

Labor Day Statement

An American Catholic Tradition

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The late Msgr. George G. Higgins was a remarkable priest whose primary work for many years was connecting the Church and the labor movement around Catholic teaching on worker rights. One of his many contributions was to offer an annual Labor Day statement on issues of work and economic justice. This American Catholic tradition has been continued by the bishop chairman of the Conference committee that works on economic issues. As the new Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I take up this task with some trepidation but with a desire to begin by paying homage to my friend of many years, Msgr. George Higgins.

Msgr. Higgins was a powerful bridge between the Catholic Church and the labor movement. He was a realist, but a hopeful one. Monsignor was irascible and rather confident in his opinions as well as in his convictions of what needed to be done. To his very core, he believed that workers were best served by joining together with other workers in a union. I suspect he would have had some trenchant comments about the situation of workers and wages, working conditions, and the changing face of work in a globalized marketplace. While he would have waxed eloquent about the "big picture," his goal would never stray from an extraordinary ability to measure the large economic issues by their impact on the average working man and woman.

Monsignor would have been harsh in his judgment about the greed and irresponsibility that led to the mortgage foreclosure crisis. He would have had some caustic comments on the price of gas for the working person and its impact on family life. He would have kept a keen eye on the cost of living and its effect on family budgets, on the real value of current wages to buy necessities, and on the challenges to our economy to diversify without losing sight of its traditional strengths and opportunities. Monsignor would have pointed out the lack of union representation in so many of the emerging industries and workplaces where exploitation has been most evident. He would have applauded any and every new initiative that brings labor leadership, management, and related interested parties together as "intermediate institutions" in our society that would be based on mutual respect. He would recognize that such respect furthers the good of the worker, the enterprises involved, and the common good.

Above all Msgr. Higgins would be concerned about the worker, the person, and the family whose daily lives are affected by a host of factors. He would weigh up and measure all those factors by their overall impact on human beings. And then he would have offered a couple of basic suggestions that would move beyond hand wringing and negative assessments. Monsignor would re-assert his faith in a nation and a people whose creative energies and productive capacities should and would move us to a healthier economic situation. He would urge us to remember that in a world of globalized activities, Catholic Social Teaching still offers one of the best ways to assess whether the human person is the center of economic life or whether workers who are poor and marginalized are forgotten.

A Nation Blessed

We are a nation blessed with extraordinary natural and human resources. We have great economic capacity and creativity. We have extraordinary economic power and responsibility. And, we are free! We all know we face challenges. But when did our nation not have challenges? Where does it say that we should simply be recipients of the goods of this earth without working for them, without earning them? Creativity and initiative are as much essential elements of our lives today as they have been in the past. This freedom of creative initiative and energy needs to be tempered by a deep sense of responsibility for one another, for our planet, and for the future. The more we exercise self control in our possession and use of the goods of this earth, sharing with others opportunities as well as products, the less need we will have for the kinds of regulatory laws that become necessary when economic privateers and profit seeking pirates take over whole areas of our economy.

We are a nation committed to both economic freedom and economic justice. But that cannot mean freedom for me and justice for me alone. The classic linking of the human person with the common good teaches us that we have to use our freedom and creativity not just for ourselves and those we care for. It must extend to all those who are affected by our actions and by society's goals. That means everybody in today's globalized world.

A Globalized World

All these challenges and questions are framed in a new light with new dimensions in this age of globalization. The world of work is different than in years past. Finance, production, trade, and labor are no longer local, regional, or national entities, but global. Of itself globalization is a neutral fact. It depends on who takes advantage of the current global economy and how it is put to use. Our present Holy Father Benedict XVI has suggested that this process offers "the hope of wider participation in development" but warns against its risks of "worsening economic inequality." (May 26, 2007). Here, two interrelated principles of Catholic Social Teaching come into play. The principle of subsidiarity champions the freedom of initiative that allows everyone scope and opportunity to be creative and productive and reap the benefits of hard work and energy. When taken to the extreme, it can become exploitive of others. Yet joined to the principle of solidarity, subsidiarity and all its creative impulses become harnessed to an end that includes the makers of a vibrant economy. This links their work into a set of relationships bringing new opportunities to one another across political and social divisions and especially across the great divide between rich and poor. Let interdependence become the "solidarity" of neighbor to neighbor in such a way that the subsidiarity of free creativity builds up and offers new possibilities for all neighbors, especially the poor and the vulnerable. The Church continues to echo the call of Pope John Paul II to "globalize solidarity."

Catholic Social Teaching

The tradition of Catholic Social Teaching has much to offer in these tough economic times. In the midst of the transformation of society during the Industrial Revolution, Pope Leo XIII gave us enduring principles to deal with "new things" in his prophetic encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have made the cause of justice for workers their own, responding to the "new things" in economic life. When Pope John Paul II issued his first "social encyclical," *Laborem Exercens*, in 1981, he invited us to look at these issues from the perennial viewpoint of the value of human work which finds its intrinsic meaning in the dignity of the worker.

Msgr. Higgins applauded this teaching of the Holy Father. He saw it as a papal clarion call for all the issues he championed in his own life. He was right because they are all the values

stemming from the truth about the inherent dignity and value of the human person that lies at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church continues to focus on the dignity of the worker as the key to the question of work and as the cornerstone of Catholic teaching on economic life. Our challenge is to assess our “new things” by the application of traditional moral principles expressed in Catholic Social Teaching that continue to have remarkable meaning and relevance to us as we celebrate Labor Day 2008.

Labor Day and Politics

This year, we will choose a new president, as well as one-third of the Senate, all the members of the House of Representatives, and myriad state and local officials. The campaign has already been long and, for many, arduous. What can I as a bishop add to this without echoing what has been said better by others? Msgr. Higgins would urge you to look beyond the slogans and the promises. He would ask you to assess the candidates' backgrounds and records. He would have a few choice words for those he deemed unworthy or neglectful of the rights of workers and the role of unions. But he would always insist on some basic principles that we all must follow.

The Bishops of the United States have put forth for Catholics and non-Catholics alike some basic principles to consider. In publishing the new and, I believe, challenging statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, we bishops call Catholics to be active and informed participants in political life. We do not seek to impose or imply a preference for one candidate over another. We do propose what is incumbent on all men and women of good will: the formation of a correct conscience based on the truth about the human person and human society. We cannot emphasize this enough. An informed conscience moves beyond personal feelings and individual popularity. An informed conscience asks first what is right and true. An informed conscience examines the candidates and the issues from the perspective of human life and dignity, the true good of every human person, the true good of society, the common good of us all in our nation and in this world.

What can I add to that? Never forget that human life is the supreme good in this world. Never forget that human dignity is not an expendable commodity but belongs to everyone without exception. Every day we are pro-life. Every day we are champions of human dignity. Our voices and our votes should shape society by bringing these inalienable truths into every particular proposal and program, every particular candidate's projects and plans. The Bishops' statement makes both links and distinctions between the fundamental duty to oppose what is intrinsically evil (i.e., the destruction of unborn life) and the obligation to pursue the common good (i.e., defending the rights of workers and pursuing greater economic justice). I urge you to review and reflect on this challenging call to be salt, light, and leaven in this election year and beyond (see www.faithfulcitizenship.org).

A Catholic Framework

We Catholics have been blessed by a centennial of Catholic Social Teaching. I personally have been privileged to work with three Popes in this field and have been formed by their vision and their teaching. The Church offers this, not just to Catholics, but to all men and women of good will. We are convinced that the truths about the human person in society that come to us from both reason and revelation must be brought into all the economic, social, civil, political, and cultural relationships that make up a good society. The human and moral dimensions of economic life are key principles in Catholic thought. Catholic social and moral teaching on these matters offers hope and direction in difficult times. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* provides us with a summary and synthesis of the Church's teaching on economic life as well as

other aspects of the Catholic social tradition. [See Chapter VI “Human Work” and Chapter VII “Economic Life,” Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2004)] I recommend it to you.

The bishops of the United States reflect this teaching as they outline key elements of a just economy in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. These basics need to be part of the national discussion as we choose leaders and develop policies for the future:

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. Employers contribute to the common good through the services or products they provide and by creating jobs that uphold the dignity and rights of workers—to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to adequate benefits and security in their old age, to the choice of whether to organize and join unions, to the opportunity for legal status for immigrant workers, to private property, and to economic initiative. Workers also have responsibilities—to provide a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay, to treat employers and co-workers with respect, and to carry out their work in ways that contribute to the common good. Workers, employers, and unions should not only advance their own interests, but also work together to advance economic justice and the well-being of all. (#52)

Overcoming Poverty

Poverty has many faces. And they are the faces of our brothers and sisters here in our own country and around the world. Whether I am in remote corners of Africa or the streets of Lawrence, Massachusetts, I am convinced that when we face up to the needs of these our brothers and sisters, the challenge of overcoming poverty brings the Catholic community together. The Catholic Church is committed to making her contribution to alleviating the pain of poverty at every level: internationally, nationally, and especially locally through the magnificent endeavors of priests, religious, and laity in our parishes. Things may be tough for an awful lot of us today. But no matter how difficult it might be for you or me, I believe each of us can name someone we know who is carrying a greater burden. I can hear Msgr. Higgins telling us “Don’t forget the other guy,” especially the person with less. That person has hopes and dreams, too. That person comes from a family and belongs to our human family. That person has dignity because all of us are created in the image of God.

Let me close by sharing with you some thoughts from Pope Benedict’s powerful encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*:

Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.... Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. (# 15, 22)

To one and all, I wish you a most happy and relaxing Labor Day with family and friends. I hope this Labor Day will bring a renewed vigor as we seek to build together a society that cares for its own, reaches out to the poor and vulnerable, and offers true hope to all. Let us share justly and freely the goods of society and advance the good of every person and the common good of all.