Is It Just the Horns of a Dilemma?

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HR Management Forum

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Rev. Craig B. Mousin

When we started these columns on Mission and Human Resources, we assumed that although our particular institutions possess distinctive Missions based on particular histories and founding principles, all were grounded in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) that resulted in shared understandings of how our institutions approached labor and employment issues. Developed over hundreds of years, CST has responded to and helped shape the relationship between employers and employees throughout the world. With the birth of the Industrial Revolution, masses of peasants moved to the cities and faced backbreaking work under intolerable conditions that led to injury and early death. Fueled in part by the expansion of laissez-faire theories of economics and the transformation of work from farm to factory, Catholic scholars and writers addressed issues of a living wage and asserted worker rights to join associations to help balance power in the workplace.

The European revolutions of the mid-19th Century frightened many with the fear of chaos and further bloodshed. Pope Leo XIII’s Rerum Novarum sought to balance the rights and hopes of workers with the need for economic development in offering guidance past the violence of the century.

In the United States, leaders such as Msgr. John Ryan helped reinterpret CST into the political life of this nation raising up the idea of distributive justice and minimum wage protections early in the 20th Century. Ryan’s work helped introduce the justice principles of Rerum Novarum into the many progressive policies of the New Deal. In the latter part of the 20th Century papal encyclicals addressed the Catholic response to the major ideological battle between communism and capitalism, fostering the common good through alternative strategies not raised by the competing forces of the Cold War. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops weighed in with Economic Justice For All again reinterpreting the encyclicals through the lens of democratic capitalism of the United States. In that pastoral letter, the bishops supported the right to organize and engage in collective bargaining recalling Pope John Paul II’s conclusion that unions were an “indispensable element of social life” while adding, “no one may deny the right to organize without attacking human dignity itself.”

At the end of the 20th Century, St. John’s law professor David Gregory could confidently report, “For more than a century, the Catholic Church has been the world’s most eloquent and consistent voice for the rights of workers. In the contemporary era of the transmogrifying workplace, and in cyberspace’s global village, the social teaching of the Catholic Church remains the timeless, and most timely, beacon for fundamental human dignity.”

But when a world-wide recession dominating the first decade of the 21st Century combined with increasing unemployment as jobs migrated across national boundaries undermining long standing industries, the national debate became polarized as governors and legislatures attacked public unions challenging the very right to bargain collectively. Yet the relative absence of voices raising CST in this national debate raises a question whether Gregory’s sanguine 20th Century conclusion merits credence in this new day. Is CST robust enough to guide Catholics and their institutions in responding to these new challenges? Silence or neutrality seems to have taken its place. In reporting on the arguments raised by New Jersey Governor Christie’s challenge to his state’s public unions, one national news story only mentions “Catholic” in noting that Christie’s children attend Catholic schools, with nary a mention of whether CST informs his decision making. Within Wisconsin, Milwaukee’s Archbishop Jerome E. Listecki released a letter noting that the Church has long favored the right to organize, followed by a letter confirming the position by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Both letters acknowledged that unions also have a responsibility to make sacrifices if so required by the common good. Madison’s Bishop Robert C. Morlino responded that each side had important equities to support its claim to the common good, but the debate comes down to choosing the proportionality of the sacrifice required by those in the union who have expectations of the contracts they have lived by versus the sacrifice of the entire population given the
economic crisis the states find themselves enduring. He added, “As Catholics, we see both of these horns of the dilemma as good, and yet the current situation calls many of us to choose between these two goods. Thus the WCC [Wisconsin Catholic Conference] has taken a neutral stance...."

Certainly, CST does not preordain a simple answer to the horns of this dilemma, but more important, CST does not limit the debate to be boiled down to a simple choice between these two options. Instead of permitting the complexity of CST to necessitate simplifying the choice to proportionate sacrifice, why not call upon that very complexity to explore why the Church has historically stood on the side of workers to organize? Instead of abdicating the field, why isn’t the debate more fully exploring why the Church has come to favor workers’ associations and whether those circumstances remain valid? Where are the voices in the academy explaining how the Church came to this position, why it continues to do so, and what principles help one’s conscience determine an appropriate response to such a complex problem?

Pope Leo XIII saw the negative consequences when the state outlawed trade unions and prevented collective bargaining as one reason for attempting to balance power and permit engaged negotiations. Under CST, work is seen as essential to human flourishing, recognizing the dignity of each person. In employment situations of unequal power, organizing as a group helps further each individual’s ability to participate, thus encouraging his or her own development while contributing to the greater good. CST calls for collaborative pluralism and an array of “intermediary institutions” that collectively seek the common good. Unions are an indispensable part of that collaboration. Current debate suggests that public unions have too much power against weak politicians who give away the store, and thus, the argument goes, we need to reduce that power. Yet the solution posed by those Governors and legislatures seeking to take away the power, is to give the power back to those politicians to unilaterally set wages and conditions of work, even though it was the weakness of those very politicians to bargain responsibly that allegedly caused the problems the states now face. Moreover, that solution reduces engagement and dialogue, eliminating the potential for new ideas through additional voices at the table. CST encourages more voices to bargain responsibly in seeking solutions to the problem.

CST’s dedication to workers’ rights to organize recognizes that collective bargaining also reveals more benefits than just the bottom line of the contract payout. Encouraging participation of all workers through their unions leads to greater creativity, not only in the workplace, but in the work product enjoyed by the public. CST envisions the advancement of art and public goods that better all society.

CST critiques the alienation of workers where employees become commodities. When the public debate constrains to just the dollars saved by reneging on contracts, the workers become widgets, commodities to be traded, equal to the dollars they produce, and rated simply by the dollars they are paid. Through collective bargaining, unions can negotiate for more than just benefits and seek conditions that dovetail with CST’s principles of the work environment as a place for human flourishing and service to the greater common good. This would seem especially important in the public realm where the negotiations involve more than simply the employer-worker relationship.

CST also emphasizes the integrity of a contract. Just because politicians were not the ones who negotiated the initial promises does not mean they can avoid the public obligation of past promises made. CST calls for more honesty than a shrug that times have changed.

CST’s discussion of a living wage reminds us that workers need to provide not just for their families, but also have savings to cover their needs when their age prevents them from working or sickness takes its toll. The current restricted debate of economic sacrifice of the few versus the many ignores the commitments made under contract to organized labor to help ensure their livelihoods upon retirement. CST can again enliven the debate.

Some scholars have pointed out that when unions were strongest in the 1940s and 1950s, our nations experienced the “Great Compression,” fostering the most equal society in terms of wages in our nation’s history. CST favors an orientation toward equality as vast income disparity denigrates dignity and disrupts the common good. If work helps humans flourish, the common good demands that all workers flourish. Equality in society furthers this important goal of
CST. Today, however, in contrast to the peak of the Great Compression, at the very time unions are under their greatest attack, we live in one of the most unequal societies in our nation’s history. The bargaining power of unions helped provide more equality and social mobility that truly benefited the common good. Ironically, it is the generation of children that prospered during this time of the Great Compression that have since become the leaders who seek to dismantle the very institutions that helped make us a more equal society and gave them their ability to participate in public life.

The metaphor for neutrality is wrong. The traditional understanding of sitting upon the horns of a dilemma means that we face two questions, both with untenable answers. Choose either answer and one ends up impaled on a bull’s horn. CST breaks through the binary choice of conservative-liberal, pro-public union or anti-public union, economic efficiency or deficit. The answer is not simply dollars and cents. Surely CST encourages us to seek responsible bargaining by all sides, reexamination of work in the 21st century, how we provide for the aged and sick when work becomes impossible, and how to hold elected and administrative officials to the integrity of the contract. CST provides more intellectual resources for resolving these issues than to remain neutral regarding whose sacrifice is greatest. If we are to conclude with David Gregory that the Catholic Church remains vigilant in the defense of workers in the balance of the 21st Century, those of us in the academy should become collaborators and set forth the great strengths of Catholic Social Teaching to address these fundamental problems rather than remain as neutrals on the sidelines.

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We invite you to respond to this column through our blog at [http://hr-forum-ccu.blogspot.com/](http://hr-forum-ccu.blogspot.com/). We look forward to your responses.

We invite you to post links of your mission statements as well as HR and compensation philosophy documents on our blog if you would like to share them with our readers. This will permit a fuller discussion of how mission and CST influence the employment process. Please let us know if you would like us to link to any of your institution’s documents.

Resources relied upon in preparing this column include:

- David L. Gregory’s article, “Catholic Social Teaching on Work,” can be found at 49 Labor L.J. 912 (1998). His footnote 1 at page 912 lists many of the sources of CST on employment and labor unions.
- Rerum Novarum can be found at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html)
- Economic Justice for All can be found at: [http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx). See paragraph 104.
- Archbishop Jerome E. Listecki’s letter on trade unions in Wisconsin can be found at: [http://www.wisconsincatholic.org/Right%20of%20Workers%20Statement%20Feb%2016,%202011.pdf](http://www.wisconsincatholic.org/Right%20of%20Workers%20Statement%20Feb%2016,%202011.pdf)
- Bishop Robert C. Morlino’s statement can be found at: [http://www.madisoncatholicherald.org/bishopscolumns/2083-20110224-column.html](http://www.madisoncatholicherald.org/bishopscolumns/2083-20110224-column.html)
- Regarding the issue of income equality, see, Craig B. Mousin, Frédéric Ozanam—Beneficent Deserter: Mediating the Chasm of Income Inequality Through Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,” Vincentian Heritage, Vol. 30, No. 1, 59 (2010), [http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol30/iss1/4/](http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol30/iss1/4/)