

A Time to Remember: A Time to Recommit

Excerpts from the Labor Day Statement by Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio
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Labor Day is a holiday with an important, but sometimes forgotten purpose. It was established in New York in 1882 as a day to honor work and workers and also a time to celebrate the contributions of the American Labor Movement. For too many, Labor Day has become just another day off or a time to buy school supplies, rather than a day to honor the hard work of school teachers, janitors, cafeteria workers, and others.

As we gather this Labor Day weekend, we should not forget how our nation's economy and commerce, our standard of living, and even our time off are in many ways the hard won gains of workers organized into unions to bargain for decent wages, working conditions, and benefits, such as vacation time and health care coverage. Let us also remember that too many people in our midst—and millions around the world—still lack decent work or fair wages, toil in terrible conditions, and have no real voice in their economic life.

Recalling Catholic Teaching

Just as we need to remind ourselves as Americans that Labor Day is about workers and their unions, it is also important to remember as Catholics that the dignity of work and the rights of workers are central elements of Church teaching that continue to challenge all Catholics. For more than a century, the Church has insisted that “human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question” (Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 3). Our tradition has defended the right of workers to join together to secure decent work, wages, and a voice in economic life. Our Bishops' Conference has outlined *A Catholic Framework for Economic Life* that seeks to summarize principles on which to judge our nation's economic life:

- *The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy.*
- *A fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring.*

• *All people have a right to life and to secure the basic necessities of life (e.g. food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, safe environment, economic security).*

• *All people have the right to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefit, to decent working conditions, as well as to organize and join union or other associations.*

A Look Back: A Failed Immigration Debate



In this reflection, I would like to look back to something that did not go well for our nation. What did not go well was the national debate over immigration reform. I focus on this as we approach Labor Day because at its core immigration is about workers who come to our land to try to secure better lives for themselves and their families by their labor. This vital national immigration discussion polarized our people, paralyzed the Congress, and failed our nation. This debate was truly a case of “more heat than light,” more

passion than progress. After this debate, we are a society more divided, a people more confused, and a nation unable to move forward on one of the most serious and complicated issues we face as a nation. This debate brought out some of the worst in us. Now we need to draw on the best in us if we are ever going to move forward as a whole, healthy society and nation. Let me suggest a few starting points for a new and better immigration discussion: reality, civility, morality, and consistency.

First, reality. I have heard it said, “You are entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts.” There is a temptation for all of us to look at reality through the eyes of ideology, fear, or wishful thinking. However, there are some inescapable facts:

- The immigration status quo is unacceptable and unus-

tainable. The 'system' is broken. We need far-reaching and comprehensive reform.

- Immigrants come to our nation because they find work here that allows them to offer some hope and dignity to their families. The work they do is a contribution to our society.
- There are some 12 million undocumented people among us, most of whom are workers. Our economy and communities depend on them. They bus our dishes, pick our vegetables, clean our offices and homes, and care for our children among other jobs. We cannot wish them away or simply send them away. For practical, economic, and moral reasons, we have to find ways to bring these people out of the shadows, to protect them from exploitation, and to regularize their status for their sake and ours.
- Like the rest of society, immigrant populations include a small number of people who do damage to our communities and engage in dangerous behavior. These people, like others who harm our society, must be caught and punished, but their reprehensible acts cannot be used to demonize millions who contribute to our economy and society.
- One-dimensional 'solutions' may be simple, but they are often illusions and can make things worse. There is no fence long enough or high enough that can wall out the human and economic forces that drive immigration.
- Immigration reform cannot start or stop at our borders. U.S. policy must help overcome the pervasive poverty and deprivation, the violence and oppression that push people to leave their own lands. Policies on debt and development, foreign aid and global trade are essential elements of any effective immigration reform.

Second, civility. Passion and strong convictions can be good things. I have plenty of both, based on my ministry among immigrants for decades. However, anger is no substitute for wisdom, attacks are no substitute for dialogue, and feeding fears will not help us find solutions. Respect for different points of view is a mark of civil society. Both sides in the last debate fell short sometimes. Immigration issues should not be used for partisan advantage, a ratings boost, or a fundraising tactic. We have to guard against policy disputes that encourage or excuse ethnic hostility or discrimination. We have seen the use of demeaning stereotypes, appeals to the worst in us, and one-sided advocacy pretending to be journalism. Disagreement should not degenerate into accusations of bigotry or charges of betrayal of national identity. For our



part, a Church which calls for greater charity and justice in national life ought to practice charity and justice in public life.

Third, morality. By morality, I do not mean that faith and moral principles give us easy answers to difficult problems, or that people of good will cannot disagree over the best ways forward. Rather, I am suggesting that how we analyze and act on these issues ought to be shaped and measured by fundamental moral principles. For example,

human dignity is a gift from God, not a status to be earned. Fundamental rights to work, decent wages, safe working conditions, to have a voice in decisions and the freedom to choose to join a union do not depend on where you were born or when you came to our nation. Human dignity and human rights are not commodities to be allocated according to where you come from, when you got here, or what documents you possess.

Fourth, Consistency. The failure of national immigration reform has generated a deluge of local and state proposals, controversies, and disputes. Immigration policy should not depend on where in the United States you work or live. A patchwork of conflicting policies, punitive measures, and local disputes cannot fix a broken federal system, but they can further enflame the divisions that make real progress more difficult.

We need a different debate, a constructive discussion that neither diminishes our nation nor divides our people, but achieves realistic, practical, and principled steps towards reform. A national discussion that is based on reality, civility, morality, and consistency--properly understood--can lay the groundwork for real progress.

Conclusion

Labor Day 2007 is a time to look back, look around, and look ahead. It is a day to celebrate the work and the workers who are at the heart of this holiday. It is a time to recall the powerful and consistent teaching of our Church on the dignity of work and the rights of workers. For Catholics, Labor Day 2007 is a time to recommit in our own small ways – to our own work, to treat others justly, and to defend the lives, dignity, and rights of workers, especially the most vulnerable.