

Relaxation Exercise: Just Close Your Eyes and Imagine...

Here's a little relaxation exercise for you. Close your eyes. Now imagine your statehouse. Picture the rotunda, the office wings, the various floors, and the surrounding landscape. Imagine yourself standing at the centermost point in the building on the ground floor. Now imagine 10,000 people crammed into that very space, filling it from floor to rafter and spilling out the doors and windows. Picture all those people chanting, singing, praying, carrying signs, and beating on drums. Now imagine another 120,000 people outside encircling the building doing the same thing. The crowd is so large that it spills onto the side streets in a half mile radius around the structure. Now imagine your state legislators sequestered in a room at the center of all this, debating a piece of legislation that will strip most of the collective bargaining rights from your state's public sector workers. The noise from the protest is so loud that it frequently drowns out the legislator's debate and they must halt numerous times. Wait a minute... this isn't particularly relaxing, is it? It's not supposed to be. This profoundly dissonant scene actually occurred in Wisconsin in early 2011. It is the galvanizing backdrop for the recall election scheduled for June 5th of this year.

Wisconsin has always had a progressive tradition. We were the first state to have public employee collective bargaining (1959). We were the first state to offer unemployment insurance and the first state to have progressive taxation based on wealth. Towns named "Union" are scattered through our state. People expected that tradition to go on forever. Then, it happened.

On February 15th 2011, Governor Walker introduced the bill in the Wisconsin State Legislature that would become Act 10, the now famous law that stripped Wisconsin's public sector unions of most of their collective bargaining rights. That one action set in motion a chain of events that has rocked the

landscape of our State, and reciprocally, of our nation. It has polarized our state to the extent that neighbors quit talking to neighbors, friendships have ended and families are divided.

The Recall Election that is scheduled to take place on June 5th between Governor Walker and Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett reflects this polarity. Polls suggest that a mere 4% of Wisconsin's voters are undecided. Outside special interests are flooding the state with their money. As of this writing, Governor Walker has a campaign war chest of \$25,350,755 and Mayor Barrett has \$831,508. The disparity is due to a loophole in Wisconsin Recall Election Law that allowed Walker to raise unlimited sums during the recall period. Simple distilling math reveals a pool of 136,765 registered undecided voters. The candidates are attempting to woo them at a cost of \$191.44 a vote.

All this rancor begs questioning from Catholics and working people. How could one piece of legislation have caused all this? It seems that Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listocki had his finger on the issue. On February 16th 2011, during the height of the protests and debate, he issued a letter from the Wisconsin Catholic Conference to the Wisconsin State Legislature's Joint Finance Committee. In it he acknowledged the need for shared sacrifice from all of Wisconsin's residents to balance our State budget, but also clearly upheld the Catholic Church's social doctrine on the rights of workers to organize and participate in unions. He also highlighted the Church's unwavering support of the human right of free association. Within that right, we find the genesis of this whole debate.

The human right of free association is a fundamental part of human personhood. It is recognized around the world by societies and cultures of all types. The United Nations includes free association in its declaration of human rights. Along with food, water, shelter, a place to sleep and others, a child of God ought to have the right to associate themselves with whom they wish. We are creations of God, imbued with God's dignity and worth and so we are entitled to certain basic things, just because we exist. The citizens of Wisconsin who are actively trying to remove Governor Walker from office

acknowledge this on a very deep personal level. If they don't know it existentially, they know it intuitively. Messing around with people's right of free association is wrong and shouldn't be tolerated. Wisconsin Act 10 and The Wisconsin State Legislature's support of it brought that injustice screaming into the consciences of at least half the citizens of this state and a much broader audience across the nation, and the world.

The argument has also been advanced that public sector workers, because they draw their salaries from the taxpayers, are less entitled to the right to collectively bargain with their employers than private sector workers. To me, making that argument is the same as saying that public sector workers are less human than private sector workers and therefore entitled to less access to their human rights. I can't speak for anyone else, but I will always believe no human being is less human than any other, and therefore, this argument has no merit.

There are plenty of folks in Wisconsin on the other side of this issue. The public reaction to Archbishop Listerick's letter sent shockwaves through our state's Catholic community. I remember listening to a conservative talk radio program during the protests. The host had been actively building a case against the protestors over the course of his program. Then he was handed a news bulletin that Archbishop Listerick and the WFC had come out on the side of the protestors. He was absolutely taken aback. The announcement changed the entire course of the program and the caller's comments reflected the shift in the debate. What was indicated then, and what is still resonating now is that many Catholics are clearly unaware of the church's social doctrine; specifically it's teachings on the rights of workers or, if they are aware, it has no affect on their political views.

In my mind, the battle raging in Wisconsin boils down to divergent views on how we value human beings. About 48% of the state agrees with Governor Walker, that cutting social programs that benefit the poor, and giving tax breaks and incentives to the wealthy and corporations will create more jobs,

and will reduce the need for social programs, thereby reducing taxes. The other 48% believe what the US. Conference of Catholic Bishops has been saying for years, that the truest measure of any society is how its weakest members are fairing. We should have a preferential option for the poor in state lawmaking policy. Our society ought to be built from the bottom up they feel, and wealthy business owners should do a better job of sharing corporate resources with all the members of their organizations. Unionized public employees have sacrificed enough more than enough already, they say. Make the wealthy pay more in taxes to balance the budget. Both sides bring equal passion to the table.

Nobody here has the faintest idea how this election will turn out. The only known is that it will be close, very close. One thing is certain. We have become a state of misplaced identity. The vast amounts of money pouring into this election from outside this state, the overwhelming majority of which comes from conservative causes, has influenced how Wisconsin residents value working people. That is wrong. The voting populous of Wisconsin will soon decide who will be our Governor not exclusively based on their own experiences as working people and responsible human beings, but on the collective spin asserted by wealthy special interests, and the extensive ad buys they make in our local media markets. Meanwhile, the poor here grow ever poorer and more marginalized. My hope for all of us today is that we will one day become a state in which as much will be spent on poverty relief and human unity building as is spent on political advertising and ideology. On that day, Catholic Social Teaching will no longer be the best kept secret in Catholicism.

Richard Schmidt is currently serving as the President of Teamsters Local 344 in Milwaukee WI. He can be contacted at rschmidt@local344.org.

