

AMERICAN NURSES' ASSOCIATION
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ECONOMIC SECURITY ;

An Address Before the Joint Meeting of General Duty and Private Duty Nurses
At the ANA Biennial Convention, San Francisco, May 11, 1950,
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The first time that I faced a group of nurses on the subject of economic security one of the group came up to me after the talk and said very frankly, "I was absolutely against having a priest on the program because I could not imagine what a priest would have to say about the economic needs of the nurse." Probably there are some here with the same idea, for the majority of Americans seem to have that false idea that religion is something confined to the inside of a church, or at most, to the inside of an individual. Actually, religion must be concerned and is concerned with the normal growth, development and destiny of all human beings according to the intelligent design of their Creator. This Creator's design confers specific natural rights upon each person, rights necessary to meet the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs of every individual. These rights are interrelated. For example, there is a relationship between the economic security of a steady job and decent wages and a person's emotional and spiritual balance. There is certainly a relationship between how you eat and sleep and how you pray. There is a relationship between the decisions of the one who sets your work shifts and whether you get to church for a month of Sundays. There is a definite relationship between the justice and charity of your daily actions with others, either at work or at home or at play, and just how you stand with God. Thus there are plenty of ethical, moral, religious issues in a discussion of economic security.

Last Sunday it was my privilege to participate in the national observance of American Student Nurse Sunday by preaching a sermon of tribute to the noble profession of nursing on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of St. Mary's College of Nursing here in San Francisco. As I reviewed the very high spiritual ideals and values and unseen heroism of the nursing profession I kept thinking what a real injustice it would be if the lack of economic security in nursing would prevent any individual either from entering this wonderful profession or from remaining in it. Nursing is a profession, yes, more than a profession, a thrice-blessed vocation which gives the individual so many opportunities to be a better person, opportunities for the development of those heroic qualities and strengths of soul, understanding, unselfishness, patience and fortitude, opportunities to love your neighbor and to meet the physical and spiritual needs of a neighbor who is sick and helpless and dying. Certainly no one should be kept out of such a profession or be caused to leave such a profession because of unfair economic conditions, because of the lack of economic security.

It was brought to my attention last week that the 1950 goal in this country for the nursing profession is the recruitment of 50,000 additional nurses. It is reasonable to ask: how can this goal be achieved without realistic economic incentives? Certainly where the life and death needs of a community are at stake then the lack of economic security should never be an obstacle to meeting such needs. It has always seemed particularly ironic to me that a nurse who is so important to the security of society should ever be deprived of social and economic security.

What precisely does the word security mean? To understand the security of persons on a payroll we must understand the basic idea of our wage system, that is, the capitalistic wage system and believe me, I am not using the word capitalistic as a bad word. The basic idea of our capitalistic wage system, its motivating principle and spirit is this: Keep production costs down and maximize profits. Even in many nonprofit institutions that spirit prevails. When this wage system is completely uncontrolled, either by government or by the economic organization of employees, or by religious principles, then the effect of the system is always economic insecurity for those on the payroll. When this wage system is uncontrolled, the conditions of pay are almost entirely subject to the arbitrary will of the employer. The life, health, and morals of the employees are endangered by physically and morally unhealthy conditions of work. Moreover, the unwise, one-sided, unilateral decisions on prices, wages, and profits result in periodic economic crises and depressions which sweep away the all-important security of continued employment for millions of employees.

Fortunately, in recent years some elements of control have been used to offset the bad effects of our wage system. These elements are social legislation, collective bargaining, and even, in a few cases, the application of religious principles. In speaking of social legislation, let us repudiate immediately the idea of complete control by the provider state, the state that gives womb to tomb care. I refrain from the expression "welfare state" and use the expression "provider state" because "welfare state" is a current epithet used as propaganda against some very necessary social legislation. Let me insist again that in defining security we reject emphatically the concept of the state as a general welfare institute. We prefer the realization of security through self-help, through autonomous self-organization for this is much more consistent with our American and Christian heritage of the dignity of the individual.

With these ideas in mind let us now define security as developed especially in this country and as applied to all wage-earners and salary-earners. This security comprises a threefold aspect. First, there is the security of the employee's person. This security seeks to provide a certain minimum of protection for the health and life of those on the payroll. It has resulted in a comprehensive system of safety regulations, such as the regulations for those who handle power-driven machinery. To these are added today regulations as to the minimum period between shifts and breaks during shifts. There are also regulations concerning the labor of women and children -- prohibition or restriction of employment, prohibition of night work, protection of mothers in confinement.

The second aspect of security is the protection of the employee against the risks involved in the wage system. These risks consist of the total or partial cessation of income owing to sickness, accident, permanent invalidity, age, or unemployment. The progressive development of modern social policy has striven to meet these risks by the insurance system in the form of general or obligatory social insurance.

The third aspect of security is the guaranteeing of the employee's rights in the labor contract. The object is to defend the employee as the weaker party and to secure the minimum conditions demanded by human dignity. These conditions chiefly relate to wages, hours of work, paid holidays and length of notice. The great achievement in this matter has been the forty-hour week which allows an employee a reserve of time and energy to devote to home obligations, to cultural interests and to recreation. In the matter of wages, our social policy has finally reached a basic minimum wage of seventy-five cents per hour. A few exceptional industries give the security of guaranteed wages, that is, fifty-two pay checks guaranteed per year. A big step forward in the achievement of this aspect of security has been the legal status gained for the economic organizations of the employees.

The general result of this threefold security in health, work and wages has brought untold blessings to millions of human beings on the payrolls of our country. It has eliminated for many the harsh effects of insecurity of existence and it has caused a substantial raising of the standard of living as expressed in better food, clothing, housing, leisure, education and recreation. How has most of this security been achieved? It has been achieved chiefly through the economic force of effective self-organization. Employers and administrators are rarely moved to action favoring security through mere talk or preaching on social justice. Voluntarily, they rarely go beyond the pious nod approving the general principles of justice.

One of the common protests from hospital administrators is this: "We are running a charitable, nonprofit institution, not a regular business, and thus we should be exempt from the normal requirements of social justice." When this objection is from a Catholic source the first answer calls for a direct quotation from the official Canon Law of the Catholic Church, which has spoken very clearly on this point. Canon 1524 reads, "All, and especially priests and religious administrators of ecclesiastical goods, should give to their employees a fair and just wage." Certainly there is no exemption in this Canon for charitable institutions, in fact, the word "especially" points directly at all priests and religious administrators. This answer from Canon Law can be supplemented by the teaching of that great apostle of social justice, Pope Pius XI, concerning the relationship between charity and justice. He says, "But charity will never be true charity unless it takes justice into constant account ... A 'charity' which deprives the ~~working man~~ of the salary to which he has a strict title in justice, is not a charity at all, but only its empty name and hollow semblance." (Atheistic Communism, 49.)

Realistic churchmen recognize the need of organized force to bring about the reign of justice in economic relationships. In the joint Jewish, Protestant and Catholic Declaration on Economic Justice issued in October, 1946, it is stated: "Therefore, organization is both legitimate and necessary, since man, acting as an individual, is all but powerless to bring economic life into subjection to God's law. It is the duty of the free organizations of workers, farmers, employers and professional people to govern themselves democratically and to assume their full responsibility for the ethical conduct of their own industry or profession and for the economic welfare of the community and all its parts. It is also their moral duty to admit to their membership all qualified persons without regard to race, creed, color or national origin."

Nurses as a group have been slow to respond to the need of group techniques to improve working conditions and to protect their economic rights and requirements. Yet experience shows that anyone who works for a living simply cannot trust his welfare and security to the current benevolence of an individual employer. Experience also shows that even the best of intentions in the most Christian employers are rarely realized without the strong encouragement of organized group demands. There is no assurance that administrators, whether of profit or nonprofit institutions, will always be aware of the rightful and just needs of their personnel, or be disposed to grant them. Certain hospitals are quite backward in calculating and granting a living wage and decent conditions of employment. These same hospitals refuse to accept the normal means of this day and age to learn the just demands of their personnel through the freely chosen representatives of those on their payroll. Certainly the picture of conditions before and after effective economic organization should prove to anyone that some of the very minimum requirements of human needs will not be met voluntarily, but only through organized group pressure.

To the the nurse who feels that the group technique and collective bargaining are beneath her dignity, let her realize that it is actually in behalf of her dignity to strive through cooperation with others to improve personal security, conditions of employment and salary, accident and health insurance, paid sick leave and retirement plans. Dignity can be cold comfort in time of need.

Another objection to organization for economic reasons is raised in behalf of those nurses who consider their employment almost like a religious vocation, who voluntarily wish to dedicate themselves, their talents and their time to the works of charity. This is certainly a wonderful and beautiful ideal, but in God's Providence that noble ideal is given to very few and it must never be used as an excuse not to support those organizations which are fighting for the economic needs of all nurses.

One cannot speak on the subject of economic security for American nurses without a tribute to the California State Nurses' Association which has given such a splendid example of leadership in the field of economic security and collective bargaining for nurses. When you refer to the splendid salary scale of California nurses, or to holidays and sick leave with pay, or to the five-day, forty-hour week with consecutive eight-hour shifts -- you are referring to CSNA accomplishments. CSNA has al-

ways proceeded in a very professional and effective manner much like the giving of a hypodermic to an unwilling patient. Even the most dignified nurse could never accuse this splendid organization of sacrificing any of the dignity of the profession.

This entire discussion on economic security may have sounded quite demanding and mercenary to some ears, especially coming from a priest and directed to a professional group which has always been characterized by its noble spirit of generous service and smiling self-sacrifice. God forbid that I have given any of you bad thoughts! God forbid that I have agitated a mercenary spirit where it should never exist! But it is my deep and sincere conviction that the nurse with economic security will be a happier and better nurse, that the nurse with fair wages, decent hours, decent working conditions, future security and a chance to live a normal life will give better service and live closer to her ideals.

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