REMARKS TO PANEL “AMERICAN CATHOLICISM AND IMMIGRANT WORKERS”

My thanks to panel chair Doctor Maria Mazzenga, and indeed to all the conference organizers, for doing such a great job. For me, today’s a homecoming, since it was from this university that I did most of the research for “Go to the Worker”—so Maria, archives director Tim Meagher, and others here are familiar and friendly faces. A special thanks goes to John Shepherd, who guided me through two great collections, those of the national Catholic Social Action Department and of its longtime director Father, later Monsignor, George Higgins.

Interviewing Higgins, I must tell you, was a highlight of my research. I well remember visiting his apartment not far from here, and sitting in a circle of stacks of his books and papers as he shared memories of the Catholic social-action movement. In his reminiscing—and this is true for all the movement members I spoke with—there was a strong sense of having been part of something very well-defined and tremendously significant, and of that something having great potential for good in both past and present. I offer my remarks in that spirit.

The Catholic social-action movement was instrumental, in my view, in providing social and spiritual justice to workers, Catholic and non-Catholic, in the United States of the New Deal era and for several decades beyond. Many if not most of these workers were immigrants or the children of immigrants, as were many if not most of the movement’s clerical and lay activists.

For both groups, their activism was a true pathway into American life, and they saw it in that light. To Chicago lay activist Ed Marciniak, a son of Polish immigrants, it meant, in his words, “that a whole new world opened up to me. I was excited to find,” he said, “that my religion could be an instrument of social change, and that in the movement we could help right the wrongs of injustice.”

Not long after publication of “Go to the Worker”, I became aware of efforts to help today’s immigrant workers along many of the lines of the Catholic social-action movement. While visiting one such effort, a New Jersey project called New Labor, I heard participants express the same sort of excitement which Ed Marciniak expressed. And I heard that the worker injustices being fought by these participants in and around their city of New Brunswick—unorganized workplaces, substandard wages and benefits, unsafe working conditions—are much like the injustices faced by workers back in the day.

What’s often different now, though, is that immigrant workers must also contend with the injustices stemming from a broken U.S. immigration system—a system which is overly restrictive, delay-
ridden, and results in too many deportation-divided families. In addition, millions of these workers are undocumented, meaning that they still live in the shadows and in fear of being deported—a situation which some employers frequently take advantage of. Changes are now underway, we know, to alleviate some of the system’s brokenness, but until this nation deals forthrightly and fairly with this crisis, it will continue to fester and to impede national progress.

Few know this better than those in projects like New Labor, yet I was impressed to find its participants to be full of optimism, energy, and confidence—a trait which the project strengthens through peer-to-peer training. I was also impressed by New Labor’s sharp focus on expanding the rights, roles, and paychecks of women workers, and by the project’s thoroughly ecumenical approach.

Local churches representing several faith traditions have supported New Labor, including Sacred Heart Catholic Church in the project’s neighborhood. I was delighted to discover that this church took part 70 years earlier in the Catholic social-action movement. New Labor is one of Interfaith Worker Justice’s 75 affiliates around the country, and is one of several dozen worker-justice efforts which have received assistance from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. In addition, the project cooperates closely with local unions, Rutgers University, and other worker-justice advocates in the New Brunswick area.

Across this nation, there are many worker centers like New Labor, and many justice-seeking parishes like Sacred Heart, as we’ve been hearing today. They have many partners, often unions active in the industries where both immigrants and lower-income jobs predominate—hotel/motel, food service, home health-care, janitorial, and construction. The projects, parishes, and partners are important parts of a growing movement. It’s a rather loose movement at this point, but it is a movement, and it bears many resemblances to its social-action predecessors. It indicates to us a number of possible dimensions and directions for the road ahead, and I think I can best help this afternoon by highlighting a couple of common threads connecting the past, present, and future of our topic.

The major common thread is foundation on the bedrock values of human dignity, the dignity of work and workers, and the fairness of a society’s welcoming the strengths and the vitality of its immigrants. These values underlie Monsignor John Ryan’s 1936 assertion that “no economic or other human practice can claim immunity from the moral law.” They underlie Dorothy Day’s observation, in a 1936 issue of her Catholic Worker newspaper, that workers are fighting for “their rights to be treated not as slaves but as human beings, and to be considered partners in the enterprises in which they are engaged.” And they underlie Pope Pius the Eleventh’s call, in his 1931 encyclical Quadragesimo Anno,
for employers and workers to share the ownership, management, and profits of their economic enterprises. That encyclical, of course, translates as “Fortieth Year” because it came 40 years after Rerum Novarum, or “New Things”, the first encyclical to champion worker organizing.

These are landmark documents. When we consider that Quadragesimo Anno appeared in a world mired in economic collapse, we can well understand what a ray of hope it was for workers everywhere. By the mid-1930s, activists of the Catholic social-action movement were spreading this encyclical’s powerful messages throughout the United States, especially among the largely-immigrant masses of industrial workers in the nation’s big cities—Chicago, New York, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Boston, New Orleans, Baltimore, Toledo, Gary, and all over.

Catholic social teachings were an essential underpinning of 1930s reform. Movement activists, clerical and lay, explored and applied these teachings in a national network of labor schools, and gave their lessons practical expression by taking part in many organizing drives, and by heavily influencing, and strongly advocating for, many pieces of New Deal worker-justice legislation.

The key measure was the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. It was based on the union-shop method of organizing, whereby unions chosen by the majority of workers in a collective-bargaining unit represented, and advocated for, all the workers in that unit. Organizing under that provision increased the proportion of U.S. workers unionized from seven percent at the beginning of the 1930s to one third at the end of that decade and for several decades thereafter. I’ll return to this point in a few moments.

The other common thread I’d like to highlight is the total inclusivity of Catholic social teachings. This aspect is based on the concept of the Mystical Body of Christ, which asserts that we are all God’s children and are therefore sisters and brothers of one another. Members of the Church treat others as potential members, or as if they were members. According to this concept, when you help someone in need—such as by helping an immigrant worker gain social justice—you minister to the Christ in that other person. This aspect, I believe, enables parishes and other groups engaged in such ministry to face both inward and outward at the same time. In this regard, I urge you to read the recent book The Shared Parish, as well as the Center for Migration Studies’ new report entitled U.S Catholic Institutions and Immigrant Integration.

Hand-in-hand with this inclusivity goes, or should go, a total commitment to diversity—of religion, gender, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, union status, whatever. Unfortunately, the commitment of even social-justice activists is often hampered by the biases of their era. Otherwise, I would have had several women labor apostles as chapter subjects of “Go to the Worker.” What I have done is highlight the achievements of the many women activists in the Catholic social-action movement, including union
organizers and officers and labor-school teachers and students. I also make it clear that Dorothy Day, while she led a separate movement, the Catholic Workers, was a major influence in the lives and ministries of more than half of the book’s chapter subjects.

Now let’s return to my point about unionization of U.S. workers going from seven percent at the beginning of the 1930s to one third at the end of that decade and for several decades thereafter. At this instant, you’re probably thinking of that seven-percent figure as being the same percentage of U.S. workers unionized today, which it is. You may even be thinking that this is a case of history repeating itself, and so did I—until I was recently reminded of Mark Twain’s dictum that “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” My thanks to fellow panelist Professor Joe McCartin for that reminder.

The key factor here and elsewhere, of course, is context. The United States now finds itself at a crucial historical crossroads. The unrestrained capitalism which contributed substantially to the nation’s Great Depression made a long-term comeback after World War II. In 1947, the National Labor Relations Act’s union-shop provision was replaced by the Taft-Hartley Act’s provision enabling so-called right-to-work states, now 24 of them. When that act passed, Social Action Department spokesman Father George Higgins immediately and bravely termed its central provision as “unfair and unworkable”, since under it, millions of workers become basically unrepresented and lack adequate worker protections. The percentage of U.S. workers unionized hovered close to a third for several decades after the act, but spiraled sharply downward following President Reagan breaking the air controllers’ strike of 1981, and kept falling until it reached its present alarming level. That strike, by the way, is well-described by Professor McCartin in his 2011 book Collision Course.

This brings us to the present, when we are back to the seven-percent figure and when unrestrained capitalism recently contributed substantially to another economic collapse, the Great Recession. These seeming repetitions, however, occur in the context of a time when a compelling case in being made that what the United States needs more than anything else right now is an economic system which fairly distributes the nation’s resources, and which gives all the nation’s workers a greater voice in their workplaces and a larger share of the ownership, management, and profits of the enterprises in which workers participate—and by workers I mean the great majority of the people in this country.

As we have seen, this case is at the heart of industrial democracy, and conforms closely to Catholic worker-justice teachings. These have been buttressed, since the heyday of the Catholic social-action movement, by the documents of Vatican II, by Pope John Paul the Second’s 1981 encyclical Laborem Excercens, “Of Human Work”; by the American Bishops’ 1986 pastoral letter Economic Justice for All;
and, just two years ago, by Pope Francis’s *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel”, in which he exhorts us to “return economics and finance to an ethical approach which favors human beings.”

Practical applications of these teachings are all around us. I call your attention to groups whose members have been described as a new generation of labor priests and laity. A member of one such group, Father Clete Kiley of the UNITE HERE union, sees the group as a legacy of the Catholic social-action movement.

Obviously, history is doing a lot of rhyming these days. The outcomes for immigration reform and integration will be profound. In the labor turmoil of the 1930s, it was the strengths and the vitality of immigrant workers which often made the difference in worker-justice advances. Today’s immigrant workers, I believe, using both old and new forms of organizing, and with help from us and from social-justice advocates everywhere, will again make a huge difference for good as this nation and its workers try to determine their destinies.