

NOTE: This is the text of the homily that was delivered by Fr. Patrick Sullivan, CSC, at the Mass that concluded a conference on “The Theology of Work and The Dignity of Workers” at St. John’s University Law School, Queens, N.Y., March 18 and 19, 2011. Fr. Sullivan is Chaplain of the Labor Guild of the Archdiocese of Boston and serves on the Steering Committee of Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice.

“The Dignity of Work”

(Mass on March 19, 2011 at St. John University)

Your Eminence, members of the Hierarchy and the Laity, fellow priests and religious. It is fitting for people dedicated to the common good to be at this University, hailing the man whom Jesus said was the greatest born of woman and who challenged the nascent economic and political complex of his day; a university who strives to honor Vincent, its founder, who walked the walk to undo the economic slavery of his day.

Today we honor a gentle carpenter Joseph, Jesus’ foster-father. For many Canadian, Italian and Polish Catholics, St. Joseph’s day is their patronal feast. However, for all who adhere to the Judaic-Christian Tradition it is a celebration of how God cuts across our human experience at key moments. Miracles of a spiritual and physical nature happen, but their interpretation of prophetic fulfillment takes us by surprise. The prophet Nathan announces to David an everlasting dynasty, which both interpreted as an offspring always to rule the Israelite people from the capital city of Jerusalem. However, when no Davidic king ruled from Jerusalem after 500 years, we and the author of Psalm 89 had serious problems of faith, “Where are your ancient favors, Oh Lord, which you pledged to David by your faithfulness”. Yet, we must respond like Abraham and Sara with faith and hope, like Joseph with tender concern and ultimate loyalty, like Mary with loving care and continuing surrender, and like all the saints with profound and continued prayer.

This assembly of advocates for the dignity of workers can do no less, regardless of a full-court press against the labor movement not just in the private sector, but also in the public sector, and regardless of the meager membership numbers in unions today. Earlier, our cause was aided by Pope Pius XII’s

challenge to Communist “May Day” rallies, during the post World War II days in Europe when Pius XII instituted the “Feast of St Joseph the Worker” and Joseph became the patron of workers world-wide.

However, despite more than ninety-years of papal encyclicals and councilor decrees, it remained for Pope John Paul II’s Laborem Exercens, one-hundred years after Leo XIII’s Rerum Novarum, to provide a distillation of all that learning and wisdom into a systematized “theology of work” for modern day agricultural and industrial, service and technical, market-place and globalized workers. The genius of Laborem Exercens, so typical of this prolific scholar-pastor, was its sometimes subtle and other times striking integration of the scholarship of his papal predecessors and counciliar colleagues, with the wide swatch of lay and clerical scholars consumed with the intricacies and challenged by the perplexities of the world of work. The implications for our faith are even greater.

John Paul II reminds us of the 19th century’s European “semaine sociale”, which imbued the later Leo XIII, while Papal Legate in Brussels, and which breathed so much of the scholarship and political genius of Immanuel Von Kettler, Bishop of the highly industrialized city of Mainz. Cognizant of the experience and wisdom of those ecclesiastics and clerics, industrialists and bankers, scholars and unionists, politicians and lawyers, Von Kettler was prepared for the pleas of Germany’s Chancellor Count Von Bismarck to offset the threats of the earliest Communists, whose leader Karl Marx, Bismarck exiled to Belgium.

It was Von Kettler who parlayed with Bismarck for relief of KulturKamp, living wages, health insurance, unemployment compensation, pensions, healthy and safe working conditions, as well as aid for children and the aged, in exchange for the Catholic Party votes to offset a possible coup in the Reichstadt by the remnant of Marx’s followers. I frequently remind some uniformed, misguided, and quite conservative business and academic acquaintances such was the beginning of modern Catholic Social Teaching. It is not “warmed-over socialism” or “watered-down Communism”. Indeed, Leo proclaimed Von Kettler and Cardinal Gibbons as his teachers!

At a time very much like today, Gibbons defended the right of workers to organize under the banner of the Knights of Labor, the fore-runner of today’s AFL-CIO and extolled Catholic teachings, expanded in the U.S. Bishops’ 1919 Statement. Through the writings and meetings of Catholic University’s Msgr. John A. Ryan and Msgr. Francis Haas at least eleven of its proposals eventually found their way into F.D.R.’s New Deal social legislation, in effect establishing the

Catholic Church as a lobbyist for workers and the poor. Through the NCWC's Social Action Department of Ryan and McGowan, Hayes and Higgins more than three hundred Labor Schools and more than four hundred "labor priests" in dioceses and campuses taught and fostered that Catholic social teaching we celebrate at this Assembly. From Washington and Chicago, New York and Boston, Baltimore and Buffalo, Hartford and Rochester, Seattle and Portland, San Francisco and Los Angeles, San Antonio and New Orleans and Detroit worker rights, the necessity for labor unions, collective bargaining blessings and eventual federal and state protection were taught and heralded.

The labor priests have passed-on and Communist threats have passed-over. However, the urgency of Catholic social teaching is more pressing than ever, as workers' needs and protections are ignored and denied. As serious as is the decline in the labor movement everywhere, most serious are attempts to parody workers' dignity and rights, freedom and security in right to work-laws, quality work circles, 401-Ks, company unions, endless legal appeals, as well as blaming deficits on collective bargaining and legislating the outright suppression of unions. This is the daunting challenge not only for all assembled here, but - in concert all episcopal and clerical, lay and religious educators, as well as business, judicial, legal and political leaders – a most pressing part of the "seamless robe" of Catholic social teaching. Furthermore, recent news that the American Economic Association is finally facing up to the need for an ethical framework reminded me of the words of NCWC's Sulpician Fr. John Cronin, to the former Association for Social Economics after World War II. "We should not disdain the argument that good human and labor relations are profitable to business. [In] the area of social policy we can well use available research to build up even more convincing arguments for the social position of the Popes!" Would that more business and political leaders had heeded the works of the author of the first Catholic text on economics!"

Your Eminence, Cardinal Egan, we are honored as you preside at this liturgy in honor of St. Joseph. Mindful of the challenge and courage in earlier days of Mundelein and Sheil, Hillenbrand and Higgins of your native Chicago, we admit and accept the need for the faith and courage, integrity and dedication of St. Joseph to be as devoted to God's call, as was Joseph's spouse, the Mother of the Church, and Joseph's son, whose love and resolve are again and again celebrated and communicated in this and every Eucharist.