

Labor Day calls all to a spirit of collaboration, to stand in solidarity with workers, their families and the poor among us

As a child growing up in Montana, I viewed Labor Day as a mixed blessing. Labor Day was a holiday that brought our extended family together for a picnic or barbeque and frequently one last trip to Butte's Columbia Gardens. Labor Day also spelled the end of summer, a return to salt and pepper cords, the annual trip

since that first Labor Day, the human family continues to face a widening disparity between the rich and the poor, and an ever growing body of families living from hand to mouth. How many parents are forced to moonlight in order to pay rent and keep bread on the table? How many persons have labored an entire lifetime, only to learn that the self-serving decisions of certain corporate executives or board members have emptied their retirement accounts?

How many farmers and ranchers are struggling to remain solvent as giant farming conglomerates, sky-rocketing operational costs, unfriendly trade policies, and fluctuating markets threaten to overtake the family farm? How many communities have stood in stunned silence as small businesses disappear and scores of jobs are exported, out-sourced, or eliminated? Who among us has not paid dearly because

inadequate or oppressive environmental policies have ruined the

pristine beauty of Montana and jeopardized the health of our citizens?

Clearly the underlying meaning and ideals of Labor Day are as important as ever. All of us have the responsibility to collaborate together to protect the rights of workers, relieve the burdens of working families, strengthen our regional economy and stand in solidarity with those who have been hardest hit by the changes and challenges of our time.

The spirit of Labor Day and the pressing needs of our people offer the entire community new opportunities to work together in creative and unprecedented ways. Government officials, small business owners, farmers and ranchers, corporate leaders, union leaders, pastors, working families and ordinary consumers in Montana stand at an economic crossroads together. In the complex world in which we live, the collaborative spirit is the surest and most effective way to secure a healthy economy, protect the rights of workers and their families, improve the lot of the working poor, and address the needs of the most vulnerable in our midst.

The Second Vatican Council instructs us "to preach the message of Christ in such a way that the light of the Gospel will shine on all activities of the faithful." A collaborative vision sees working men and women as co-workers and valued collaborators whose wisdom, experience and well-being are vital components in a healthy industry, business or corporation.

A collaborative attitude allows government leaders to think and act in bi-partisan

fashion for the sake of ordinary workers and families. A collaborative attitude encourages elected leaders to tap into the wisdom and experience of business and agricultural communities to find ways together to create a strong and secure business climate in our region. That same spirit encourages elected officials, business leaders, and farming communities to dream creatively, think regionally, and work internationally to reign in the costs of health care, childcare, fuel costs, and to stem the exportation of Montana jobs. A collaborative outlook welcomes dialogue with religious leaders who care deeply about the common good and the well being of the poorest and neediest in our community.

A collaborative spirit also keeps in focus the dignity and worth of the individual worker and sees that economic decisions have human consequences and moral content. In the words of the American bishops, "economic decisions help or hurt people, strengthen or weaken family life, advance or diminish the quality of justice in our land."

The collaborative vision acknowledges the inestimable value of just wages and benefits. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "A just wage is a concrete measure - ~~of the respect for the person~~ - of the justice of a system." A collaborative spirit understands the values of incentives and profit sharing, continuing educational opportunities, and apprenticeship programs.

That same spirit underscores the responsibility of the worker to provide a full day's labor for a just wage and to take initiatives to increase the profitability and productivity of the employer. The spirit of Labor Day promotes dialogue, goodwill, civility and mutual respect as characteristics of the collaborative working environment.

Pope John Paul II and the American bishops have clearly and consistently taught that "the Church fully supports the right of workers to form unions or other associations to secure rights to fair wages and working conditions." They have underscored the need for union leadership to keep the common good and the value of respectful dialogue in focus. In the difficult economic circumstances of the day, guaranteeing the rights of American workers "calls for imaginative vision and creative new steps - not reactive or simply defensive strategies." In the words of the American

bishops, "indeed, new forms of cooperation among labor, management, government and other social groups are essential."

As a Catholic community, we share the responsibility with the wider community for creating an environment guided by stewardship, generosity, self-sacrifice and creative thinking. This will allow us to practice what we preach, and offer our lay leaders and pastoral workers living wages and benefits that should come not from a spirit of charity but a spirit of justice.

So too, as consumers we do well to think critically, buy locally, and support the local business community to the fullest extent possible. There is an adage that advises us to "live more simply, so that others may simply live." In the spirit of Labor Day, it is timely to evaluate shopping habits, examine personal investments and corporate portfolios, and systematically avoid businesses and governments that violate human rights, or employ unethical labor practices.

Labor Day is indeed a time to think deeply and pray fervently, recalling in gratitude the advances we have made, while remembering that we also have "miles to go before we sleep."

The light of the Gospel and the grace of Catholic social teaching makes this power both to form and transform society. That transformation begins in our individual hearts and moves out into our community.

Labor Day 2004. It's everyone's business!

Sincerely yours in Christ,
+ George L. Thomas

Most Rev. George L. Thomas
Bishop of Helena



BISHOP THOMAS' THOUGHTS

uptown for school supplies, the unwelcome return of the alarm clock, and the end of a carefree summer.

As a youth I was oblivious to the underlying significance of Labor Day in the lives of ordinary working families. I didn't realize the perennial importance of Labor Day as a way to celebrate small and large victories and gains that came to us through the efforts of labor unions and the blood, sweat and tears of earlier generations. Nor was I aware that Labor Day was a way to stand in solidarity with new generations of women and men still struggling for economic security, humane working conditions, decent wages and benefits for themselves and for their families.

Since its formal inception in 1884, Labor Day still serves as a significant reminder of the value of human labor and human rights, as well as the importance of a sound economy. It is a holiday that connects the struggling families of the past with present day workers still vying for living wages and decent working conditions. It is a reminder to be grateful for the blessings won by our parents and grandparents, and a stark reminder to take none of them for granted.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wisely observed that "the joys and the hopes, the grieves and the anxieties of people of all ages, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the grieves and the anxieties of the followers of Christ." (G.S. 1)

While many advances have been made

