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Unions in Catholic Social Doctrine

I am Dr. J. Brian Benestad, Professor of Theology at the University of Scranton, Scranton, PA. Throughout my career, I have published articles on Catholic social doctrine. This summer I just completed a manuscript on Catholic social doctrine for the Catholic University of America Press.

Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice have issued a fine statement titled “Catholic Social Doctrine and Worker Justice: a Call to the Common Good.” They are right to say that “there is an a priori presumption for labor unions in Catholic Doctrine” (p. 2). They rightly back up this statement by quoting the writings of Popes Leo XIII and John Paul II, and by appealing to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (cf. p. 7).

Because of Catholic teaching on unions many workers throughout the world enjoy better working conditions, wages and benefits. *Rerum novarum* created a kind of earthquake by persuading employers to treat wage earners with dignity. Today many workers suffer because for-profit companies either can't or won't pay benefits. To give an example, as a university professor, I have noticed that part-time faculty could benefit from union affiliation. The “market” allows universities to avoid paying benefits to part-time faculty altogether, and to pay a wage way below what the quality and productivity of their work deserves. In my judgment, full time faculty members receive better salaries and raises because of the income generated by the productivity of part-timers. So we full-time faculty in unions have a moral obligation to be supportive of part-time faculty.

Rerum novarum (1891)

In order to advance the discussion of Catholic social teaching on unions I would like to bring to your attention some statements about unions in the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII and John Paul II, not mentioned by Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice. *Rerum novarum*¹ says,

¹There are two different set of reference numbers to *Rerum novarum*. My numbers refer to the widely-used copy of the encyclical published by the Daughters of St. Paul. The reference numbers on the Vatican web site are different.

“Workers’ associations ought to be so constituted and so governed as to furnish the most suitable and most convenient means to attain the object proposed, which consists in this, that the individual members of the association secure, so far as possible, an increase in the goods of the body, of soul, and of prosperity (RN, 76). ... It is clear, however that moral and religious perfection ought to be regarded as their principal goal, and that their social organization as such ought above all to be directed completely by this goal” (RN, 77).

These goals, except for prosperity, are, of course, not on the radar screen of the modern union. Even unions made up of employees in Catholic institutions typically don’t have as their goal the moral and religious perfection of their members. All unions today focus on wages, benefits and working conditions and do not attempt to provide religious and moral education. Some unions also tend to endorse political candidates and support political parties.

Laborem exercens (On Human Work, 1981)

In section 20 of his encyclical Pope John Paul II discusses the importance of unions. Key statements are as follows:

“The experience of history teaches that [unions] are an indispensable *element of social life*.” Unions are “*a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice*” and “*a constructive factor of social order and solidarity*.” “Just efforts to secure the rights of workers who are united by the same profession should always take into account the limitations imposed by the general economic situation of the country. Union demands cannot be turned into a kind of *group or class ‘egoism*.” In their work unions must always keep in mind “the common good of the whole of society.”

Unions should not have “too close links” with political parties because they might lose sight of their duty “to secure the just rights of workers within the framework of the common good of the whole of society; instead they become *an instrument used for other purposes*.”

Then John Paul II expresses his hope that “thanks to the work of their unions, workers will not only *have* more, but above all *be* more: in other words, that they will realize their humanity more fully in every respect.” This statement calls to mind the oft-quoted sentence of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World): “A man is more precious for what he is than for what he has” (no. 35). Most would agree that unions in the United States, even those in Catholic institutions, do not have as a goal that their members become better people. Catholic schools, however, must have as one of their goals that their employees “be more” by growing in virtue and knowledge of their faith.

John Paul II defends the right of unions to call a strike but calls a strike an “extreme means.” “Abuse of the strike weapon can lead to the paralysis of the whole of socioeconomic life, and this is contrary to the requirements of the common good of society, which also corresponds to the properly understood nature of work itself.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)

The CCC assumes that unions will exist and will play a role in reducing conflict “by negotiation that respects the rights and duties of each social partner: those responsible for business enterprises, representative of wage-earners (for example, trade unions), and public authorities when appropriate” (no. 2430).

With respect to wages the CCC says, “Agreement between the parties is not sufficient to justify morally the amount to be received in wages” (no. 2434). The CCC quotes Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes*, no. 67 to explain its criteria for a just wage. “Remuneration for work should guarantee man the opportunity to provide a dignified livelihood for himself and his family on the material, social, cultural and spiritual level, taking into account the role and the productivity of each, the state of the business, and the common good.” Catholic schools don’t pay their teachers as much as the public schools because of the “the state of the business.” Tuition and contributions from parishes do not provide enough income to match the pay in public schools.

How can Catholic teaching on unions help Catholics today?

Catholic social doctrine would counsel the bishop of a diocese to have an a priori presumption for recognizing a teachers association as a union. He then must examine carefully the goals and *modus operandi* of the proposed union or unions in his schools, and then make a determination whether entering into collective bargaining with a particular union would contribute to the common good of Catholic schools and their employees. A bishop, without violating Catholic social doctrine, could reasonably decide that recognizing a particular union could be an obstacle to maintaining the Catholic identity, academic excellence or financial viability of the schools in his diocese. This, of course, means that the right to join a union is not an absolute right that must be honored regardless of the circumstances. As a matter of fact, just about every right is subject to various kinds of limitations for the sake of the common good. According to Catholic teaching, rights may be properly curtailed when they are not exercised in the light of the natural law or the divine law (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 41).

Whether or not a diocese enters into collective bargaining with school unions, Church teaching would require it to make every effort to insure that the dignity of workers is fully respected by providing good working conditions, the most just wage and benefits possible, and opportunities and incentives for continuing education. Furthermore, the diocese and its schools should do what is possible to provide ongoing religious and moral education for all their employees, and thus accomplish what Leo XIII had expected from all unions. Of course, diocesan leadership and school administrators should do all that they can to promote a collegial atmosphere in their schools. Collegiality is such a great good that people will be willing to work even though they could make more money elsewhere if they are happy at work and know that they can count on their colleagues in difficult times.

Although many Catholic schools are not able to pay an adequate wage, they should keep

trying to find ways to increase wages, not only to respect the dignity of their workers, but also to keep the best teachers. Everyone knows that Catholic schools don't pay as much as public schools. Unfortunately, competitive salaries would require the kind of tuition hike that would reduce the number of students in the schools. Under today's conditions, it is no surprise that Catholic schools have declining enrollments and are insufficiently funded.

As a means of achieving all the above-mentioned goals it would be helpful to keep open lines of communication between teachers and administrators, and between staff and administrators. Establishing a formal structure of communication would probably be the best approach, and would be consistent with Church teaching.

Unions are frequently an important means of achieving justice for workers, but they are not always necessary. Sometimes the usual goals of unions (just wages and benefits, and good working conditions)-- in addition to other desirable goals that uphold the dignity of workers such as religious and moral education as well as opportunities for professional advancement-- can be secured by the prudent decisions of diocesan officials, school administrators and employment councils. When this is the case, a diocese should not be reproached for not recognizing unions in its schools. The goals are more important than the means. A properly functioning diocese will always want more for its school employees than the typical union.

Catholics, of course, may disagree among themselves about a decision made by a bishop denying recognition to a particular union. When such disputes occur, they should be resolved by Catholics themselves, not by the government. Government agencies must refrain from intervening to resolve disputes about the proper interpretation of Catholic social doctrine regarding unions or other Catholic matters. The government cannot possibly decide whether a bishop is interpreting the Church's doctrine correctly or not. Furthermore, government agencies and institutions cannot determine whether a bishop is correct in determining that recognition of a particular union would jeopardize Catholic identity, academic excellence, or the financial viability of schools.