



CLN vice president Adrienne Alexander from AFSCME 31 (the union involved in the Janus case).

Defending the Rights of Workers

—Catholic Labor Network (CLN)

BY BETH GRIFFIN

The Catholic Church has a rich tradition of defending the rights of workers. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, his groundbreaking encyclical on the rights and duties of capital and labor—the foundational text of modern Catholic social teaching. *Rerum Novarum* describes the relationships and mutual responsibilities between employers and employees and supports laborers’ right to form unions.

“
As a Church, we have something to say. We’ve been talking about the world of workers for 125 years. Their work is not a commodity.
”

There is a great deal of overlap between union life and what we believe as Catholics,” says Clayton Sinyai, executive director of the Catholic Labor Network (CLN). “Both groups support workers’ rights, organizing, a living wage, and the protection of immigrants.”

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) gave CLN a Strategic National Grant to promote the cause of workers and Catholic social teaching throughout labor unions, parishes, and other organizations.

CCHD established the Strategic National Grant program as a response to timely opportunities relevant to the priorities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The program focuses on strategies to fight the root causes of

poverty and reflects the CCHD foundations of Catholic social teaching, including participation and nonpartisanship.

Clayton says the relationship between the Church and workers was particularly strong during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when both institutions were most influential. He explains that the National Catholic Welfare Council, a forerunner of the USCCB, urged Catholics to support legislation that established the right to organize, a minimum wage, and the Social Security Administration. In addition, the Church developed a network of labor schools that offered night classes in Catholic social teaching and labor leadership.

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WHAT IS CCHD?

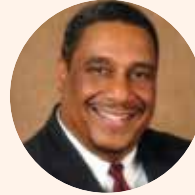


Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of

CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

LETTER FROM



THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends:

When I was growing up, a natural connection existed between the labor movement and the Church. Many adults from my parish worked hard at solid union jobs and were able to provide a nice life for their families.

Before I became steeped in Catholic social teaching, I learned by example that the Church supports and values workers, stands up for their right to organize, and speaks in favor of honest pay for honest work. And Hollywood caught on, too, giving us burly labor priests who stood shoulder to shoulder with stevedores and other union men.

Over the years, labor and the Church drifted apart. We began to approach the same issues from different perspectives. Of course, the connection was never completely broken, thanks to courageous men and women who put Catholic social teaching into action. But we have now rediscovered how much we have in common.

The Catholic Labor Network (CLN), profiled in this issue of *Helping People Help Themselves*, started about 25 years ago as an informal group committed to keeping lines of communication open between Church and union leaders after a labor standoff in Illinois. The founders were visionary priests, deacons, religious, and laity, as well as impassioned activists. Through CLN, a new generation of priests and other Church leaders now study our rich 125-year tradition of social teaching so they can help workers, employers, and advocates navigate contemporary challenges to practice our teachings.

Today, low-wage workers are exploited in new and familiar ways, and immigrant workers have a particularly tough

experience. Pastors and parishioners want to act but often do not know what course is most effective.

With robust support from bishops across the country, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development awarded CLN a special grant to expand its life-affirming work. The Strategic National Grant will help CLN extend its outreach to identify young workers to attend labor apprentice programs, encourage communities to support these trainees, advocate for living-wage jobs in municipal construction programs, and help more people to appreciate the fundamental rights and responsibilities of workers and employers.

This is not a new message. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, his groundbreaking encyclical on the rights and duties of capital and labor. Since then, every pope has spoken eloquently in support of workers. Like so many aspects of our faith, Catholic social teaching is well formed and consistent!

We are proud to support CLN as it introduces our Catholic social tradition to a widening circle of people.

Thank you, as always, for your interest and enthusiasm.



RALPH McCLOUD, Director
Catholic Campaign for Human Development



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*More than 40 million
Americans live in poverty.*

TOP TO BOTTOM

The Carpenters Union is working with Catholic Charities through the Cornerstone Project to place returning citizens in family-supporting construction careers. The union has also agreed to provide an announcement to be shared with all New Orleans parishes when they next invite applications for apprentices, in summer 2019. Pictured: Clayton Sinyai with Rayford Calamari and Jerry Repka from the Carpenters' Training Center.

Rosa Ponce, an organizer with the Painters Union in Nashville, is working to fight wage theft.

At Catholic Social Ministry Gathering (CSMG) 2019, Catholic Labor Network executive director Clayton Sinyai visits staff from Virginia senator Mark Warner's office. One of the main topics was an extension of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for immigrants displaced from their homes by violence, war, or natural disaster; many union members hold TPS authorization.



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"In the 1950s," Clayton says, "more than one in three workers belonged to a union, and perhaps two-thirds of Catholics attended Mass at least weekly—meaning a lot of people who were in their union hall for a meeting on Tuesday were in the pews on Sunday."

"It made for a lot of overlap. Any parish priest could have had a shop steward on his parish council, and he was familiar with what unions did," Clayton says.

Priests who promoted the dignity of work, preached about the Church's social teaching, and helped workers win their rights became known as "labor priests." Among the most storied were Msgr. George Higgins, Msgr. Jack Egan, Fr. Ed Boyle, SJ, and Msgr. John Hayes—not to mention the fictional Fr. Barry in the 1954 movie *On the Waterfront*, based on the real-life labor priest Fr. John M. "Pete" Corridan, SJ.

Sadly, these close ties between labor and the Church frayed in the 1960s and 1970s during the Vietnam War. The popular

perception held that the unions supported the war, whereas the Church focused more on social justice and peace. Although informal relationships continued to exist, the Church was not so visibly a partner with labor unions by the 1980s, compared with earlier decades.

Fr. Cleto Kiley, a CLN board member from the Archdiocese of Chicago, recalls, "There were always some priests in Chicago who followed worker issues." Nonetheless, he was still surprised when his mentor, Msgr. Jack Egan, drew him into labor organizing with food service workers at Chicago O'Hare International Airport.

Fr. Cleto subsequently worked for UNITE HERE, the hotel workers' union. He also served on the board of Interfaith Worker Justice in Chicago and facilitated a grant from the AFL-CIO that brought together clergy and workers in different cities to discuss and act on shared concerns. Later, he served as executive director for priestly life and ministry at the USCCB and helped develop contacts between clergy and the devolving trades. Today,

he serves as chaplain for the Chicago Federation of Labor and as vice president for immigration and civil rights for UNITE HERE International Union.

"At one point, I overheard someone ask, 'Where are the labor priests?' and the quick response was, 'They're all dead now!' I took that as a challenge," he says.

At meetings of the National Federation of Priest Councils, Fr. Cleto invited priests to sessions to discuss Catholic social teaching and how they might apply it to situations among their parishioners.

"When workers are in the midst of a situation, they need to hear a lot more from us than, 'Thanks for sharing. I'm sorry for your troubles,'" he says. "As a Church, we have something to say. We've been talking about the world of workers for 125 years. Their work is not a commodity."

He says priests want to know how to help, but they "haven't been trained or sensitized to look at workers in the pews and ask, 'What happens to you when you go to work?'"

"The plight of immigrant workers,

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especially the undocumented, is like something from the 1700s,” Fr. Clete says. Worker exploitation and wage theft are rampant, he adds.

Fr. Clete’s training meetings have developed a new generation of labor priests, and the program is now part of CLN. “These are folks who are active and informed and willing to work with us in different dioceses,” Clayton says.

“This is not a separate ministry,” Fr. Clete agrees. “It’s integral pastoral care of the people right in the pews. We have a rich tradition, and out of it comes the ability to organize and make changes in situations.”

Fr. Clete also partnered with the AFL-CIO to train union members in Catholic social issues and workers’ rights. An example of cooperation between priests and labor is matching young people with union apprenticeship programs that lead to well-paying jobs.

“Dialogue is important,” Fr. Clete says. “We work with the building trades to identify the training programs. Pastors help recruit candidates and then help with in-community support so the trainees can be successful. Sometimes childcare or transportation is the issue.”

Msgr. Higgins was Fr. Sinclair’s mentor in Catholic social teaching while the young priest was studying canon law at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Fr. Sinclair recalls, “By then, the labor priest movement had been shrunken to Msgr. Higgins. He was the go-to man for the Church.”

Fr. Sinclair describes the roots of CLN in the convergence of two dozen priests, deacons, religious, and laity in Decatur, Illinois, in 1996. Two strikes and a labor lockout at three facilities had created a “war on the workers,” he recalls. Msgr. Egan, Msgr. Higgins, Fr. Boyle, and other labor-active Catholics met to talk, pray, and reconnect with the labor movement. “Everyone realized they had to go back and reestablish ties and promote social justice issues like collective bargaining, fair wages, and worker conditions,” Fr. Sinclair says.

Clayton, from CLN, is also a longtime union member. He started as an extruder operator at a rubber factory whose workers made an unsuccessful attempt to unionize. He was the volunteer leader of CLN until the organization’s board asked him to

FR. CLETE KILEY RECALLS A CONVERSATION WITH A PASTOR FROM A SMALL TOWN.

“[The pastor] didn’t know what to do because his congregation included business owners and the people who worked for them. He asked me which side he should take. Take the side of the Catholic social teaching!”

He explains, “There’s a will in the labor movement, and the CCHD [Strategic National] Grant to CLN will help move people out of the cycle of poverty into training programs. Good things are emerging.”

Fr. Sinclair Oubre in the Diocese of Beaumont, Texas, is himself a third-generation union member. His father and grandfather were carpenters, and he was and is a merchant sailor. He is CLN’s spiritual moderator.

become the first executive director in 2019.

“Labor unions and the Church have more in common than people realize,” Clayton says. “My job is to connect the two when there is an opportunity to work together for added value.”

CLN is working in New Orleans to help Catholic workers describe their needs to fellow parishioners and their pastors, using the language of social teaching.



Julia de la Cruz of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) addresses participants at a CLN workshop at CSMG 2019. The CIW is fighting to improve wages and working conditions for farmworkers.

In Nashville, it is preparing to recruit community members for construction apprenticeships and working with a local community to create living-wage job opportunities at a planned soccer stadium. It has partnered with Catholic Charities USA to promote local job training and placement efforts.

Fr. Sinclair says Catholic social teaching challenges people to work with and for others in a contemporary world where the highest value is radical individualism. He points out a parallel between faith communities and unions, in that leaders of both groups sacrifice personal gain to build something good for everyone.

With help from CCHD, CLN is reestablishing the clear connection between workers and the Church. ✚