

For Labor Day, a pope who lauds workers

BY JANMARIE TOKER

This Labor Day, workers across the country will be lighting up the grill and enjoying a well-deserved day off. While the support for workers this past year has been hit or miss, there has been one particularly bright spot that has come out in 2013, that being the refreshing attitude of our new pope.

While the church has long been a supporter of workers' rights, the working poor and the fight against income inequality, it has been especially heartening to see Pope Francis breathe new life and place a stronger focus on these matters under his leadership.

It may seem surprising to some who view Catholics as focused on only specific

issues, but labor and workers' rights have been part of the Catholic mission and values ever since Jesus Christ first spoke about workers and the poor.

In 1891, Pope Leo issued an open letter supporting the right of working people to form unions. In 1931, Pope Pius XI expressed support for the working class and the importance to have clergy and lay leaders from a working-class background. In 1981, Pope John Paul II, a strong union supporter, wrote about his hopes that through unions, "... workers will not only have more, but above all be more; in other words, that they will realize their humanity more fully in every respect."

The right of the workers of the world to be able to live full



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lives free from poverty and persecution has always been one of the cornerstones of the Catholic mission.

That is why it is especially refreshing to see the new energy Pope Francis has displayed to help the poor and the workers of the world.

In the six months since he was elected the first Jesuit pope, he has done an outstanding job so far using his position to advance the causes of the poor – and to bring attention to the issues that face workers.

For example, in the past few months, he has equated low-

wage labor to a form of slavery. He has made a number of remarks about the importance of fair wages for workers worldwide. In an address he made on May 16, he criticized corporations that care more about profit than people: "Human beings themselves are nowadays considered as consumer goods which can be used and thrown away."

He has also spent considerable time talking about unemployment and the fact that it is socially unjust. He has taken advantage of his position to call attention to unemployment as a significant social ill, announcing, "There are many people who want to work but cannot. When a society is organized in a way that not everyone is given the chance to work, that society is

not just."

He also has explained how unemployment is a moral issue: "Not paying fairly, not giving a job because you are only looking at balance sheets, only looking at how to make a profit. That goes against God."

Not only does Pope Francis speak of his support of the working class and the poor, but he lives it. He stands behind his words condemning the outrageous income gap by eschewing fancy clothes, car, or living quarters. Those actions, while small in scope, are meaningful in that they show his interest in being a pope for the people, rather than for the "1 percenters."

When considering moral issues, there are few that are more important than the abil-

ity of men and women to be able to work to provide for themselves and their family.

Attacking workers through low wages, lack of safety precautions, preventing workers from organizing or choosing profit over the people is immoral. Workers' rights advocates and labor leaders have been saying this for years.

And, so have Catholics. I'm happy to hear Pope Francis say it just a little bit more forcefully.

Perhaps now we will all listen.

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