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FRANCISCANS SUPPORT WORKERS' RIGHTS

NEW YORK — March 16, 2011 — The leaders of Holy Name Province, the largest United States religious community of men following St. Francis of Assisi, are voicing their support of workers' rights and labor unions. The nine members of the HNP council released a statement to its 350 members emphasizing the connection of current issues with Catholic social teaching.

The Rev. John O'Connor, OFM, provincial minister of the 110-year-old organization based in Midtown Manhattan, called "alarming" the recent trend by some local governments to limit or eliminate the hard-earned bargaining rights of unions. To remind friars of the Church's stance on unions, he distributed the Franciscan perspective to the friars at the Province's more than 40 locations.

The friars were encouraged to share the information with their parishes and ministries. Below is the statement, written soon after the Wisconsin demonstrations began.

We are well aware that difficult economic times call for hard choices and diligent financial responsibility on the part of federal, state, and local governments to promote the common good. At the same time, as heralds of the Gospel, we must voice our concern that basic principles of social justice be maintained in these decisions.

That workers have the right to organize in order to negotiate with employers for a just wage and for adequate medical, disability and retirement benefits, has been a principle of Catholic moral teaching for more than a century.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (CSDC)(2004), summarizing this tradition, recognizes "the fundamental role" of labor unions, calling them "a positive influence for social order and solidarity, and...an indispensable element of social life... more fitting and necessary than ever" (#305).

Just two years ago, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us of this fact in his encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, observing that:

Governments, for reasons of economic utility, often limit the freedom or the negotiating capacity of labor unions. Hence, traditional networks of solidarity have more and more obstacles to overcome. The repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum* (1891), for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past [#25].

That labor unions are still needed in the U.S. is quickly evident when we consider that as union membership has declined (from 30% of the workforce in the 1950's to less than 12% today), so too have

the relative incomes of working- and middle-class Americans. Simultaneously, the concentration of wealth in the top 1% of earners is now greater than any time since the 1920's. In the words of Peter Steinfeld, "our democracy has become the most economically unequal nation in the advanced world" (Commonweal, Vol. CXXXVIII, No. 5, March 11, 2011, p. 5, 20).

Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers can be viewed as a modern echo of the teaching of Jesus who insisted: "whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40).

Labor unions have the obligation of seeking not only the good of their members (subsidiarity) but also, in cooperation with the government, the common good of all (solidarity). They must not "lose contact with their specific role, which is to secure the just rights of workers within the framework of the common good of the whole of society" (CSDC, #307).

As states work to balance their budgets and to contain the spiraling costs of worker wages and benefits, they may legitimately seek to renegotiate past contracts with union workers. But they must not deny the collective bargaining rights of workers in a frantic scramble to arrive at fiscal solvency. Nor should union workers alone be made to bear the burden of eliminating government deficits flowing from the current severe economic recession, while that same government continues to afford tax breaks for the most wealthy. As John Paul II wrote in *Laborem Exercens* (1981): "The thing that must shape the whole economy is respect for the workers' rights within each country and all through the world's economy." (#17)

Economic justice for all must remain the goal of both unions and government, whose relations "must be marked by cooperation; hatred and attempts to eliminate the other are completely unacceptable" (CSDC, #306).

We appeal to everyone — government officials, union members, and ordinary citizens — to move beyond divisive words and actions and work together to build a society where there truly is "liberty and justice for all."

About the Franciscans

Holy Name Province is the largest of seven provinces in the United States that belong to the Order of Friars Minor. Its 350 Catholic priests and brothers serve in 12 states along the East Coast at colleges, parishes, urban ministry centers and a wide variety of social ministries as well as in Africa, Asia and South America.

The Order was founded in 1209 by St. Francis of Assisi, who, today, remains one of the most widely known saints, revered for his care for creation and passion for peace. His feast day is Oct. 4.

Information about Holy Name Province can be found on www.hnp.org.

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