

**LABOR DAY 2022**  
**HONORING WORKERS ON COVID'S FRONT LINES**  
**PREACHING AIDES: THE ROMAN CATHOLIC LECTIONARY**  
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*For Labor Day Weekend, the Scripture readings for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time provide excellent opportunities for preaching. This resource sheet utilizes both the Second Reading and the Gospel for two separate approaches to preach on working people and the issues they face "on the job".*

**Second Reading: The Letter to Philemon**

St. Paul's **Letter to Philemon** is his shortest in **New Testament** literature, but brevity should not be confused with importance. Philemon belongs to a church that St. Paul has evangelized. Philemon has a slave named Onesimus (a name meaning "Useful" or "Beneficial").

When learning that St. Paul has been imprisoned, Onesimus runs away from Philemon to assist him, thus placing himself in grave danger of punishment. St. Paul now sends him back to Philemon along with this letter. In a critical moral challenge, St. Paul asks Philemon how he "sees" those employed or owed as slaves. St. Paul insists that Philemon and the whole church no longer look at Onesimus as only "a slave", but now as a "brother", someone sharing the dignity of baptism and a complete humanity with them.

Constantly re-examining our life before God is a challenging but essential spiritual task. There is always work to be done transforming our heart into the heart of Christ. Philemon is a man of faith and someone St. Paul respected. But his faith journey was far from over. He now was called to look again at Onesimus, but now through the eyes of Christ.

Verse 6 is critical for teaching that "faith may become effective in recognizing every good there is in us that leads to Christ." (emphasis added) Verses 15 and 16 completes the circle by encouraging Philemon and the other Christians at his house church to "have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a brother..."

In verse 17, St. Paul ups the ante even more, "So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him (Onesimus) as you would me." The church should welcome Onesimus as though they were welcoming St. Paul himself. The one looked upon as only "a slave" is now to be seen as sharing the importance of the Apostle himself. What are we called to look at and see anew through the Lord Jesus Christ?

Thus, presents us questions:

**Do we see a connection between our faith and our work? Our worship and our workplace?**

**Do I "work to live" or "live to work"? Does work enhance or disrupt family life?**

**How do we see those working hard at low wage jobs?** When someone needs to work at two or more low wage jobs to provide for a family, are we satisfied they are living out their "lot in life" as determined by the market? Or do we recognize an injustice and weigh in on behalf of those workers?

**Do we recognize those who remained on the front lines of Covid exposure often out of necessity and honor them for their work?**

From Magisterium, see **The Catechism** # 2428\*, #2434\*, also #1940, #2186  
**Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church**, #250, #264, #302

## Gospel: The Gospel According to St. Luke 14: 25-33

In this gospel passage, a large crowd of disciples and curious onlookers follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Although he knows the trial of darkness he will face there, no one following him is even remotely aware of where his mission will lead him or what will happen to him. Jesus turns and addresses them with stark imagery laying before them the real price of following him. A decision of discipleship will mean opposition, persecution and a battle with the darkness of our time. Such a choice requires trust, and perseverance especially in prayer allowing no one or nothing to block or hinder one's decision.

Following Jesus as a disciple today requires the same choice of travelling the road of justice in the face of injustice and oppression. Chris Smalls understands this exactly. Who is Chris Smalls? Chris Smalls worked as a supervisor for a large Amazon warehouse on Staten Island in New York City. He loved his job at first and there seemed to be a focus on helping employees "make it in life". But then workplace culture changed from a "humanity model" to a more "soul less" institutional model. Humanity was discarded for a more industrial stressful metrics driven culture.

In early 2020, when Covid19 emerged in the metropolitan area, thousands became sick daily, and hundreds died daily. Chris was fired after complaining about the unsafe working conditions and lack of protections from the virus. A year later he formed the Amazon Labor Union and began an organizing effort to form the warehouse workers as a labor union. Chris recruited two warehouse employees as organizers. The three of them faced the full weight and force of Amazon financial resources against them, spending over \$4million to defeat organizing efforts.

<https://time.com/6169185/chris-smalls-amazon-labor-union/>

Amazon's union busting efforts included, forcing employees to attend mandatory meetings where mistruths were spread regarding union membership, surveillance of workers, massive printing of anti-labor flyers and posters spread throughout the warehouse. Because Chris Smalls dresses in clothing associated with black hip-hop culture, rumors were spread regarding his supposed lack of intelligence, and his alleged immoral and illegal tactics.

On April 1, 2022, the workers at this Amazon warehouse voted 2,654–2,131 in favor of the union. Although that is the first of many difficult and tougher battles ahead of them, Chris Smalls and his two homeless organizers represent all that Jesus declares is necessary to bring justice into the world today. They are 21<sup>st</sup> Century examples of a "David" slaying "Goliath" with the use of one sling shot and two pebbles! [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris\\_Smalls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Smalls)

On this Labor Day Weekend, we need to remember that what happened on Staten Island in New York City is also happening in Maine as well. In May 2020, nurses at Maine Medical Center in Portland voted 1001-750 to form a labor union affiliated with the Maine State Nurses Association. This also came after a well-funded anti-union campaign launched by Maine Medical Center administration.

In January 2022, workers at Bates College in Lewiston cast their votes on whether or not to form a union. But those votes remain uncounted until appeals filed by the Bates College administration are settled by the National Labor Relations Board. Like Maine Medical Center and Amazon, Bates College administration expended large amounts of money hiring law firms established for the sole purpose of disrupting, harassing, and stopping union organizing efforts in workplaces.

"Why is this a topic of a homily at a Catholic Mass? The Roman Catholic Church supports workers' rights to have free and fair elections to decide to form (or not to form) a labor union. The Catholic Church supports this as a basic human right and has done so since Pope Leo XIII issued his papal encyclical **Rerum Novarum** in 1891. Since that encyclical, The Catholic Church has not only *allowed* labor unions, but *supported* and even *promoted* labor unions for workers to claim their rights in actions of solidarity.