

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, 5 September 2021

Scriptures: Isaiah 35:4-7; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37

Homily: Fr. Ken

This weekend we celebrate and commemorate Labor Day.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah rejoices in the hope of Israel's return from exile. Among the first to enjoy the blessings of restoration will be those who cannot hear, cannot speak, cannot see, and cannot walk.

In the second reading, James points out the contradiction of believing in Christ yet treating those who are poor as inferior persons.

In Mark's Gospel, the miracle of Jesus reflects the first reading, and is a sign that Jesus fulfils the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah—the Holy One of God who would care for those in need, and teach us to do the same.

Today, we honor workers.

As a teenager, Jesus was a carpenter, helping build homes for people. As an adult, he helped people build a life for themselves. He carried people's ailments, and he carried their hearts and souls.

The disciples followed suit. And everyone of us is called to do the same. Simply stated, we—each one of us—are all called to help those in need.

In a recent survey of Catholics in the United States, the vast majority firmly believe that working to help the poor is an essential part of what it means to be a Catholic today.

This weekend we focus on the working world: there is the infamous 1%, and there's the rest of us. There is the long-standing debate about equal pay for equal work. In California that was resolved in 1949, after World War II, no doubt prompted by the "Rosie the Riveters" who took on "a man's job". But it was seldom enforced.

The COVID-19 pandemic has induced a catastrophic impact of social, economic, political, and educational disarray. Prior to this devastating challenge, despite steady gains in hiring, a falling unemployment rate, and other signs of an improving economy, take home pay for many workers has effectively fallen since the economic recovery began in 2009.

The declines are even greater for lower-paid workers in sectors where hiring has been strong, namely, home health care, food preparation, and retailing, even though wages were already below average to begin with in those service industries.

Today, millions of workers are being denied the honor and respect they deserve because of a lack of jobs, underemployment, low and unjust wages, wage theft, abuse, and exploitation, all of it exacerbated by the COVID crisis.

That summary assessment comes not only from Nobel Prize economists such as Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman, but particularly relevant for us, from the United States Catholic Bishops in their annual Labor Day Statement.

In their message, the bishops quoted from *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II's 1965 *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*): "While an immense number of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced areas, live in luxury or squander wealth...How can it be said that persons honor one another when such 'extravagance and wretchedness exist side by side?'" Those words the bishops noted "seem to be just as true today" as they were more than fifty years ago.

Every year the Labor Day statement of the U.S. Catholic bishops provides powerful incentives to reflect on and to respond to contemporary work and employment issues. Reviewing the Labor Day statements of the past decade, the bishops have perhaps been the most pointed in the statement of 2015. It is worthwhile remembering today.

The bishops referred to Pope Francis who said: "Work is fundamental to the dignity of a person... It gives one the ability to maintain oneself, one's family, and to contribute to the growth of one's own nation". In that regard, the bishops stated: "The economy is not creating an adequate number of jobs that allow workers to provide for themselves and their families".

They then addressed the importance of unions: "Since the end of the Civil War, unions have been an important part of our economy because they provide protections for workers and more importantly a way for workers to participate in company decisions that affect them. Catholic teaching has consistently affirmed the right of workers to form a union.

The bishops conclude: "Whenever possible we should support businesses and enterprises that protect human life and dignity, pay just wages, and protect workers' rights. We should support immigration policies that bring immigrant workers out of the shadows to a legal status and offer them a just and fair path to citizenship, so that their human rights are protected and the wages for all workers rise."

At the conclusion of every Mass, "we are sent forth in peace to love and serve one another". Thus, we leave Church nourished with the Eucharist and departing with "a sense of mission to show one another honor by all that we do and say each day".

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