transcribed these words from the video found at CathnewsUSA from this link: <http://www.cathnewsusa.com/2011/04/father-kiley-delivers-labors-invocation/>

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