

Initiatives

In Support of Christians in the World

National Center for the Laity
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Taking the Initiative

In Medical and Business Ethics

A group of doctors, some of whom are researchers and teachers, challenge all medical committees to adopt a *zero dollar* policy toward pharmaceutical and medical equipment companies. This means no souvenir pens or tote bags at conferences. More importantly, explains Steven Nissen (Cleveland Clinic, 9500 Euclid Ave. #J23, Cleveland, OH 44195), it means that a committee writing practice guidelines have no financial influence from industry. A corporate sponsor could have a booth at a conference and could buy a journal ad, but no money to a committee or its members. (*JAMA* [4/1/09], PO Box 10946, Chicago, IL 60654 & *N.Y. Times*, 4/2/09)

On another matter the new administration through the Department of Health and Human Services (200 Independence Ave. SW #716G, Washington, DC 20201; www.hhs.gov) is reviewing the *Bush Conscience Clause*, some language that addresses those health care workers who object to specific procedures or medications.

Democrats for Life (601 Pennsylvania Ave. #900S, Washington, DC 20004; www.democratsforlife.org) and other groups advise caution in tampering with the *Clause* because it raises awareness about rights and responsibilities and, says DFL in an April memo, it protects against coercion in institutions receiving Federal funds. The Catholic Health Association (4455 Woodson Rd., St. Louis, MO 63134; www.chausa.org) sent a letter to DHHS emphasizing that any review of the *Clause* should not weaken current laws.

In an April 2009 wide-ranging *Progress Report* DHHS says: Health care “providers will continue to be protected—as they have been for years—by the existing conscience clause statutes that will remain in place.” The existing laws include the Church amendments, section #245 of the Public Health Service Act and the Weldon amendments. DHHS welcomes more comments. (*National Catholic Reporter* [3/20/09], 115 E. Armour Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64111 and

America [6/15/09], 106 W. 56th St., New York, NY 10019 and *Sign of Peace* [Spring/09], PO Box 4232, South Bend, IN 46634, for first-person essays on the topic)

In its comments the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (3211 Fourth St., Washington, DC 20017; www.usccb.org/conscienceprotection) is interestingly surfacing the concept of *selective conscientious objection*. How well, INITIATIVES wonders, is the whole church explaining this principle to all workers, including those in the armed services or in the entertainment industry?

In a third initiative, students at Harvard Business School (Soldiers Field, Boston, MA 02163; <http://huhs.harvard.edu>) introduced “The MBA Oath” at graduation. The voluntary pledge says that the goal of business is to “serve the greater good” and that Harvard grads will act ethically and not put “their own narrow ambitions” ahead of others. Some students at Columbia, inspired by their Center for Leadership and Ethics (3022 Broadway, New York, NY 10027; www.gsb.columbia.edu), are thinking similarly. The Zicklin Center for Business Ethics (University of Pennsylvania, 3730 Walnut St. #Huntsman 668, Philadelphia, PA 19104; www.zicklincenter.org) sponsors student clubs dealing with the same topic. (*N.Y. Times*, 5/30/09)

Several posts on the Internet react cynically to the Harvard pledge: “Yeah, right;” it is merely a marketing tool; it is “awfully silly;” only a small number of students participate. Admittedly, the students devised a symbolic gesture. But INITIATIVES, drawing upon 2,000 years of Catholicism which influences people and society largely with gestures and symbols, pays attention whenever students imagine a different world of work.

Taking the Initiative

With Textbooks

Students have launched a website (www.toxictextbooks.com) and a Facebook group, Toxic Textbooks, to criticize the books used in college economics classes. The current

economic crisis, say the students, is largely the result of “false beliefs regarding the nature of economic reality.” Nearly all textbooks present concepts like *rational economic agency*, *market efficiency* and *invisible hand* as objective science, whereas those concepts and more assume an ideology. The students are looking for alternative suggestions on their Facebook.

Bob Senser, editor of *Human Rights for Workers* (www.humanrightsforworkers.blogspot.com), mentions that the topic of globalization is overwhelming. Yet college students made a difference in finding a local angle around the issue of sweatshops and apparel sold in college stores. Perhaps, says Senser, this concern about textbooks will similarly lead to practical reform.

Taking the Initiative *Toward Corporate Reform*

Citizen and shareholder confidence in corporate boards is low. Thus the Securities and Exchange Commission (100 F St. NE, Washington, DC 20549; www.sec.gov) proposes an easier process for reform candidates to win board seats. Anyone who holds a 1% share for at least one year could get on the official ballot. The reform process would remain open until 25% of the directors are elected in this manner. Under current procedures new candidates are usually handpicked and companies do not allow more candidates than open positions. The SEC seeks public comment.

Some say the proposal is an appeasement; that it is not enough for effective reform. But the Investor Responsibility Research Center (1 Chase Manhattan Pl., New York, NY 10005; www.ircinstitute.org), in a study of companies where active shareholders won board seats, finds that stocks improve and outperform similar companies by about 20%—both short term and after three years from the election. Interesting, IRRC finds that a gradual approach—adding one reform board member at a time—is better for a company than when three or more reformers crash the boardroom. (*N.Y. Times*, 5/24/09 & *N.Y. Times Magazine*, 6/7/09)

Bringing executive pay into line with an executive’s worth is another challenge. There is hope that the recent bailouts will give taxpayers some influence on executive pay. But there are many complications, including different stipulations if the bailout was approved under President George Bush or under President

Barack Obama. Additionally, Congress has various opinions. For example, a subsidized company might be liable for a penalty if it pays an executive too much, but only if government bought its assets in an auction, not purchased them directly. A promising new tax provision limits a company’s deduction for executive pay to \$500,000. Obama wants Kenneth Feinberg (U.S. Treasury Department, 1500 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20220; www.ustreas.gov), the new “comp czar,” to develop and enforce regulations on executive pay. (*Washington Post Weekly*, 1/4/09 & *N.Y. Times*, 6/8 & 6/11/09)

Taking the Initiative *Against Poverty*

Why is it that so many millions of blacks in Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and other U.S. cities are mired in poverty? The overall reason, according to William Julius Wilson, Harvard’s distinguished professor of sociology, lies in the economic and technological transformations of the past three or four decades: their positive effects failed to benefit most inner-city blacks while some of the negative effects have eroded community life. In his new book, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (W.W. Norton [2009], 500 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10110; 24.95), Wilson details how this tragic outcome came to be.

Wilson carefully tracks how economic and technological transformations produced radical changes (aka globalization) that led to two unintended consequences: a greatly increased demand for more workers at the two poles of the labor market and an increased geographic concentration of black poverty.

The increased demand for workers should be a boon to those at the bottom of the pay and skill scale, including inner-city blacks, most of whom (partly as a legacy of historic racial subjugation, partly as a result of continuing discrimination) rank low in education and job skills. However, the urban manufacturing industries that once provided equal job opportunities in the millions (think steel and auto) have largely moved abroad, thanks to U.S. free trade and investment policies and the attraction of low wages and weak labor protection overseas. Meanwhile, at the top end of the expanded labor market, thanks to a decline in racial discrimination, many better-educated blacks are able to land good-paying jobs as

managers, professionals, and technologists. These jobs, at least until recently, were stable enough for the beneficiary black families to join the general exodus out of cities. The urban black poor who were left behind thereby lived more concentrated in poor communities, and more isolated. For the army of unemployed and underemployed black men, this is a double whammy. Women can apply for jobs in service industries, which can't escape to other countries.

"The economic predicament of low-skilled black men in the inner city," Wilson writes, "has reached catastrophic proportions." But for blacks and the rest of society, that's not the only predicament. Another one, perhaps the most serious of several, is "the fragmentation of the poor black family," as one of Wilson's five chapters is titled. Why are so many black families headed by a single mother (45% in 2006)? Wilson puts part of the blame on the father's inability to care financially for the children, and part on the influence of lax attitudes toward sex and marriage in society. The answer, according to Wilson, awaits further research within a framework that studies all of the causes, both "structural" (institutional) and "cultural" (the ideas and behaviors of individuals and groups).

Wilson used to believe that a color-blind approach was the way to rally widespread support to help the poor, blacks included. He has changed his mind. In this book, he argues persuasively that the race-neutral approach does not convey the grim realities about the special plight of the black poor--particularly the low-skilled black men in the inner city--and the special quandaries confronting all other citizens. Because of its fresh look at the causes and effects of black poverty, *More Than Just Race* will be enlightening even (perhaps especially) to people who consider themselves already well informed on racial issues.

Taking the Initiative *Against Predators*

Msgr. Jack Egan (1916-2001), a Vatican II forerunner and a champion of the poor, was well known to most readers of INITIATIVES. Late in life he launched a campaign against payday loan agencies. It seemed quixotic then. But in the wake of our economic collapse, as Tom Geoghegan writes, Egan now looks prophetic. (*Harper's* [4/09], 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012)

Actually, Egan was against payday loans and other predators as early as 1966, when he was appointed pastor of Presentation Parish on Chicago's Westside—in fact, Egan was on the case years before that. Beryl Satter in *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (Metropolitan Books [2009], 175 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010; \$30) details Egan's Contract Buyer's League and the pioneering legal efforts of her father, Mark Satter.

Until 1967 if not thereafter the Federal Housing Administration "refused to insure mortgages" in so-called *poor neighborhoods*, Satter begins. That and similar policies insidiously drained the wealth from those neighborhoods. The alternative to a standard mortgage in Satter's Chicago case study was a home bought "on contract." That is, a family paid the seller in monthly installments—up to the inflated purchase price, plus a high interest, plus recurring fees. If a family missed a payment, the seller could repossess the home. After the eviction the house was sold again in the same way at an even higher price. A so-called *slum* was rather profitable for a handful of real estate speculators. The injustice, Satter details, was not isolated and it involved the tacit approval of many power brokers.

In early 1968 Egan, a team of seminarians and 24 families launched the Contract Buyer's League to pressure the speculators into renegotiating terms. The effort spread and led to some redress. Along the way CBL drew the courts, the state legislature, Federal agencies, the press and several civic groups into their struggle. Most significantly CBL became a formative moment for several seminarians, other students, some young lawyers and community leaders.

Even for those uninterested in urban issues, Satter's book is nourishing because it is a fearless moral tale, including surprises about her own family members and nearly every other protagonist. And even though the case study is over 40-years old, it is timely. The poor today, Satter concludes, "pay considerably more" for life's basics because they lack access to reasonable and honest credit terms. The scheme is no longer confined to one or another urban neighborhood. Usurious payday loan outfits, credit card companies, loan modification scams and storefront mortgage speculators continue to prey upon working families, even after causing our economy to collapse.

Unlike the standard rendering of the

civil rights story in the South, says Thomas Sugrue in *Sweet Land of Liberty: the Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (Random House [2008], 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; \$35), the struggle for justice in the North “is full of paradoxes and ambiguities, of unfinished battles and devastating defeats.” Nonetheless, lessons from the North are likely more pertinent today. Satter makes a major contribution with *Family Properties*.

Taking the Initiative

In the Liturgy

“More often than not we stand condemned by what our liturgies fail to do rather than by what they accomplish,” charges Rodica Stoicoiu of Mt. St. Mary’s University. She is not referring to a failure in meeting the budget during the collection at Mass or a failure to stop people from leaving Mass early; although those shortfalls and others might be symptoms of her point.

“The Sunday celebration,” Stoicoiu writes, is supposed to connect with “justice in the world.” It seemingly does not, in many cases.

It is a difficult connection, Stoicoiu admits, because U.S. culture has lost symbolic language, a sense of ritual or rhythm, an appreciation for silence and a notion of communion or solidarity. The liturgy, by contrast, prizes these things. Additionally, many worshippers (even all these years since Vatican II) carry the U.S. emphasis on individuality into Mass, treating it as a time for individual encounter with God. Whereas, says Stoicoiu, “the Eucharist is the most public, radically social act we do as church.” This includes even the silences during Mass, which are “communal and active, not private or isolated.” (*The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching* edited by David Matzko McCarthy, Baker Group [2009], PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516; \$24.99)

INITIATIVES keeps current on essays like Stoicoiu’s and on conferences about liturgy and justice, including one in April at the Liturgical Institute (1000 E. Maple Ave., Mundelein, IL 60060; www.liturgicalinstitute.org). Usually missing, however, is any mention of an impediment for some Catholics (and others) in making the connection between liturgy and justice: gender exclusion among presiders at Mass. There might be a sound reason for the policy. If so, those who

write and talk about the topic should at least mention the explanation.

Taking the Initiative

For Family Life

Rep. Lincoln Davis (1804 Carmack Blvd. #A, Columbia, TN 38401; www.house.gov/lincolndavis) and Senator Robert Casey (22 S. Third St. #68, Harrisburg, PA 17101; <http://casey.senate.gov>) have introduced the Pregnant Women Support Act into Congress. Democrats for Life (601 Pennsylvania Ave. #900S, Washington, DC 20004; www.democratsforlife.org) designed the bill. There are cosponsors in the House, but little support so far in the Senate.

The bill has several provisions to help mothers deliver and support their baby. For example, insurance companies would be prohibited from considering pregnancy a “pre-existing condition.” A federal hot line would direct mothers to health and social services. Education grants would be available for teenage mothers. Clinics could receive ultrasound equipment. (*Our Sunday Visitor* [5/24/09], 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, IN 46750)

Some pro-life leaders do not share the goal of incrementally reducing the number of abortions. Others realize that effective morality necessitates compromise. Democrats for Life supports this bill as part of a campaign to reduce abortions by 95% over the next ten years.

The Great Workbench

Alain de Botton writes ten meditations on work, each specific to an industry, including transmission engineering, aviation and shipping. His book, *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (Pantheon Books [2009], 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; \$26), is supplemented with over 100 photos of workplaces.

Commercial shipping attracts no “attention from anyone beyond its immediate participants,” says de Botton of the School of Life (70 Marchmont St., London, England MC1N 1AB). “Given the trials she has undergone, [a ship entering port] might have expected to be met by a minor dignitary.” But instead a foreman on dock hands over some forms and the crew quickly fades to the background. No one asks them “what dawn looked like over the Malacca Straits or whether there were porpoises off Sri Lanka.” Dock hands

unload shoes, light bulbs, toys and TVs; displayed in stores within days. “The origins and travels of our purchases remain matters of indifference,” he writes. The work around the port is complex, including engineers in shoreline factories, financiers for the boats and the goods, truckers and many more—all working routinely. “So arcane are the operations around the port that no single person could ever hope to grasp more than a fragment of their totality.”

But why is so little attention paid? Maybe people suffer from “an unwarranted prejudice which deems it peculiar to express overly powerful feelings of admiration...towards almost any aspect of the laboring world,” de Botton concludes.

An exception is the hobbyist known as a ship spotter (or train spotter). These people “are appropriately alive to some of the most astounding aspects of our time. How ignorant most of us are by contrast, surrounded by machines and processes of which we have only the loosest grasp.”

In another chapter de Botton is ready to conclude that the mechanics and specialties of a biscuit factory equal workers’ alienation. (This book is in British English and has many words like *biscuit* that are unfamiliar in the U.S.) Then he tours the plant and discovers care, skill and pride in the work. He sees solidarity among coworkers and realizes that even the company’s innae advertising is “worthy of respect and dignity” because it allows people to survive. He leaves the plant munching on some biscuits.

There is a big downside to societies “that ignore the efficient production of chocolate biscuits,” de Botton concludes. They are “so poor as to be unable to guarantee political stability or take care of their most vulnerable.”

Other recent meditations on the meaning of work include *Shop Class as Soulcraft* by Matthew Crawford (Penguin Press [2009], 375 Hudson St., New York, NY 10014; \$25.95) and *The Craftsman* by Richard Sennett (Yale University Press [2008], PO Box 209040, New Haven, CT 06520; \$18).

Rest in Peace

Rev. Carl Dudley (1932-2009)

Dudley, a Presbyterian, was a pastor in Buffalo and St. Louis before joining the faculty of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. While here, he founded the Chicago

Area Group for the Study of Religious Communities. He spent the last 25 years of his life at Hartford Institute for Religious Research (77 Sherman St., Hartford, CT 06105).

Many of Dudley’s books are still in print, including *Effective Small Churches in the 21st Century* (Abingdon [2002], PO Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202; \$19) and *Congregation in Transition: A Guide in Changing Communities* with Nancy Ammerman (Wiley [2002], 1 Wiley Dr., Somerset, NJ 08875; \$21.95).

Dudley believed that the Holy Spirit makes use of social science in advancing the church—a belief not shared by those Christian leaders who use facts only to support their preconceptions.

Rest in Peace

William Erb (1922-2009)

The death notice says: “Erb was always the life of the party.” That being so, all of life is in some sense a party (a banquet, conviviality, Eucharist) because Erb was the life of life.

Erb, the founder of Erb Financial Services (2243 Lyell Ave., Rochester, NY 14606), was married for 63 years. He and Michelina had nine children.

In the early 1950s Erb hosted a Cana Group, which met one Friday each month until shortly before he died. The group was for mutual support, socializing and faith discussion. A chaplain participated for many years; guest speakers sometimes shared their experience.

Erb was a one-man youth and young adult ministry program. His secret? He was genuinely interested in young people—their issues, their relationships, their ambitions. His youth ministry had no hidden agenda and no budget; just to listen. He attracted young people with simple activities and stale jokes. Specifically, he taught the children of your INITIATIVES’ editor the following: sailing, canoeing, fishing, magic, checkers, chess, berry picking, self-confidence, social ethics and bocce ball.

Erb was active in several electoral campaigns; often backing a candidate not endorsed by the party. Two of his sons served in public office. Erb was a sustaining contributor to the National Center for the Laity.

Happenings

“A Celebration of Faith and Writing” is an October 10, 2009 gathering, featuring Patricia Hampl, Anne Lamott, Thomas Lynch and others. The host is House of Hope Presbyterian Church (797 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105; www.hohchurch.org).

Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology (20 Archbishop May Dr., St. Louis MO 63119; www.faithscience.org) has an October 23-25, 2009 conference on “Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition” in Belleville, IL.

Trinity Institute (74 Trinity Pl., New York, NY 10006; www.trinitywallstreet.org) has a January 27-29, 2010 conference, “Building an Ethical Economy: Theology in the Marketplace.” Bishop Rowan Williams is the featured speaker.

Pope Benedict XVI expects to release a social encyclical, *Love In Truth*, late this June. Its publication is delayed because Benedict XVI wants to include reflections on the current economic crisis. INITIATIVES will report on the encyclical in its regular “110+ Years of Catholic Social Thought” column. (*Inside the Vatican* [7/09], PO Box 57, New Hope, KY 40052)

The Labor Guild (85 Commercial St., Weymouth, MA 02188; www.laborguild.com) hires Fr. Patrick Sullivan, CSC as its new director, who succeeds Fr. Ed Boyle, SJ (1931-2007) and Sr. Mary Priniski, OP. Sullivan has a long history in labor relations, including several years with the Higgins Labor Research Center at the University of Notre Dame. In his letter of introduction Sullivan acknowledges some of our Chicagoans who influenced him in Catholic social action. The Labor Guild is the last of what once were many outposts for Catholic formation in labor relations. In fact, according to Kim Bobo’s research there were 96 U.S. Catholic labor schools, some in colleges, others in parishes and some in their own meeting space. (*Wage Theft in America*, The Free Press [2009], 38 Greene St., New York, NY 10013; \$17.95)

The Progressive (409 E. Main St., Madison, WI 53703) celebrates 100 years of publication. It was founded in 1909 by Senator Robert La Follette and is now published monthly. Its souvenir April 2009 issue contains paragraphs from articles over the years by people like Lincoln Steffens, Jane Addams, Carl Sandburg, Samuel Gompers, Helen Keller, Sinclair Lewis and many more. A 1951 item by Saul Alinsky (1909-1972) tells what happened when Bishop Bernard Sheil (1886-1969) of Chicago went to a meeting of Catholics to denounce the anti-Semitism of Fr. Charles Coughlin (1891-1979). The audience was “seething with hostility.” Sheil was called “not a Catholic [but a] Jew lover.” Then he was spat upon and called “Rabbi Sheil.” He replied: “Rabbi? That is what they called our Lord.”

Miguel Diaz (College of St. Benedict, 37 S. College Ave., St. Joseph, MN 56374), a Cuban-American, is the new U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. He is the author of *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (Orbis Books [2002], PO Box 302, Maryknoll, NY 10545; \$25).

Websites

A new coalition, Catholics and Climate Change (PO Box 60205, Washington, DC 20039; www.catholicsandclimatechange.org), is promoting the “St. Francis Pledge” as part of its “Catholic Climate Covenant.” The pledge follows an old Catholic Action format, specifically, “Pray, Learn, Assess and Act.” The coalition is a clearinghouse for other pro-environment activities.

Our National Center for the Laity is fond of St. Francis of Assisi, finds the pledge to be a useful step and supports the goals of the coalition. The NCL merely reminds activists that policies are good because they are just and compassionate, not because they are *Catholic*. Further, says NCL, overly equating good public policies with *Catholicism* is potentially a setback for the issue at hand and for genuine lay leadership on multiple issues. NCL is not interested in hard-and-fast ideological distinctions, but is nonetheless sensitive to problems on other issues.

www.catholiclabor.org/NCL.htm

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