



The Rank and File Catholic

(Connecting the teaching of the Church with the struggles of Labor)

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The Labor Movement and Living my Faith

**By: David Suetholz, Kentucky Labor Cabinet,
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“For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’” Galatians 5:14. Caring for one’s neighbor as much as oneself is embodied in a core principle of the Labor Movement, namely “solidarity.” It is the principle that compels us to contribute to a strike fund for strangers, to feel righteous indignation at their mistreatment and to stand up shoulder to shoulder when asked.

The Labor Movement has become a way that I can live my faith in Jesus in my professional life. Much like the early Church, the labor movement is much maligned because it promotes values that cut against the greed that is preached in our corporate culture. Where the television promotes “me, me, me” and “buy, buy, buy” the labor movement instills “we, we, we” and “share, share, share.”

I had the great fortune of studying Catholic theology at Villanova University as well as becoming a student and friend of the great Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez while I was in law school at Notre Dame. My studies and reflections on the Gospels led me to conclude that the life well-lived is not spent amassing fortunes for oneself, but rather to tend to the least among us.

The labor movement gives those who would be powerless by themselves, dignity and power to stand up and assert themselves against entities that would otherwise brush them aside. I have proudly watched as ordinary people (extraordinary in God’s eyes) stood together in unity to defend each other and demand a share of the fruits of their labor. Because I take the commandment ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ seriously, I am proud to celebrate Labor Day as a part of the labor movement and the labor family.

Sweet Morsels of Grace

By Todd Butler

Just as the first peas and onions are popping up in gardens across the Commonwealth, it also seems that this long economic winter may finally be sprouting new life. I believe there are similarities between gardening and the way God has worked in this recession. Perhaps the poet Walt Whitman can best explain what every gardener knows and every faithful person hopes. In his poem, “This Compost,” Whitman considers the foul commodities with which we fertilize the soil only to watch it, “... grow such sweet things out of such corruptions.

(See top left page 2.)

Workers in Atlanta Georgia Reach a Settlement

**By: Todd Johnson
Editor: TR AFC**

To have the privilege of working for a fair and reputable employer is often taken for granted. The usual day to day routine with wages being paid for hours worked and automatically receiving overtime pay when applicable is what the average worker in America is accustomed to, and rightfully so. Most employer employee relationships are a basic agreement for the employee to work hard and in return the employer will pay him/her fairly for that labor. At some point in American history it became necessary to have laws to protect the rights of workers. These laws were mandated due to the actions of some unjust and unfair employers.

Amazingly, some dishonest employers continue to blatantly cheat their employees, simply because they can. They see a chance to steal from someone who is afraid they may lose their job or be retaliated against in some other way if they argue about incorrect pay. The desire to do the right thing is nonexistent for these employers as is the fear of government reprisal. This brings me to a quite interesting employer I have encountered in Atlanta, Georgia.

As much as I would like to tell a story of a real life employer that treats his employees with the same respect he insists on in return (and I must say I know many employers like this), I instead have chosen to tell about a man who has manipulated, cheated, stolen from and abused his employees until finally they filed a class action lawsuit against him. Over one hundred employees filed suit several years ago. In May of this year, a settlement was reached and their former employer paid over one million dollars for wages he stole from them. A good friend of mine, Jim Lindeman from Greenwood, Indiana, was instrumental in helping those workers who were treated unfairly. Jim passed away a year ago and did not get to hear of the settlement for those workers. He would have been very proud to be a part of exposing this employer for what he is. Upon investigation it was discovered that instead of being paid time and 1/2 for all hours worked over 40 hours, this employer paid his employees regular time ... in cash! Among other threats, workers were told if they did not work over time they would be fired.

This same employer is still up to the same antics and this time, the United States Department of Labor is investigating for accusations of wage and hour violations. He is not only stealing from his employees but no taxes are being paid on wages that are owed and are either not paid or are paid in cash; therefore, he is also stealing from the government, and you, and me!

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Sweet Morsels of Grace

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No doubt most of us could tell tales of watching our 401K being plowed under by a corrupt economy. Yet, if we pause to reflect more deeply we may also be able to give witness to the way God, even in the midst of these foul economic indicators, has managed to bear such sweet fruits within our families and within our faith communities. Early on in this financial meltdown, I saw an interesting statistic that began my search for how God has been working on the underside of these painful economic times.

Even as spending plummeted like a thermometer in the dead of winter, one sector of the entertainment economy was growing by more than 40%-board games! With less money for movies and meals out, families everywhere were rediscovering the pleasures of purchasing Park Place or yelling, "You sunk my battleship!" From this simple stat, I began asking people I encountered while leading parish workshops and preaching parish missions how the negative economy has impacted them in positive ways.

A man in South Carolina shared the difficulties resulting from the downturn in his own small business while his wife was simultaneously downsized by her employer—forcing them to live and work in two different states. Then a smile broke across his face as he proclaimed that while this has been difficult, the two of them had never been closer. He said, "We talk every evening on Skype. And we really talk. We talk about our day, about our relationship, our dreams...even about God." He concluded, "In fact, two years ago I would not have been here (meaning the parish function at which I was speaking). I was so busy I barely found time to attend Mass."

A woman in another parish said that she and her husband faced a chorus of complaints from their children as they cut eating out and shopping from their monthly budget, that is until they relocated the bicycles buried in the back of their garage. "Now," she said, "we take long bike rides as a family where we share priceless but cheap soft serve ice cream cones and then pedal off the calories on the trip home."

While many parishes have had to deal with a dip in their collections, I have also heard from pastors and parishioners about a renewed sense of stewardship and the common good. The Great Recession has taught us how vulnerable we all are and how connected we all need to be. (Continued top right this page.)

Sweet Morsels of Grace

(Continued from bottom left this page.)

Time and again in these sacred stories I have heard from people who encountered authentic pain and loss, but through it have also reclaimed intimacy, returned to faith, and were surprised by joy.

To be clear, God does not wish such calamities upon us—as a family or as a nation. But it should come as no surprise that the same God who could bring everlasting life from the brutality of the cross would also be able to take the greed of Wall Street and an addiction to debt on Main Street and turn these corruptions into such sweet morsels of grace.

Todd Butler, Ph.D., is Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Brescia University and is a member of the Social Concerns Committee of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky. This article appeared in the Catholic Conference of KY "WITNESS" newsletter "Spring 2010" and may be found at this address: <http://www.ccky.org/Newsletters/2010%20Newsletters/volume10number1Spring.pdf> See page 7 of 8.

The Chaplain's Corner

By: Fr. Shonis

Recently I returned home from Las Vegas where I received the New Wineskins award for the Sunday/Monday Connection. For the last ten years every week I visit one of the parishioners at their workplace. The visit only takes 10 minutes, but later we meet in small groups to discuss the relationship between faith and work. People are fascinated by the idea of priest actually going into a business or factory to visit workers. Why not? It is where most people spend at least 50% of their time ...at work. Unfortunately we build our Churches in the suburbs which gives the impression that God is not very interested in what we do for a living and how we do it or where the money comes from that we put in the collection basket. The truth is that the God that we meet in church on Sunday is the same God we meet on the job on Monday.

This year for the Labor Day weekend Masses I have asked 15 parishioners that I have visited over the years to talk about how they connect their faith and spirituality...three per Mass. The Labor Day Masses this year at Holy Name will all emphasize justice for workers and to complement this we will be selling free trade coffee from Guatemala. This is part of our Jewish heritage and what the prophets proclaim loud and strong that you cannot stand before God on Sunday and on Monday defraud the workers of their wages.

Fr. Shonis

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