

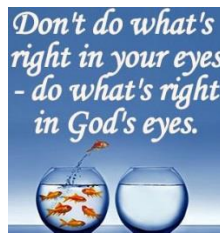
ENCOURAGEMENT ENCOURAGEMENT

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To Strike or not to Strike...?

You may be surprised to know that the church provides us with a code of practice that tells us much about striking or withdrawing labour for any reason. As the world became more industrialised more issues became obvious that needed to be addressed. We all have our opinions on these matters and often they are linked with our experiences, our own work or our politics. Today when there seem to be little guidelines on many of these issues a Christian is left unaided as to what is the morality of any action and its justification or otherwise. Many would argue that it is a matter of opinion and preference only, and that ethics are not important. On the other hand we see people struggle with both the right to strike and their obligations to employers and the people they serve. There are clearly many things to be addressed and it is not always a straightforward course of action.

The word 'strike' has overtones of violence which do not always convey the purpose of such actions. Withdrawing labour or work is perhaps a better indication of what is proposed for it begs the question WHY? In 1891, Pope Leo XIII published the first letter/encyclical 'Rerum Novarum' on these issues and it was considered progressive and almost revolutionary. It set the scene that work plays a crucial part of a person's life and that there had to be mutual agreement and binding ways of operating on both the worker and the employer. It also stated the importance of the dignity of the work and the worker. Subjects such as wages, benefits and the spirituality of work were explained. By 1981, almost a hundred years later the world had changed significantly, and Unionisation had grown and the collective protection of people's working rights. As a consequence, Pope (St.) John Paul II issued another encyclical called 'Laborem Exercens', in 1981, ninety years after the first. This expanded on many of the ideas and statements of the previous and took into account the many other forms of employment especially the rôles of women. This laid great stress on the 'dignity of man' and the right and obligations of both employers and employees and the importance of making a settlement. It also stressed the necessity of just wages and working conditions



Both are worth looking at today and pondering. The concerns, while deepening, are those faced over many years and not always referenced.

There are many examples taken from the Gospels, that Jesus himself was aware of the issues of work and people's rights. We have the famous story of the 'workers in the vineyard' and although having a deeper spiritual significance it also points to Jesus' compassion for those that were 'left not working' (Mathew 20:1-16). We also have the question of working on the Sabbath and hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Jesus of course chose mostly fishermen to follow Him... All are equal in the sight of God.

As we live at a time when 'striking' is a big problem facing societies especially after a pandemic, and with major climatic problems, it is perhaps important to look very carefully at the statements which are issued and guidance to those whose take their responsibilities of work seriously, both as a need for survival but also in terms of service to others... and there are many such. We have also to consider the duties and rights of the state.

There are two statements on the catechism that are very important to consider...

'Striking becomes unacceptable when accompanied by violence or when objectives are included that are not linked to working conditions or are contrary to the common good.'

This needs very careful thought. Clearly violent action is not justified to gain improvement in wages etc. But more difficult is the second statement relating to working conditions.

Interestingly phrased, for it does not mention money and wages specifically though this is implied but included working conditions...so much in debate today, both for the work force, and the service itself that is provided to others. It also mentions the common good. This has to be reflected upon very carefully as one could argue that at times the 'common good' has to be put first, say in a financial depression.. but it can also be argued that the improvement of a service serves this.

THE HOST APOSTOLATE
WWW.THEHOSTAPOSTOLATE.ORG

14, GOATBECK TERRACE,
LANGLEY MOOR,
COUNTY DURHAM DH7 8JJ
thehostapostolate@gmail.com

'I asked you and you would not listen; so I asked my God and He did listen.' St. Scholastica

The second useful statement states...

The Church's social doctrine recognises the legitimacy of Strikes "when it cannot be avoided or at least when it is necessary to obtain proportionate benefit when every other method for resolution of disputes have been ineffectual."

This statement implies a last resort but also the right to withdraw work to gain that which is essential.

There is an emphasis here on every other means having been exhausted. There is also a moral obligation on both sides of the argument or try every means and not to entrench but seek resolution.

Both these guidelines, Catechism of the Catholic Church 2430, 2435, are a good basis for reflection when strike action is called for. These should be considered together with prayerful consultation..

Linked with strike action in the employment sense there are other situations that may require a greater sacrifice and surrender to moral values. There are issues sometime of nonviolent opposition to laws and dictates or when fundamental right are being infringed.

Franz Jägerstätter was born on 20 May 1907 in St Radegund, Upper Austria. Franz received a basic education in his village's one-room schoolhouse. His step-grandfather helped with his education and the boy became an avid reader. After his marriage to Franziska in 1936 and their honeymoon in Rome, Franz grew in his faith but was not extreme in his piety. In 1930s, while much of Austria was beginning to follow the tide of Nazism, Franz became ever more rooted in his Catholic faith and placed his complete trust in God. While carrying out his duties as husband and breadwinner for his wife and three little daughters, this ordinary man began thinking deeply about obedience to legitimate authority and obedience to God, about mortal life and eternal life. Franz was neither a revolutionary nor part of any resistance movement, but in 1938 he was the only local citizen to vote against the annexation of Austria by Germany, because his conscience prevailed over the path of least resistance.

Franz Jägerstätter was called up for military service and sworn in on 17 June 1940. Shortly thereafter, thanks to the intervention of his mayor, he was allowed to return to the farm. Later, he was in active service from October 1940 to April 1941, until the mayor's further intervention permitted his return home.

He became convinced that participation in the war was a serious sin and decided that any future call-up had to be met with his refusal to fight.

"It is very sad to hear again and again from Catholics that this war waged by Germany is perhaps not so unjust because it will wipe out Bolshevism...."

Jägerstätter was at peace with himself despite the alarm he could have experienced when many people knelt when Hitler made his entrance into Vienna. Catholic Churches were forced to fly the swastika flag and subjected to other abusive laws.

In February 1943 Franz was called up again for military service. He presented himself at the induction centre on 1 March 1943 and announced his refusal to fight, offering to carry out non-violent services such as in the medical core but this was denied him. Put to trial on 6 July 1943 he was condemned to death, by beheading, for sedition. On 9 August, before being executed, Franz wrote: "If I must write... with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains. Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of his Faith and his free will. God gives so much strength that it is possible to bear any suffering.... People worry about the obligations of conscience as they concern my wife and children. But I cannot believe that, just because one has a wife and children, a man is free to offend God". Franz Jägerstätter, who would not bow his head to Hitler, bowed his head to God. He was obviously called up to serve a higher order.

There is much to reflect in this Martyr and layman's story perhaps during the coming Lent? Where do our loyalties lie?
Halina Holman

In Memory of Pope Benedict R.I.P.

The Church's social doctrine has always maintained that justice must be applied to every phase of economic activity, because this is always concerned with man and his needs. Locating resources, financing, production, consumption and all the other phases in the economic cycle inevitably have moral implications. Thus every economic decision has a moral consequence. 'Charity is Truth' 2009

Feast Days in February

2nd The Presentation of the Lord

3rd St. Blaise

5th Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

6th St. Paul Miki & Companions

10th St. Scholastica

11th Our Lady of Lourdes

12th Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

14th Ss. Cyril & Methodius, Patrons of Europe

19th Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

21st St. Peter Damian

22nd Ash Wednesday: (Fasting & Abstinence)

26th First Sunday of Lent



Photo of Bl. Franz Jägerstätter