

~~United States Catholic Conference~~
(1970) Labor Day Statement

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LABOR DAY STATEMENT

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United States Catholic Conference**

The great task incumbent on all men of good will is to restore the relations of the human family in truth, in justice, in love and in freedom.
Pope John XXIII, Peace on Earth

In response to this urgent appeal by Pope John, we propose to deal specifically, in this annual Labor Day Statement, with the pressing problems faced by one of the most neglected segments in American society—the so-called white ethnic working class. We do so with the hope of being able to help bring about true peace in our national community “in truth, in justice, in love and in freedom.”

For many years, we have tended to set aside or ignore ethnic differences in this country as though they were no longer consequential. We have allowed ourselves to believe that our society is divided principally on black-white lines, with a nod toward the Indian and the Spanish-speaking population. The large white majority of working people—whether poor or middle class—is thought of as being a homogeneous mass lacking in its own internal divisions and its own peculiar problems. Perhaps this emphasis may be excused in the light of the pressing concerns of the black and brown minorities. Nevertheless the continued neglect of the white ethnic working class is bound to bring disastrous results in its wake.

While we have forgotten the days of massive immigration, the first and second and third generation descendants of the major immigrant groups retain in

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many ways an identifiable ethnic character. Many mixed ethnic communities are commonplace in the larger cities of the United States. Some Irish, French, Polish, Slavic, Italian, Syrian, German, Jewish, and other ethnic enclaves are still plainly visible in the social pattern. Most often, we tend to think of these people as being able to solve their own problems, which in large measure they do. There are, however, tensions within and between the ethnic groups and between the ethnic groups and the black and brown communities which are potentially very dangerous. Ethnic communities and neighborhoods must be considered as a social asset, for they provide security and stability to this portion of our society. When, however, they are faced with rapid social change, as they are now on many fronts, they can produce confrontations that are socially destructive. Since many of these groups are almost totally Catholic, and in some measure still tend to cluster about the Church as an institution, the Church has not only the responsibility but a providential opportunity to play a constructive role in helping them to solve the many problems with which they are now confronted.

Public and private agencies devoted to the restoration of urban America have largely ignored working class whites in designing programs to eliminate poverty, substandard housing, racial discord, declining schools, and physical decay. It is difficult to rationalize neglect of these citizens, given their number and their strategic location in our urban areas. While the sons and grandsons of European immigrants can be found in various social and economic strata, a large number of them are blue-collar workers. They are the backbone of the labor force in most of our industrial cities, mining towns, and manufacturing centers. They still reside in older, mixed-ethnic neighborhoods, or have relocated in predominantly blue-collar suburbs. The needs, frustrations, and problems of these largely working class groups are urgent and varied.

We reject the widespread accusation that these people are the primary exponents of racism in our society, although we do not deny that racism exists in their ranks. We find that race relations in America's big cities have come to mean increasingly the relations between the blacks and/or the browns on the one hand and white ethnic working class people on the other. This happens because, increasingly, business and institutional leadership no longer lives in the city and the upper middle class has either fled or

is fleeing to the suburbs. It is obvious, therefore, that if there is to be a resolution of the racial crisis which currently grips our society, a critical role will be played by white ethnic working class communities. We believe that white society at large should spend less time looking for a scapegoat for this racial crisis and more time considering how to assist the people in those communities which are situated on the racial frontier.

Since the end of World War II, scholars, journalists and social reformers have devoted little attention to the white ethnic working class communities. It was assumed that the offspring of European immigrants had lost their identity in the "melting pot," that they were well entrenched in the middle class, and that the plight of the new urban immigrants, the non-white minorities, deserved priority attention. Recent studies clearly indicate, however, that many elderly white-ethnics are living in abject poverty, that most working class families do not earn "middle class" incomes, and that white blue-collar youth must grapple with many of the same problems that have produced such widespread alienation among affluent college youth.

As the result of two decades of neglect, we know very little, unfortunately, about the white ethnics—their precise numbers, the composition of their communities in terms of age, occupation, income and education, and the importance of their cultural heritage in understanding their social behavior. More recently, however, the academic community, the mass media, the foundations, and a growing number of people in official Washington have rediscovered the "white ethnics." This renewed interest is based on the realization that to continue to ignore their valid needs is to jeopardize those efforts which are designed to restore urban America and to reduce social discord rooted in economic insecurity and racial misunderstanding.

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 deepseated 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.

Labor unions, in the light of run-away inflation and growing unemployment, recognize the anguish and ever increasing concern of the working class. As the official newspaper of the national AFL-CIO recently stated: *"The truth is, the majority of people who work for a living are not a part of 'affluent America.' The median family made \$8632 in 1968—less than the 'modest but adequate' standard designed by the government. In 1965 the average industrial worker with three dependents took home \$88.06 a week, his after taxes pay in 1969 was \$87.27 when price adjustments are taken into account."*

The lack of adequate housing is also a matter of deep concern to the working class. Four out of every five American families cannot afford to buy a house that is priced halfway between the cheapest and the most expensive. HUD Secretary, George Romney, has pointed out that \$27,000 is now the national median housing price. On the average, a family would need an income of nearly \$14,000 a year to buy and maintain such a house, Mr. Romney concluded. Fewer than 20 percent of U.S. families make that much. Five years ago, the median house was within reach of two out of five families.

We believe that the Church must play a pivotal role in bridging the ever widening gap between work-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 foundations, the universities, and the Church, 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 in human needs.

In order to rebuild and restore American cities and develop the kind of relationship that will be positive

rather than negative between black and brown minority groups and white ethnic groups, the following suggestions are in order:

1) A major effort is necessary to inform and sensitize mainstream institutions, both public and private, to the varied social, economic, and cultural problems existing in working class white ethnic communities.

2) Residents of ethnic communities must be provided with information and research assistance which is relevant to social, cultural and economic community development.

3) Social scientists and other scholars, in cooperation with community leaders, must help design educational programs dealing with ethnic studies (black-brown-white) in primary and secondary schools, both private and public.

There is also a need to:

1) Research ethnic and/or working class factors in today's urban ferment.

2) Explore the use of federal and private programs in cultural, economic and social development, and new methods of participation in these programs by ethnic communities.

3) Encourage federal agencies to explain their programs in a more meaningful way to working class white ethnics.

4) Re-examine programs in manpower development, housing, medical care, education, etc., in an effort to meet more effectively the legitimate needs of neglected ethnic groups and to expand their involvement in these programs.

5) Develop new legislation to meet the needs of working class white ethnics who are presently excluded from a wide range of federal programs.

6) Encourage community residents to become involved in their cities, and to identify, support and help design programs for social, cultural and economic development.

7) Urge the mass media to correct the kind of stereotyped reporting which portrays ethnic groups and working class people in a negative light. The news media's recognition of the legitimate concerns of the white working class and fair and accurate re-

porting of their problems is an important first step towards reducing their alienation, which has deflected them from recognizing that they share many problems and concerns in common with their non-white neighbors.

The rediscovery of ethnic awareness among working class whites as well as blacks and Spanish-speaking can be a progressive factor in solving America's urban problem. A new view of American society as culturally pluralistic, with various groups being equally respected, must be fostered if we are to develop the multi-racial coalition needed to resolve our urban crisis.

Many ethnic groups in our urban society are already organized around the Church. Social and fraternal groups also play a very important role in the various ethnic communities. The Church, in cooperation with such groups (e.g., the Black-Polish Conference of Detroit), can do much to achieve common community goals. Such cooperation can effectively reverse our local and national spending priorities so as to enable us to deal more realistically with the many domestic social and economic problems which now so tragically divide us.

At the community level, the parish priest has an indispensable role to play in initiating cooperation between the various minority and ethnic groups. He must be aware, above all, that the new ethnic consciousness in urban America, which we heartily support, should never allow ethnic groups to close in on themselves or to use ethnicity as a means of excluding others. The role of the parish priest also includes:

a) Teaching ethnic groups how to respect the best in their own cultural heritage.

b) Teaching these groups the real value of a free and open society in which all groups are equally respected.

c) Isolating common community problems affecting all urban residents and uniting the various ethnic and minority groups in solving them.

d) Preventing polarization and closed-mindedness among these groups.

e) Developing an international awareness among Americans because of the ties of some ethnic groups with their relatives in other parts of the world.

The urban crisis, at its core, is a human and a moral crisis. Thus the importance of the Catholic Church in helping to resolve it. The Church in this country has traditionally been an urban church. Its institutions represent a crucial force that might well be decisive in restoring our cities and determining the future life-style of urban Americans. The Church's strength, through its clergy and laity, is now more vitally needed than ever before to assist largely Catholic ethnic neighborhoods in our cities to develop social, economic and cultural programs designed to restore justice, peace, and social harmony in urban America, the most ethnically and culturally pluralistic nation in the world.

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