



# The Rank and File Catholic

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

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## “Meet Darrell Howard our newest RAFC staff member”

By: Darrell Howard

I'm a member of Sts. Joseph and Paul Catholic Community in Owensboro, KY. I graduated from St. Mary of the Woods High School in 1960 with 12 years of Catholic education. My Mother and Father were faithful people; we had to say the rosary each night and attended the early mass on Sunday morning. Although neither held a union job, they were convinced that workers should be represented by a union because that was the way you *get-ahead* and that was *Catholic Church teaching* from the pulpit. Dad repeated words of encouragement throughout school, “Stay with it; *can't* never done nothing. Get an education and get a union job!” After the military, I found that union job and completed a four-year apprenticeship; the program was a joint endeavor by the company and the union. My Dad was proud; the union provided the opportunity for me to *get-ahead*.

I held numerous leadership positions in the labor movement: from shop steward to 6 years on the Executive Board of the United Steel Workers (USW) Local 104, health insurance and pension representative, president of the Owensboro Central Labor Council, Co-chair of the Owensboro Daviess County Labor-Management Committee, and a union representative on the Citizens Advisory Committee to the Board of Directors of the Owensboro Daviess County Hospital (OMHS).

In 1985, along with six other labor leaders from across the nation, I participated in a study tour of Germany, Belgium, and France. The National AFL-CIO and the National Chamber of Commerce jointly sponsored the tour. The purpose was to expose us to the methods and procedures existing in those countries and utilized by the Unions. I continue to draw on that experience and exposure.

In 1988 I decided to step out of my comfort zone. I left the company accepting a management position that severed my official relationship with organized labor. My basic philosophy never changed and I've maintained many friends who are involved in the labor movement. Uniquely, I've experienced both sides of the fence. I officially retired in 1996.

I've heard the statement in recent years, even from some union members, “At one time unions were needed, but they are out-of-step in today's world and not really necessary.” You can't get much farther from reality! Organized labor exists to provide a unified voice, create a balance in the workplace, and protect the bread-and-butter issues of wages, hours, and working conditions. Unions are as important today as they ever were, maybe more so.

(Continued top right column of last page)

## “Organized Religion and Labor”

By: Todd Johnson

Unions have long been a divisive issue between employers and employees. The employees usually support unions which encourage labor with respect for the worker. Employers on the other hand, have been historically reluctant to share the fruits of their employees' labor with the very ones that made their success possible. Certainly, there is not that division in all work places. However Unions remain necessary to ensure employees are treated with dignity and respect and are paid a living wage for their work.

History chronicles the plight of workers since the Civil War. There were masses of workers entering the country from 1880 to 1920 in hopes of finding a better life. The workers were native Irish, Italians, Lithuanians, Germans, Polish, Slovaks and Russians with various religious influences. They were looked down upon and viewed as a threat to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture of the nation. Their demands for justice for workers were seen by federal and state courts as an attack on the absolute rights of property. They were often treated poorly and degraded. Viewed as unskilled, illiterate, dirty criminals, the workers had to band together to defend their very being. Employers often used strong arm state and federal connections to break attempts of workers to strike. With years of persistence and the backing of many religious organizations and ethical politicians, the labor movement is credited with monumental strides in achieving respect for the worker.

Labor unions are credited with establishing a 40 hour work week, a minimum wage, and OSHA rules and regulations that protect employees of all businesses, only to name a few accomplishments. Unions rally behind their members but all workers in America have reaped rewards of their efforts. Unions continue to demand dignity for workers in efforts to obtain a living wage for all labor.

Many faith groups have strong ties to labor unions and their movement in the United States. The Catholic Church and its leaders including various Popes have repeatedly supported the plight of unions and their workers. The Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Disciples of Christ and Jewish each adhere to and have publicly supported respect for the worker in their social teachings. Each religion encourages a just wage for a just effort.

The plight and struggles of the working American are understood and respected by many. The right of the American worker to organize offers each worker dignity and freedom from oppression. The labor movement is an ongoing force that began in the Civil War era and continues today...for that we should all be thankful!

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## The Chaplain's Corner

Fr. Anthony Shonis

Recently I read the bibliography of George Meany\*, the President of the AFL-CIO from 1955 until his death in 1979. Meany was an Irish Catholic from New York City who began his career in the union with Plumbers Local 463 in the Bronx. He was a practicing Catholic all his life and he and his wife Eugenia had four daughters. At the same time I was reading Meany's life I was also reading The Jungle by Upton Sinclair about the Chicago stockyards at the turn of the century and the misery of the immigrants who worked in the slaughter houses.

The AFL-CIO under Meany was constantly fighting battles with employers (strikes) and constantly with Congress (Taft-Hartley). It was the classic adversarial understanding of business and labor and while today we may question whether this is the best approach to meeting the needs of labor, read against the exploitation of workers at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it could not have been otherwise.

Upton Sinclair in The Jungle portrays the meat packing industry as literally grinding up the immigrant work force. Low pay, unsanitary working conditions, 12 hour work days, child labor, no pension, no regress of grievances, no sick days this was the lot of those immigrants who filled the lowest rung of the economic ladder. The same could be said of the miners and steel workers, the only thing that stood between them and the greed of corporate America was the union.

Meany's biography gives you a glimpse of the endless struggles, and the ebb and flow of labor history. And the unions never shined brighter than when they organize and promote the dignity of those among us who were on the lowest rung of the economic ladder and American's newest workers...the immigrants.

\*George Meany and His Times by Archie Robinson, 1981

### ENCYCLICAL LETTER, CARITAS IN VERITATE (CHARITY IN TRUTH), POPE BENEDICT XVI

The above Encyclical is the Pope's latest teaching released on July 7, 2009 and it may be found in its entirety at the Vatican WEB site: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). "It challenges us all to recognize and then to confront the social evils of today." We recommend its reading!

**Darrell Howard**

(Continued from page one left column)

Although I don't hear about Catholic teaching concerning collective bargaining from the pulpit as my Dad did, the Catholic position on labor has not changed. Is the subject too counter-cultural?

Joseph J. Fahey, concerning Catholic social teaching and labor, substantiates my belief in excerpts from his recent article: *Catholic social teaching (CST)* states that labor unions "are a positive influence for social order and solidarity, and are therefore an indispensable element of social life." CST further teaches that "unions have the duty of acting as representatives working for 'the proper arrangement of economic life'" and must play an active role "in the whole task of economic and social development and in the attainment of the universal common good" (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 305, 307). Contrary to those who hold that unions are a relic of the industrial past, CST states that today "solidarity among workers [is] more fitting and necessary than ever" and that unions are appropriate "for all professions."

Catholic social teaching's extraordinary support for labor unions and the essential role unions play in securing the common good is the rock upon which Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice is founded. Tragically, workers and their families are often the least—and the last—to benefit from economic and social systems that are based on greed and power. Fortunately, there is a long Catholic tradition holding that workers are entitled to a just wage and that the work they perform must not demean human dignity." Joe Fahey, Professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College in New York City, is Chair of the Steering Committee of Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice.

I challenge current union leadership to develop educational programs enabling union members to defend the existence of labor unions. Don't shun non-union workers; be a friend and tell them the union story.

I appreciate the opportunity to be a contributing staff member of TRAFIC.

### Prayer in Times of Unemployment.

By: David M. Grief

During these times of high unemployment we might consider this as an opportunity to pray for the unemployed and the underemployed. The best prayer is to participate in Holy Mass and Communion for the intentions of the person or persons in need! Some other very powerful prayers are: The Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:10-13) (found at [www.stfrancisenid.com](http://www.stfrancisenid.com)). The Morning Offering with the Pope's intentions [www.apostleshipofprayer.org](http://www.apostleshipofprayer.org). and a Novena (a nine day's prayer) such as a Novena for Job Seekers, also called Litany To Find Employment (found at [www.stfrancisenid.com](http://www.stfrancisenid.com)). St. Joseph is the patron saint for the working, (his picture is in the header of this newsletter) and there is a St. Joseph Novena and a prayer To St. Joseph for Workers ([www.stjosephsite.com](http://www.stjosephsite.com)).