

~~United States Catholic Conference~~  
Higgins, George 1976 Labor Day Statement  
ADP 4005

# 1976 LABOR DAY STATEMENT

Rev. Msgr. George G. Higgins  
Secretary for Research  
United States Catholic Conference

## LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL Some notes on the Bicentennial

It is recorded in the Scriptures that Moses told his followers on the threshold of the Promised Land that "there will be no lack of poor men in the land that is to be your home; I must needs warn you, then, to be open-handed towards your brother, your fellow-countryman, when he is poor and in want. . . . It may be that one of your brethren . . . will fall on evil days. Do not steel your heart and shut your purse against him; be generous to his poverty."

Perhaps never before has this biblical injunction been so timely and of such crucial importance as it is in the United States in this Bicentennial year. When Moses told his followers that there would be no lack of poor men in the Promised Land that was to be their home and commanded them, in the name of the Lord, to be generous and open-handed to those who might fall upon evil days, he was speaking to men and women who, all their lives, had been surrounded by abject poverty and were themselves very poor and, for that reason, might understandably have been tempted, as he himself suggests, to steel their hearts and shut their purses against their less fortunate neighbors. Poverty, in other words, was in those

*Catholic Church and Labor*

days, and in many parts of the world still is the perennial and almost irremediable lot of all but the favored few.

Our own situation in the United States at the present time is vastly different. Despite all our problems and the gross inequities in our economic system, we are the most prosperous people in the history of mankind. Never before have so many people enjoyed such a high standard of living—a standard of living which, in the time of Moses, would have been beyond the wildest dreams of all but a handful of kings and potentates.

And yet the words which Moses addressed to the Chosen People in the Book of Deuteronomy have not lost any of their meaning either as a statement of fact or a binding dictate of conscience: “. . . there will be no lack of poor men in the land that is to be your home; I must needs warn you, then, to be open-handed towards your brother, your fellow countryman, when he is poor and in want.” On the contrary, as noted above, the law of Moses and the subsequent teaching of Christ are, if anything, more important today than ever before. This is true not only because there is no lack of poor people in this prosperous land, but also, and more importantly, because there is less excuse today for the continuation of widespread poverty and less excuse on our own part for steeling our hearts and shutting our purses against its unfortunate victims.

### **POVERTY AMIDST PLENTY**

Our first obligation, as we examine our collective conscience during the Bicentennial on the matter under discussion, is to bring ourselves to realize that there is indeed no lack of desperately poor people at the present time in almost every community in the United States. By and large, our recognition of this fact has been very slow in coming. As one experienced writer put it in a recent study of poverty in the midst of plenty, “the poor have drifted out of the national consciousness. . . .” This has happened, he says, “not because Americans are cruel but because they are looking the other way.”

In recent years, however, this situation has begun to change for the better. That is to say, the American people are gradually facing up to the fact that literally millions of their fellow-citizens have fallen on evil days through no fault of their own and are living in the most degrading kind of poverty.

The poor, in other words, are finally beginning to drift back into our national consciousness, and, in

fits and starts and however inadequately, we have begun to step up our efforts, through legislation and other appropriate means, to help them remedy their sad plight and to take their rightful place in American economic and social life.

There is no need to elaborate statistically on the extent of abject poverty in the United States. Suffice it to say that even the most conservative estimates indicate that more than 25 million Americans are poverty stricken, by any reasonable standard, and that several million able-bodied workers were unemployed at the last count. Add to this the tragic fact that Blacks, on the average, are almost twice as poor as whites and that their unemployment rate is more than twice as high as that of white workers, and it will be readily understood why a prominent official of our Government was prompted to say recently that, in his opinion, "the situation is so deplorable in human terms that it warrants an indignant intolerance of any explanation for it in terms of any kind of economic analysis." What this official meant to say was that there is no inherent reason, from the point of view of our economic resources and technical facilities, why we cannot substantially reduce the level of unemployment and the incidence of abject poverty if we have the will to do so.

It is not our purpose, nor is it within our competence, to try to tell the Government or to tell labor and management what steps should be taken to eradicate the root causes of mass unemployment and widespread poverty in the midst of plenty. It must be said, however, that time is of the essence and that all of us must be prepared to make whatever sacrifices may be required to spread the benefits of our phenomenal productivity more equitably among all the people of the United States.

Labor and management have already done much, through the process of collective bargaining, to raise the living standards of millions of Americans. Enlightened representatives of the two groups will be the first to admit, however, that the traditional techniques of labor-management cooperation are not sufficient, of themselves, to solve the nagging problem of abject poverty in the midst of plenty and the problem of mass unemployment. They recognize, in other words, that, even as they strive to perfect our present system of collective bargaining and to extend its coverage, they will have to lend their support to new and imaginative programs of social and economic reform aimed specifically at the problems faced by the poorest of the poor.

## EQUALITY AND PARTICIPATION

Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Letter of May 14, 1971, "Octogesima Adveniens," commemorating the eightieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's historic social encyclical, "On the Condition of Labor," addressed himself to this problem very pointedly. He said that two aspirations made themselves known in today's world: "the aspiration to equality and the aspiration to participation." The Holy Father looks upon this two-pronged development as a clear sign of hope for mankind in these anxious and troubled times.

In November, 1971, the third Synod of Bishops, meeting in Rome, made reference to this same phenomenon in the Introduction to its final statement on Justice in the World. While noting that there are "serious injustices which are building around the world of men a network of domination, oppression and abuses which stifle freedom and which keep the greater part of humanity from sharing in the building up and enjoyment of a more just and more fraternal world," the Synod document pointed out, with satisfaction, that there is a new stirring of justice "moving the world to its depths."

"There are facts," the statement says, "constituting a contribution to the furthering of justice. In associations of men and among people themselves there is arising a new awareness which shakes them out of any fatalistic resignation and which spurs them on to liberate themselves and to be responsible for their own destiny." Like Pope Paul VI, the synodal delegates—some 200 bishops representing all of the various national conferences of Catholic bishops throughout the world—see this new social awareness, this new movement towards the complete liberation of the human person, as an encouraging sign of hope, "hope in a better world and a will to change whatever has become intolerable."

The 1974 Synod on Evangelization also spoke to this issue. It is in this same spirit of hope for the future that we address ourselves briefly to the desire for justice among Americans today.

## THE AMERICAN SCENE

The phenomenon referred to in Pope Paul's Apostolic Letter and in the synodal statements on Justice in the World—a new stirring of justice characterized by an ever-increasing aspiration to equality and participation and by the will to change whatever has become intolerable—is not limited to particular countries or particular regions of the world, but is common to all mankind, and this because of the fact that widespread social and economic injustice, in varying degrees, is

well nigh universal in today's world and knows no national boundaries.

It was not so long ago that many Americans were naively tempted to think that our own country was an exception to the rule in this regard.

Whatever of that, the poor themselves—the Blacks, the Spanish-speaking, the native Americans, the Appalachians, and other disadvantaged groups in our affluent society are helping us regain our sense of justice and compassion. They have acquired a new awareness of their own fundamental human rights, a new consciousness of their own dignity which has shaken them “out of any fatalistic resignation and (has spurred) them on to liberate themselves and to be responsible for their own destiny.” In the process, they are challenging the nation to take off its moral blinders, so to speak, and to look more honestly and more realistically than ever before at the darker side of American life—at poverty, racial discrimination, the ravages of war, the awful wastefulness of a suicidal arms race, the destruction of our natural environment, and other deep-seated problems in our society.

This is not to suggest that the more affluent members of American society have done nothing at all on their own initiative to advance the cause of social justice or that whatever we have done in this area has been done only in grudging response to demonstrations and other outside pressures. To make such a sweeping allegation would be grossly unfair to the many people of good will in this country who are sincerely devoted to the cause of justice as a matter of conscience and inner religious conviction.

On the other hand, it would be fair to say that we owe a great debt of gratitude to the disadvantaged minorities in our society who, in their belated demand for equality and participation in the benefits and privileges of American society and in their anguished cry for peace, have sharpened our sense of justice and have compelled us to make a more honest and more thorough-going examination of conscience than we might have done on our own initiative if they had not kept the pressure on us so insistently in recent years.

The social and economic problems facing our society are so widespread and of such a complex nature that there is a very real danger that people will despair of ever being able to solve them. On the other hand, as Pope Paul has pointed out, we can take hope from the fact that “from all sides there rises a yearning for more justice and a desire for a better guaran-

teed peace in mutual respect among individuals and peoples." He sees in this phenomenon the working of the Holy Spirit. "It is with confidence," he says, "that we see the Spirit of the Lord pursuing His work in the hearts of men and in every place gathering together Christian communities conscious of their responsibilities. On all continents, among all races, nations and cultures, and under all conditions the Lord continues to raise up authentic apostles of the Gospel."

### **ROLE OF THE CHURCH**

The Church, as a structured religious institution, does not and should not pretend to have the technical answers to the nation's problems. It does not have the political authority, the economic means, or the specific competence necessary for governing the temporal order. Nevertheless, as a religious institution, the Church must work for justice in ways and by means consonant with her own nature and her own specific mission. That is to say, the Church can and must promote justice by the constant proclamation of the Gospel, by denouncing violations of justice, by education, by encouraging the faithful to take part in political action aimed at achieving justice, and by organizing programs or projects aimed at helping the poor, the weak and the oppressed both at home and abroad.

In general, the Church has an indispensable role to play in supporting the efforts of the poor and the disadvantaged "to take in hand and give directions to their future." The Church, in other words, must become, without fear or favor, the champion of the poor in our society. As Pope Paul puts it in his Apostolic Letter, "The Church directs her attention to (the) new poor—the handicapped and the maladjusted, the old, different groups of those on the fringe of society, and so on—in order to recognize them, help them, defend their place and dignity in a society hardened by competition and the attraction of success."

A proper understanding of the role of the Church will not confuse its mission with that of government, but rather see its ministry as advocating the critical values of human rights and social justice.

Above all else the Church must keep alive in the hearts of men the indispensable virtue of hope in these troubled times. The 1971 Synod of Bishops concluded its statement on World Justice on this very note: "the power of the Spirit, who raised Christ from the dead, is continuously at work in the world. . . . Hope in the coming kingdom is already beginning to take roots in the hearts of men. The radical transformation of the

world in the Paschal Mystery of the Lord gives full meaning to the efforts of men, and in particular of the young, to lessen injustices, violence and hatred and to advance all together in justice, freedom, brotherhood and love. At the same time as it proclaims the Gospel of the Lord, its Redeemer and Saviour, the Church calls on all, especially the poor, the oppressed and the afflicted to cooperate with God to bring about liberation from every sin and to build a world which will reach the fullness of creation only when it becomes the work of man for man."

The German Catholic theologian, Father Bernard Haring, who is well known in the United States, takes this point a step further in a book entitled "Hope is the Remedy." He says that those who struggle for justice—for equality and participation and the complete liberation of man—are themselves "truly signs of hope for the world. Their concern for man in his daily needs and their peaceful struggle for a healthier world can open the eyes of all men of good will to the greater hope of eternal life. Their solicitude becomes all the more convincing because this very hope inspires commitment to a better world."

The poor and the disadvantaged are not looking to the Church for instruction on the techniques of liberation, but many of them still hope that they may be able to find—that they will be helped to find—in the Church that strength of love which they need in order to liberate themselves. The Christian community dare not fail them in this regard. Joined together in ecumenical unity, Christians must cooperate with one another, and with their fellow-citizens in the Jewish community, to bring about the full development of peoples and to establish a just and lasting peace in a world that is literally sick unto death of war. This we must do, not as a temporary expedient to calm the troubled waters, nor as a work of super-rogation, but as an integral part of our Christian mission. The 1971 Synod of Bishops put it very well when it said that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."

#### **MINORITY GROUPS**

This new emphasis on equality and shared responsibility, as already noted, is not limited to particular countries or particular areas of the world community but, in varying degrees, is characteristic of mankind as a whole. Yet it would probably be fair to say that

in certain respects it is a peculiarly American phenomenon. At the very least, it can be said that in no other nation in the world has there been, within recent years, a more widespread and more insistent demand on the part of so many different groups for a greater degree of equality and a fuller measure of participation in the affairs of our society.

What started in the United States, roughly two decades ago, as a belated demand for elementary forms of justice in the somewhat limited or restricted area of civil rights has rapidly escalated into a much more sweeping demand for genuine equality (as opposed, for example, to so-called lunch-counter or drinking-fountain equality) and for a greater measure of shared responsibility at every level of our society. This demand came, in the first instance, from the largest of our minority groups, the Black community, which historically has suffered beyond measure from an almost total lack of equality in many areas of our national life and from a systematic denial of an adequate sharing in responsibility. More recently, the same demand has come from the Spanish-speaking, the native Americans, and other disadvantaged groups in our society. These groups charge that they, too, have yet to be accorded the kind of treatment which they feel they have a right to expect in a nation founded on the principle that all men (and women) are created equal.

### **WORKING CLASS WHITES**

The working class whites who live in our metropolitan areas have many unmet needs. Long standing neglect on the part of our nation's mainstream institutions has produced a deep-seated feeling of alienation among a growing number of this largely Roman Catholic population. These first, second and third generation Americans of European descent live in close proximity to Blacks and Browns and share many of the problems and frustrations of their non-white neighbors. But mutual suspicion and fear have precluded recognition of these common problems and needs.

The Church must play a pivotal role in bridging the ever-widening gap between working class ethnic whites and the non-white minorities if we are to build an effective coalition for constructive social change in urban America. The Church should initiate new efforts to cooperate with the white working class and to help them develop community structures towards this end. A great potential exists for racial reconciliation and the building of new coalitions of Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans and white ethnic

working class people on issues of common interest and concern. Such coalitions will not be possible, however, until white ethnic working class communities begin to receive sympathetic attention from the major institutions in our society and meaningful help in dealing with their very real problems. In the present vacuum of concern by government, the danger is terribly real that the demagogues of hate will prey on the anguish of these communities and will further divide those who should be natural allies in reordering the priorities of our society in the interest of human needs.

### **NEED FOR CHRISTIAN OPTIMISM**

Our inability or unwillingness as a nation to cope successfully with this constantly accelerating and completely understandable insistence on a greater measure of equality and for the fullest possible degree of participatory democracy has led us into a potentially dangerous impasse. Even as we observe our Bicentennial and rightfully celebrate our past accomplishments in the area of freedom and democracy, we no longer seem to know exactly where we want to go as a nation and, to make matters worse, one of our better known historians has recently notified us all in writing that there really isn't any point in our worrying about it, for the play is over, he reports, and the curtain is about to fall. "The United States," he contends, "is now about to join other nations of the world which were once prepossessing and are now little more than plots of bounded terrain. Like them, the United States will continue to be inhabited by human life; however Americans will no longer possess that spirit which transforms a people into a citizenry and turns territory into a nation."

This is a dismal thing to prophesy about a nation which is only two hundred years old. In any event, while most Americans will be repelled by this kind of sickly pessimism and despair and will undoubtedly tend to reject it, at the same time we will want to examine the reasons which prompted its author to give expression to it in the first place. His argument is that we have passed the point "where self-interest can subordinate itself to citizenship" or, putting it in reverse, that we have reached the point where "a preoccupation with private concerns deflects (our) population from public obligations."

This, too, may be an exaggeration or a careless exercise in rhetorical license, but, to the extent that it represents an accurate reading of our present situation in the United States, it raises a number of questions which are worth thinking about.

There is no reason, however, for the United States to wallow in pessimism or to indulge in excessive self-criticism as we come to the end of the Bicentennial. Pessimism is alien to our national temperament and to our Judaeo-Christian heritage. And while self-criticism can at times be therapeutic, it can also be a cop-out.

Far better, while admitting our failures, to renew our commitment to the American tradition of freedom and democracy and to look for new ways and means of extending its blessings to all of our fellow-citizens without distinction or exception—especially to those who are struggling against the greatest odds to achieve the basic human rights which the rest of us take for granted as our natural birthright.

Pope Paul VI, in his recent Bicentennial message to the Catholic Church in the United States, refers to some of these groups in specific terms. "We are deeply appreciative," he writes, "of your constant solicitude in bringing the application of Christ's message into the lives of your people. We know your commitment to the social teaching of the Church in various fields. We thank you for promoting liberty and justice and for your concern with the many needs of your people: for food and housing, for health assistance, employment and education—your preoccupation for farm labor, for the condition of migrants, for the dignity of immigrants and for the promotion of peace through endeavors favoring development. We would confirm you in this pastoral solicitude offered in the name of Christ. And we would likewise recall to you that your endeavors must be incessantly renewed in the application of the uplifting message of the Gospel. Each day constitutes a new beginning in our service of Christ in our people."

It is in this spirit of Christian optimism that we are called upon to renew and reconfirm our commitment to the Bicentennial theme of "Liberty and Justice For All."

---

*ADDITIONAL COPIES AVAILABLE:* Single copy—15¢; 100-999 at \$8.00 per hundred; 1,000-4,999 at \$60.00 per thousand.

1976

Publications Office

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE  
1312 Massachusetts Avenue N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20005

