

- Topic: The Church and Organized Labor
- Moderator: Patricia A. Lamoureux, St. Mary's Seminary and University,
Baltimore
- Presenters: Marion Steeg, South Bay Labor Council AFL-CIO, San Jose
Eugene J. Boyle, Interfaith Council on Religion, Race, Economic
and Social Justice, Santa Clara County
James P. McEntee, Sr., Office of Human Relations,
Santa Clara County

While there are high and low points in the history of the Roman Catholic church's relationship with labor unions, the overall picture reveals a tradition of cooperation. For more than 100 years Catholic social teaching has supported the rights of workers to organize and to bargain collectively. The efforts of Catholic "labor priests," as well as lay and religious men and women labor leaders, have earned the Catholic church a reputation as a friend of the American labor movement. Since the 1950s, however, there has been a tapering off and somewhat of a falling out between the Church and labor. This is due, in part, to Catholics' growing disinterest in labor organization as they moved up the economic ladder and their dissatisfaction with some corrupt and greedy practices of labor leaders. Presuming the importance and necessity of a Church-labor alliance, this session explored the present and future possibilities of a renewed and effective partnership.

Using case study methodology, Eugene Boyle focused on Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) to exemplify the kind of leadership and organization that is needed to create a "new amalgam" between the Church and organized labor. Boyle drew four relevant insights. (1) Experience sensitized Chavez to the plight of poor and oppressed farm workers. As the son of a union organizer, he encountered the reality of harsh and brutal conditions under which most farm workers lived and worked. He also experienced the difference that organization could make for powerless, poorly paid, and mistreated workers. (2) There was a fruitful wedding of religious faith with union organizing evident in many of the activities of the UFW. One notable example was the "peregrination," or religious pilgrimage that characterized the march led by the "Spirit-filled" Chavez to the Sacramento state capitol in support of collective bargaining rights for farm workers. (3) Catholic social teaching, particularly Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* gave Chavez the principles upon which he developed the UFW: the dignity of the worker, the right of working persons to share the fruits of their labor, the right to a living wage (a wage sufficient to support a family), the right to form unions, and the right to enter into collective bargaining arrangements with employers. The US bishops' statements on farm labor issued in November 1968 and 1974 as well as the subsequent development of the bishops' ad hoc committee on farm labor provided support for the UFW's organized grape boycott. (4) Chavez was inspired, taught, and supported by committed men and women: the feisty Dolores Huerta who was actually the

cofounder of UFW; Rev. Donald McDonnell, who mentored Chavez in matters of social justice; and Fred Ross, a labor organizer who taught Chavez the practical tools needed to translate Catholic social teaching about worker justice into a labor union for farm workers.

Marion Steeg recounted the impact that Chavez, Sr. Betty O'Donnell, and a number of Catholic "labor priests" had on her, a non-Catholic. The intense commitment which reflected their religious beliefs to achieve justice for the working poor inspired her own commitment to better the lives of others through labor organizing. She argued for "new unions for a new economy." This will require labor to change its *modus operandi* of "business unionism" with its narrowly economic aims and become more of a voice for social and economic justice. Steeg maintained that in order for these "new unions" to be successful, there must be a partnership among labor, the churches (interfaith), and the civic community. For example, the Justice for Janitors campaign and the Living Wage Ordinance in San Jose were both successful largely because of this broadened alliance. On the other hand, the Catholic church is an unwelcome partner when it engages in antiunion activity, that is, the hiring of professional union busters and the firing of union activists. This has occurred, according to Steeg, with Catholic Health Care West located in California.

James McEntee broadened the scope of the discussion beyond the relation of the Church with organized labor to include the responsibility that the Catholic community has for all working people, especially the poor. He emphasized the importance of Scripture, especially Matthew 25 and the symbol of the Body of Christ to motivate and sustain this commitment. McEntee explained the wide agenda that a Church-labor alliance must have to be effective in the future and for the Church to be true to its mission. In addition to working together to secure workers' rights, a Church-labor alliance needs to consider the new immigrant population and the lack of affordable housing. New immigrants have special and unique needs that require the same kind of attention that the Church gave the early wave of immigrants from Europe in the nineteenth century. And the discussion of a living wage must consider the costs and availability of housing in different parts of the country.

A good discussion followed that focused on ways to teach effectively about worker justice and labor issues; how to foster a Church-labor alliance without the leadership of the "labor priests" of the past; and how to address feelings of frustration and hopelessness people of faith experience when they encounter social injustice of global magnitude.

PATRICIA ANN LAMOUREUX
St. Mary's Seminary and University
Baltimore, Maryland