

FROM THE PASTOR'S



13th Sunday in Ordinary Time – July 1, 2007 C

“I DON’T SHOP IN WAL-MART. I DON’T WEAR NIKE SNEAKERS. I AVOID BUYING ANYTHING MADE IN CHINA.”

The *U.S. Catholic* magazine continues to have many excellent articles for us to ponder. Some of the articles are controversial—like the one you are about to read. The following article titled *Don’t Shop till they Drop* was written by Robert Sense, editor of *Human Rights for Workers*, a monthly online newsletter available at senser.com. Robert writes:

I don’t shop at Wal-Mart. I don’t wear Nike sneakers or any product with a Nike swoosh. I avoid buying anything made in China.

Until fairly late in life, I didn’t really care where things came from. I didn’t examine labels to see where clothing was manufactured or scan the copyright page of books to see where they were printed. If I liked a product, liked the price, and needed it for myself or my family, I bought it. No hesitation. But I’ve changed.

Now I have a visceral reaction against buying a sweatshirt that might have been made by a 10-year-old girl, or a shoe that might have been made by a priest or a Falun Gong member locked up in China’s notorious forced labor camps. What changed me?

About 15 years ago, during a job-related trip to Bangladesh, I saw little girls and boys as young as 10 or 11 toiling for a few cents an hour in factories assembling garments for Wal-Mart and other stores in the United States and Europe. The sight affected me deeply. Back home I attended a meeting of a Washington, D.C. group called the Child Labor Coalition and choked up when I reported on what I saw in Bangladesh.

*My personal experience visiting factories in Bangladesh, and later in other Asian countries, opened my eyes. Besides continuing to support the child Labor coalition, I started to monitor the fate of workers all over the world more closely by launching a website, *Human Rights for Workers* (senser.com). The size of the scandal is beyond belief.*

The labor problems of Wal-Mart and Nike, world leaders in their particular domains, are only symbols of the much wider problems in the global network of production and supply chains where sweatshops flourish. This network serves some 700,000 multinational firms with products from factories they do

not own, made by 70 million workers (mostly women) they themselves don’t employ.

U.S. workers aren’t immune to the effects of this network. The Economic Policy Institute says that the United States lost more than 3 million manufacturing jobs from 2000 to 2005, partially due to cheap foreign labor. Service industry jobs that have replaced many manufacturing jobs often don’t pay enough for people to live with dignity here.

Most people are shocked to learn about a sweatshop scandal—say, a Hanes factory in Bangladesh employing 200 children at wages as low as 6.5 cents an hour—but they also should be shocked to learn about U.S. children growing up malnourished and in poor health because their parents earn poverty-level wages from full-time jobs without health insurance. What can you realistically do to correct such gross violations of human rights?

What can you do?

You can boycott a product made in a sweatshop if you know the name of the product or its retail outlet. You can write a letter of concern to the embassy of the country where the tragedy occurred. You can donate to a worker rights advocacy organization, such as the child Labor coalition.

And you can help on the home front. Yes, here in the richest country in the world, we have our own brand of sweatshops and near-sweatshops— in restaurants, in meatpacking plants, in clothing factories, in hospitals, in farm fields, even on university campuses—where grown men and women work full time at near-starvation wages. You are needed to end that national scandal.

As a Catholic who has witnessed violations of human rights overseas, I personally cannot support companies that I know profit off poor workers there or here—and many do both. But there are other, often more effective, ways to get involved, for example, by lobbying and voting for raising the minimum wage at the federal level and in your own state and local community. And you can become an active participant in a grassroots campaign.

Many ordinary Americans, God bless them, are already involved in such local campaigns, which have done much better than Congress in increasing the pay of millions of underpaid workers in communities across the United States. In fact, thanks to such campaigns, at least half of all working men and women in the United States now live in cities and states where the official

minimum pay rate is higher than the decade-old federal minimum of \$5.15 an hour.

There are now countless churches, community organizations, labor unions, and other local advocacy groups taking up the cause of the poor. Their campaigns constitute a grassroots living wage movement that policymakers can no longer ignore.

How do you locate current and future campaigns?

The best national source is the Living Wage Resource Center in Washington, D.C. On this organization's website, livingwagecampaign.org, you'll also find how to information and useful links to other sources. For local information, check your parish or area civic organizations, labor unions, and newspapers.

While the new Congress is working to raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour, this movement does not want to settle for merely a minimum wage. After all, for a worker employed 52 weeks of the year, the \$7.50-an-hour state minimum established in California in 2005 comes to only \$15,600 a year, which is \$3,750 below the 2005 federal poverty level for a typical family of four. The real goal is to win a living wage—or just wage in Catholic social teaching—one adequate to support a worker and his or her family at a decent level. There is no formula for setting that level for every community, since the cost of living and other circumstances vary geographically. Arriving at a fair amount in your area requires much bargaining. That's why justice-minded men and women need to participate in the negotiating process, in order to press for a dollar amount above the barest minimum.

The negotiations may appear to be only about money, but don't forget that a basic moral value is at stake. Catholic teaching regards achieving a living wage as a matter of justice. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "A just wage is the legitimate fruit of work. To refuse or withhold it can be a grave injustice." Or as Pope Leo XIII put it more than a century ago in his historic encyclical *On the condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum)*: "To defraud anyone of wages that are his due is a crime which rises to the avenging anger of heaven."

"Why doesn't the church stick to religion?"

During a campaign to raise the minimum wage in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Father Jerome Martinez, a pastor who supported the cause, was asked why he didn't stick to religion. "Well, pardon me—this is religion," he told a reporter later. "The scripture is full of matters of justice. How can you worship a God that you do not see and then oppress the workers that you do see?"

After much controversy, the city of Santa Fe gradually raised its minimum from \$5.15 an hour to \$9.50, the highest rate in the United States. The winning argument was quite straightforward: "It's just immoral to pay \$5.15; they can't live on that."

Opponents argue that raising minimum wages actually destroys jobs. But recent empirical research by economists

shows that adopting higher minimum pay has not stunted employment, and in some instances has even increased it. In a joint statement issued last October, 650 economists—including six Nobel Prize winners—asserted that a modest, inflation-indexed increase in the minimum wage, at both the national and state levels, "can significantly improve the lives of low-income workers and their families, without the adverse effects that critics have claimed."

The very idea of having government set a wage floor offends some people, especially business owners. But *Responsible Wealth*, a national network of business people, investors, and the affluent, holds that "paying employees a living wage is good business, creating stronger communities and better customers" and urges business to sign a "covenant" in support of that goal.

From my own perspective, reached after long personal efforts to apply Catholic social teaching to modern problems, I find much virtue in this movement for a living wage. I see more and more ordinary citizens, working together, living up to the words of the gospel to love our neighbor. I see them disproving the immoral theory that human lives can improve only through value-free market competition. I see them showing how people can address other modern challenges, such as world poverty and unjust international trade and investments laws. In short, I see people moving toward a world in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

I was so struck by this article that I decided to raise the salary of employees making less than \$10 an hour to \$10.00.

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Coming Home to the Catholic Church

Please consider telling your friends, co-workers, neighbors about EWTN's program *The Journey Home* — a weekly TV program which tells the story of how non-Catholics were led by the Holy Spirit to discover the *fullness* of what Jesus came to teach in the Catholic Church. On my television it is channel 169. I have been also viewing another program on EWTN called *What Catholics Really Believe*. This program is hosted by a psychologist who left the Catholic Church and has now returned.

Have a great week and a wonderful 4th of July,

LeParan