

"Bishops and the Assault on Unions"

Week of March 28, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

One of the major elements of Catholic social teaching, ever since 1891 and the publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("Of New Realities"), has been support of workers to form labor unions.

That right has been endorsed most recently by the current pope, Benedict XVI, in his own 2009 encyclical *Caritas in veritate* ("Love in truth"). In that document, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the "repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum*, for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights."

These associations or unions "must therefore be honored today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level." [#25]

However, that fundamental right of workers to bargain collectively with their employers has been under direct attack by the newly elected Republican governors in Wisconsin, Ohio, New Jersey, and various other states.

We tend to forget that because of the persistent efforts of labor unions, we can now take for granted the 8-hour work day, the 40-hour work week, weekends off, paid vacations, child labor laws, and so many other benefits to the general public, whether union members or not.

And yet our bishops are, for the most part, silent on this greatest threat to Catholic social doctrine since the 1930s. In fact, they are, for the most part, sitting on their hands.

If Msgr. George Higgins were still alive, he would be howling at the bishops' lack of concerted action.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and so many other bishops of the 1970s and 1980s would have responded strongly to the current crisis. I would include in that number the late auxiliary bishop in my own Archdiocese of Hartford, Joseph F. Donnelly, one of the pioneer labor priests who rose to head Connecticut's Board of Arbitration and Mediation for 15 years and who had the most direct hand in supporting Cesar Chavez's strike in favor of the farm workers of California. Chavez did one of the Scripture readings at Bishop Donnelly's funeral in 1977.

In his final column for the Catholic press, published on September 21, 2001, after 56 years, Msgr. Higgins quoted his mentor and the mentor of so many others in the Catholic social action movement, Msgr. John Ryan, who wrote these words in the height of the Great Depression in the early 1930s: "Effective labor unions are still by far the most powerful force for the protection of the laborer's rights and the improvement of his or her condition."

Our bishops should be pounding the table with indignation at these latest moves by Republican governors against the rights of workers to bargain collectively, as workers have been able to do since the New Deal reforms of the 1930s.

The unions have been willing to go more than half way with Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, but he has refused to negotiate. He, and other Republican governors around the country, are not interested in financial concessions to help deal with their current budget crises.

They are out to break the unions and, in the process, make it easier for supporters like the Koch brothers to operate their conglomerates with no unions to deal with nor intrusive regulations to constrict their corporate behavior. They are interested only in profits, some of which they gladly shovel to Republican candidates like Governor Walker of Wisconsin to keep the various states free of Democratic control.

Archbishop Jerome Listeki of Milwaukee, head of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, did issue a statement in support of the workers on February 16th, but he directed it to the members of the Joint Committee on Finance, not also to the Governor.

It is a tepid statement at best, which is probably why it received little notice in the national media. It does cite good words from Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, which I have quoted above, and also contains a helpful brief quote from John Paul II's 1981 encyclical, *Laborem exercens*, on the importance of labor unions as instruments of social order and solidarity, but it is not a table-pounding statement, nor a ringing call to Catholics to support the protestors who have been advocating for workers' rights.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has also not acted against the new assault on labor unions, beyond a letter of support for Archbishop Listeki's statement by Bishop Stephen Blair of Stockton, California, chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

Msgr. Higgins would not be pleased.

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"Philadelphia and the Sexual Abuse Crisis"
Week of April 4, 2011
ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

I have no desire to pile onto the Archdiocese of Philadelphia nor its Archbishop, Cardinal Justin Rigali, with whom I was friendly when we were graduate students together in Rome back in the early 1960s, during the Second Vatican Council.

The news coming out of Philadelphia is sad as well as sordid. That archdiocese is experiencing now what the Archdiocese of Boston experienced following the disclosures in the *Boston Globe* in January, 2002. Those disclosures led eventually to the early resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law, a fate that is not likely to befall Cardinal Rigali.

However, the same mistakes were made in Philadelphia that had been made in Boston. Denials all around were followed by legal proceedings that uncovered what the Archdiocese had tried its best to hide—always for the good of the priesthood and the reputation of the Church.

The Archdiocese of Boston had been besmirched by the cover-ups and the added abuse of the families of the victims. The families were warned of the harm they would cause for the priests in question, and for the damage to the good name of the Church.

That warning worked for some families, but eventually the house of cards collapsed.

I had predicted on national television and in the press in those terrible days of 2002 that the crisis was not confined to Boston, that it was national and even international in scope.

The scandal in Philadelphia (about which I'll speak in greater detail below) and the bankruptcies of various dioceses around the country (including Portland, Oregon, and Milwaukee), because of large payments to victims, underscored the national character of the crisis.

The disclosure of similar scandals in Ireland, Poland, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Australia only made the public wonder how many other countries and continents were involved. It was clear that the crisis was worldwide in scope.

Well-informed commentators and shoot-from-the-hip pundits alike had their own theories regarding the root causes of the crisis. For the former group obligatory clerical celibacy was high on the list; for the latter it was the homosexuality of the perpetrators.

I have no intention here of reviewing the arguments on each side. Those arguments have been vetted frequently over the past seven or eight years.

In June of 2002 the U.S. bishops met in Dallas, with the main item on the agenda the need to fashion a national policy to handle allegations against priests.

Some bishops felt that the Bishops' Conference was treating a delicate problem with a meat axe, but the majority perceived themselves under pressure to do something drastic and the decision was made to adopt a strict, take-no-prisoners policy on the problem of sexual abuse of minors by priests.

Any priest with a credible allegation against him was to be removed from ministry immediately.

Now back to Philadelphia. After two priests, two ex-priests, and a layman were arrested and cited by a grand jury, Cardinal Rigali insisted that no priests still serving in the Archdiocese were guilty of such transgressions.

However, the grand jury report excoriated the Archdiocese for its failures to protect the young in this most serious matter.

The previous grand jury report in 2005 dealt harshly with both Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, Cardinal Rigali's immediate predecessor as Archbishop of Philadelphia, and Msgr. William Lynn, Cardinal Bevilacqua's secretary of the Office for Clergy from 1992 to 2004 and since then a pastor in Downingtown, accusing them of an "immoral cover-up" in abuse cases generally.

The current grand jury report, which is 124 pages long, flatly stated that even under its new pastoral leadership the Archdiocese has not lived up to its promise to protect children by weeding out predatory priests, keeping as many as 41 priests in ministry "despite solid, credible allegations of abuse."

In response to this latest grand jury report, Cardinal Rigali made an unfortunate mistake in fundamental logic by making a universal negative assertion that could be rebutted by even a single case to the contrary.

Later in the very day that the grand jury report was released, Cardinal Rigali issued a letter to all 267 parishes in the Archdiocese denying the allegation that there were other abusive priests still at work in the Archdiocese.

"I assure all the faithful that there are no archdiocesan priests in ministry today who have an admitted or established allegation of sexual abuse of a minor against them."

Soon thereafter he removed twenty-one priests from their ministries over this very issue.

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