

Labor Day Message 1979

from

The Urban Bishops Coalition of the Episcopal Church U.S.A.

(We commend that this Labor Day Message be read, in place of the sermon, at all services on the Sunday before Labor Day, Pentecost 13, September 2, 1979. It will take ten minutes to read.)

We, the members of the Urban Bishops Coalition of the Episcopal Church, address this Labor Day Message to all who are summoned by God to be co-workers with Him in the accomplishment of His purpose in the world.

This secular holiday, created to honor the workers of the land, points towards profoundly religious truths. It reminds us that God is Lord of all and that we are called by Him to be collaborators in the continuing process of creation. All the earth is the Lord's, entrusted by Him to our care and nurture.

His call demands that we be faithful stewards of that which we have been given—and this includes the right of every person to participate in God's work in the world. For many, the work to which we are called provides adequate compensation, but for others it does not. Increasing numbers are deprived entirely of the opportunity to work. And the disparity between the rich and the poor continues to grow.

We approach with confidence and hope the struggle to be faithful stewards and to provide opportunities for others to participate in God's work in the world. We know we are sustained and encouraged by the Creator, who has placed the world in our hands; and we know that He works with all who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

On this Labor Day we are beset on every side by destruction which was made vividly clear to us in the Urban Hearings undertaken by the Urban Bishops Coalition in cities large and small throughout the country. There we heard the cries of the poor, the homeless, and the hungry; and

there we learned more about the reality of the political, economic and social forces deep within the structure of our society which cause this human misery. We heard that forced unemployment afflicts an increasing number of persons, especially youth, women, blacks, the aged, and other minorities; and know that the present growing economic recession will make things worse for them. The further spectre of plant closings and relocations, already seen in the steel and automobile industries, promises new loss of livelihood for thousands of persons and even the collapse of whole communities.

We note with apprehension that this increasing economic contraction is combined with an uncontrolled spiral of inflation which now runs at an annual rate far greater than the most pessimistic forecasters have predicted. Its gravest effect is upon the poor, the marginally employed and those who live on fixed incomes. Such a spiral, combined with growing unemployment, is a threat to the economic survival of countless persons and families who once believed their futures to be secure.

We have heard about and see a deterioration of our cities, making them unfit for human habitation. We see them losing resources and revenue which would enable them to meet the needs of their people; and we see our urban political leaders yielding to special interests which demand cutbacks in human services to persons whose needs increase as the economy declines. We are moved by the plight of our brothers and sisters who are harassed by displacement, deterioration and deprivation.

There are many false signs of rejuvenation. One example is the return of the middle class to residence in the cities, even though a trickle compared to the stream of middle class persons to the suburbs. In fact, such gentrification often displaces the poor by raising the cost of housing beyond their ability to pay. So the efforts which focus on construction of islands of affluence and prosperity in the heart of the cities do little to respond to the needs of the poor.

In addition, we all live under the threat of thermonuclear destruction, paid for by immense resources which could otherwise be devoted to the needs of our people.

These realities lead us to call people to a visible expression of faithful stewardship. We pledge ourselves and ask those who receive this message to join with us in the following actions:

First, we reaffirm the local congregation and neighborhood as a primary place of mission for evangelism and ministry. This means that a substantial

portion of the church's resources—personnel, properties and monies—must be directed to such congregations for developing and acting upon their vocation as advocates for the poor and alienated in the communities in which they reside.

Second, an unquestionable priority for the church's mission in collaboration with others at this critical time is stopping the arms race which we see as the great crime of our era. The future of the cities and their people, indeed the future of the total society and civilization, is threatened today by the spectre of nuclear holocaust. We call for a moratorium on the development of nuclear weapons and the transfer of our resources and skills to the essentials of housing, health care, quality and equal education, meaningful jobs and especially for the eradication of racism, sexism and poverty in our nation and throughout the world.

Third, we call for a new sense of purpose in the church and a new solidarity founded upon doing the church's mission through involvement, reflection and action with the poor and alienated. We discern a coming together of persons—blacks, hispanics, women, youth, unemployed, underemployed and elderly with many others who are committed to focusing the church's mission on the causes, the root causes, of the degenerative condition which confronts us. In the immediate weeks and months ahead we intend to give our personal involvement and support to organizing this unifying effort, and we invite you to join us.

The realities that confront us are not distinct problems but manifold symptoms of a disease that spreads its degenerative poison throughout our social system. Unemployment and underemployment, the widening gap between the haves and the have nots, the deprivation of the poor are all pieces of one cloth. It is a cloth woven by our conscious and unconscious choices. Both knowingly and unknowingly we have brought into being a destructive society which bestows wealth on a few and poverty on many. It makes us preoccupied with consumption and profit and not with the general welfare of the society.

It is out of that preoccupation that we have created energy needs, beyond our ability to meet, which push us to environmental risks that threaten ourselves, our children and our children's children. It is out of that preoccupation that we have acquiesced to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few and under the control of institutions which serve themselves rather than the public good. It is out of that preoccupation that we have created a military system to maintain control of spheres of

influence, raw materials, and economic activity in the four corners of the earth; a system that makes ever greater demands on our resources and drains our ability to meet the needs of our people.

We do not know how little time may be left to arrest the disease which is the result of our preoccupation. But we act in hope. In the name of the compassionate Christ and the justice of God, we pledge our energies to a struggle for a just and humane society in which the needs, the aspirations, and the well being of all God's children are realized.

In the sixth century before Christ, the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed the Word of the Lord to Israel: "Your father ate and drank like you but practiced justice and right: This is good. He defended the cause of the poor and the needy: This is good. Is this not what it means to know me?" (Jeremiah 22:15-16)

The integrity of the People of God is related inextricably to their commitment to justice and right, and their defense of the poor and needy, which is the clear call of Jesus in His first startling sermon: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

As the Episcopal Church gathers next Sunday for its Sixty-Sixth General Convention, we commit ourselves to pointing the Church's leadership and resources in the building of a society characterized by justice and right and the defense of the poor and the needy.

We invite you, brothers and sisters, to join us.

