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**Labor Rights in the New Millennium
--- 'the priority of labor over capital'
Part 3**

The Washington Post headlined E. J. Dionne's September 4, 2011 column with a radical question relating to the troubled status of unions and the right to collective bargaining --- "The Last Labor Day?"

In the light of recent controversies on the political scene, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, Dionne mused: "We may still celebrate Labor Day, but our culture has given up on workers as the real creators of wealth and their honest toil --- the phrase itself seems antique --- as worthy of genuine respect."

In support of labor's cause, Dionne quoted a remarkable statement from past history voiced by a prominent American political figure: "Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves the higher consideration."

Many readers, no doubt, would be taken by surprise to learn that the passage cited was excerpted from President Abraham Lincoln's annual message to Congress in 1861.

Dionne detected a resonance in Lincoln's words with a principle formulated by Blessed John Paul II in his 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work"), namely, *the principle of the priority of labor over capital*. (LE n. 12)

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) sums up the central theme of *Laborem Exercens*: ... *work*, the fundamental good of the human person, the primary element of economic activity and the key to the entire social question." (CSDC n. 101)

Laborem Exercens marked the ninetieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Condition of Labor," 1891). Notwithstanding the expansion of the social question to an international scope since the times of Pope Leo XIII, the relationship between labor and capital, especially in the present globalized economy, continues to call for basic justice in defense of the rights of workers.

With the Church's response to the injustices spawned by the 19th century Industrial Revolution, *Rerum Novarum* is the cornerstone of a tradition which over the decades has developed into an organic and systematic corpus of social doctrine.

At the end of the 19th century, Pope Leo XIII's argument for a moral right to a just wage is derived from the dignity of the worker, for to treat any human subject as a means to an end is patently unjust.

In condemning the so-called "wage-contract" theory as immoral, Leo XIII taught that the productive labor of a worker cannot be traded on the market as if the worker were a commodity to be bought and sold according to the laws of supply and demand.

Laborem Exercens considers the ethical principle, *the priority of labor over capital*, "a postulate of the order of social morality." (LE n.15) Thus, in the process of production, labor is "a primary efficient cause." By contrast, capital (i.e., "the whole means of production") falls into the category of an instrumental cause. (LE n. 12)

Professor Daniel Finn explains the sense of this distinction on the relationship of labor and capital: "Here 'capital' is not the capitalists but is the ma-

chines and natural resources that the capitalists own and use in production."

In the final analysis, therefore, whatever comprises capital is "only a collection of things." Whatever is "synonymous with 'capital' is the result of work and bears the signs of human labor." (LE n. 12)

Since the worker is by nature sacred and social, the principle of the *priority of labor over capital* defends the primacy of human persons over "things," ... of men and women over profits. (LE n. 13)

At the close of 19th century, Pope Leo XIII confronted the credo of 19th century liberal (*laissez-faire*) capitalism. At the close of the 20th century, Blessed John Paul II rejected the same ideology in the world of a global economy and of transnational corporations. He named the modern version as "neoliberalism."

In his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America* ("The Church in America," 1999) Blessed John Paul II critiqued the structures and dynamics of such economic systems as being marred by "an unbridled greed for wealth and power." As a result, "neoliberalism" dominates the socio-economic culture. (EIA n. 56)

"Neoliberalism" approximates a contemporary version of classic *laissez-faire* economics. Such a "winner-take-all" or "survival-of-the fittest" mind-set obstructs ethical attempts to regulate market mechanisms and profit maximization in pursuit the common good.

Consequently, the late Holy Father judged that this theory is rooted in a materialistic and purely economic understanding of persons.

At bottom, according to *Laborem Exercens*, *laissez-faire* capitalism was corrupted by "the error of economism" which in turn is underpinned by "an error of materialism." "Economism" understands labor "solely according to its economic purpose." The perspective of "materialism" dictates "the primacy and superiority of the material" and subordinates "the spiritual and the personal (man's activity, moral values and such values" to the dehumanizing realm of the mate-

rial. (LE n. 13)

However, the one-dimensional conception of the human subject in "economism", contravenes Catholic social doctrine which defends the subject of work as being more significant than the object of work, i.e., the product.

In this regard, *Laborem Exercens* introduced a correlative distinction between "work in the objective sense" (LE n.5) and "work in the subjective sense." (LE n. 6) The objective sense of the term denotes the technology; the subjective sense of work identifies the human person as "the subject of work." The latter concept simply affirms that "the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject." (LE n.6)

Blessed John Paul II noted that "in the first place work is 'for man' and not man 'for the work'." Anchored in this assumption, the natural rights of the worker are not contingent on the work produced; rather those inalienable rights are grounded in the sacredness and the essential dignity of the worker as a person.

A decade later, Blessed John Paul II published *Centesimus Annus* ("On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*," 1991), a commemoration of the centennial of Pope Leo XIII's inaugural social encyclical.

The first chapter of *Centesimus Annus* synthesizes the historical context and the foundational principles of the moral teaching of Pope Leo XIII. Next, in the second chapter, Blessed John Paul II projected the current and future socio-economic landscape of "The New Things of Today." The state of the question at the end of the second millennium was rapidly being reframed both by the turning point of the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 and the advent of a global economy.

Consistent with the teaching of Leo XIII, *Centesimus Annus* confirms the defense of the right of a worker to a "just wage" in *Rerum Novarum* (CA n. 8) as well as the worker's "'natural human right' to form private associations." (CA n. 7) Blessed John Paul II specified this principle as "the reason for the church's defense and approval of the

establishment of what are commonly called trade unions ... because the right of association is a natural right of a human being ...” (CA n.7)

As *Centesimus Annus* substantiates, the guiding principle of *Rerum Novarum* is rooted “in a correct view of the human person and his unique value.” (CA n. 11)

The labor question has remained, and continues to be, an integral and essential tenet of Catholic social doctrine. Concerning the role of labor unions, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* refers to the teaching of Section 20 of *Laborem Exercens*: “Such organizations, while pursuing their specific purpose with regard to the common good, are a positive influence for social order and solidarity, and are therefore an indispensable element of social life.” (CSDC n. 305)

The celebration of Labor Day each calendar year has become an occasion for the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to release annual Labor Day message.

On September 5, 2011, Bishop Stephen Blaire, the chairman of that committee, issued the 2011 Labor Day Statement --- “Human Cost and Moral Challenges of a Broken Economy

“Human Costs and Moral Challenges of a Broken Economy” stands as a call for “reflection and action on current economic turmoil and hardships experienced by workers and their families.”

Bishop Blaire sums up the tragedies and

its ensuing toll on men and women stemming from the current economic crisis: “This Labor Day, the economic factors are stark and the human costs are real: millions of our sisters and brothers are without work, raising children in poverty and haunted by fears about their economic security.”

Beyond the economic implications, the fallout from the economic crisis constitute “human tragedies, moral challenges, and tests of our faith.”

In the light of the present economic circumstances, the 2011 Labor Day Statement invites Catholics “to recall the traditional teaching of the Church on the dignity of work and the rights of workers.”

Bishop Blaire notes: “All these challenges have economic and financial dimensions, but they also have unavoidable human and moral costs. This Labor Day we need to look beyond the economic indicators, stock market gyrations, and political conflicts and focus on the often invisible burdens of ordinary workers and their families, many of whom are hurting discouraged, and left behind by this economy.”

In *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching* (1999) the Catholic bishops of the United States appropriately offer this terse summary of the inherent moral dimension of economic life: “The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation ...”

**Rev. Ronald M. Ketteler --- Commentary
... October 21, 2011**