



Department of  
Theological Studies  
Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts

1 LMU Drive, UH3700  
Los Angeles, California  
90045-2659

T 310.338.7670; F 310.338.1947  
[www.lmu.edu](http://www.lmu.edu)

Paul S. Viviano, Chair, Board of Trustees  
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Rev. Edward J. Siebert, S.J., Secretary, Board of Trustees  
Members of the Board of Trustees  
Loyola Marymount University

September 19, 2025

Dear Chair Viviano, Chair-Elect Dean, and Secretary (Fr.) Siebert,

We want first to offer greetings for the new academic year, and to thank you for your service on the Board of Trustees. We understand your fiduciary duty to the university and your important responsibility for choosing our leadership and ensuring our future.

We write to you as Catholic theology faculty, currently serving and emeriti/ae, regarding the unanimous choice of the Board to claim a religious exemption and to withdraw recognition to present and future unions representing university faculty and staff.

We are not writing about the specific negotiations between the university and the SEIU bargaining unit of our non-tenure track faculty colleagues, to which we were not a party as tenured faculty. We understand from study and experience that union negotiations can be complex and contentious, and that there are critical budgetary questions at stake. We know that tenured faculty are not always cognizant of the ways in which the higher education models of today hover on the edge of sustainability, and many of us have connections to Catholic universities that have closed or renounced their Catholic identity.

We do, however, strongly object to the characterization of the present negotiations as if conducted by a third-party entity entirely separate from LMU. The union is composed of faculty colleagues who worked for representation and voted for it. The negotiations have been led by a team of our colleagues. We have been supportive of this process, which was also visibly supported by many of our students. It hurts our hearts to hear you speak of our colleagues as if part of an external force opposed to the survival and common good of the university we share and serve. Many of them remain devoted to our students and the mission of the university, even amidst a more precarious status in the gig economy.

Our main concern as Catholic theologians, however, is with the claiming of a religious exemption as a Catholic university, foreclosing recognition of unions now and into the future. Catholic social teaching articulates not simply the rights of workers but their **specific right to organize**. This originated in Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891).<sup>1</sup> Pope Leo refutes the early

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: On the Condition of the Working Classes*, Encyclical on Capital and Labor, May 15, 1891.

capitalist idea that only the market should set wages, understanding the radically unequal power dynamics between industrial workers of his era and the titans of industry. The workers needed “workingmen’s unions” (*RN #49*) to prevent their isolation as workers, including being forced to accept something less than a living wage and inhumane working conditions. While Pope Leo imagined unions more like the medieval guilds of the past, his analysis of the need for organizational power on behalf of the workers was sharp and accurate. More importantly, it has been affirmed over and over again in subsequent writings by popes, bishops, and Catholic theologians and ethicists. It is no blip on the screen but rather a consensus within the body of Catholic Social Teaching.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Leo XIII with his bold denunciations of the cold-heartedness of the captains of industry of his time, we are not suggesting the Board or the Administration exhibits a hostile and depersonalizing attitude toward faculty workers. The situation is, however, analogous in a particular way. Non-tenure-track faculty across this nation generally have to accept terms of employment dictated by the market, and they do not have the job security protections or clout to negotiate with influence, especially given the tiered systems of academic employment of today that afford them lesser status. This is why such faculty have at times turned to unions. We understand that part-time and visiting salaries at LMU may be superior to some other private institutions of higher learning in California, but that does not change the fundamental unequal power dynamics of the situation. By admitting this as true we are not arguing that the Board or the Administration have ill intentions or no concern for the precarious situation of non-tenure-track faculty. The truth is that neither administrators, Board members, nor we tenured faculty have to live with the economic precarity of many of our part-time colleagues.

Catholic concerns about economic precarity have roots in the Catholic tradition’s attention to economic imbalance and the destructive effects of unfettered capitalism in creating a permanent underclass. This is the heart of the church’s preferential option for the poor. Our current Pope Leo XIV made it plain in choosing his name that poverty and the effects of the current markets are a central concern for him. As Father General Arturo Sosa of the Society of Jesus put it succinctly, “Poverty is not an accident.”

While we recognize that, according to state and federal laws, the Board of Trustees has the legal right and power to make decisions for the university and direct the Administration to execute them, just because we *can* do something doesn’t mean we *should*. We do not believe that the decision in this case meets the conditions of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching. In recognizing the dignity and social nature of all human beings, subsidiarity demands that we locate as much decision-making as possible close to those impacted by it.<sup>3</sup> This is why, for

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), nos. 305-307.

<sup>3</sup> The ten principles of Catholic Social Teaching are: (1) Dignity of the Human Person; (2) Common Good; (3) Solidarity; (4) Preferential Option for the Poor; (5) Stewardship of Creation; (6) Subsidiarity & the Role of Government; (7) Participation; (8) Rights & Responsibilities; (9) Economic Justice; (10) Peace. See Kenneth R. Himes, OFM, editor, *Modern Catholic Social*

example, Pope Leo XIII called for more worker-owned enterprises. The decision to decertify the union was made at the highest levels and in secrecy. One of us was present in a college committee meeting when members of the negotiating team learned of the decision for the first time via the campus-wide email; they were not even informed first as part of the process.

We understand that in the present business environment, Catholic ideas about the right to organize and the importance of subsidiarity may seem quaint, but as Catholic theologians we hold to them as guiding stars of our tradition. There is no “religious exemption” from respecting such principles. To invoke a religious exemption in a situation like this is to instrumentalize that tradition, that is, to turn it into a tactic rather than a principle to live by. We understand that the courts and the National Labor Relations Board have generally supported the religious exemption, but we hoped for better from our beloved institution. We are deeply upset and saddened by the decision not just to end present negotiations but to foreclose the possibility of nearly any unionization at LMU in the future. This sounds to us more like the anti-union politics and rhetoric of partisan talking points, and less like fidelity to the tradition that founded the university.

Many of us have worked throughout our careers with thick and challenging definitions of the “common good,” and it is painful to see it reduced to a financial ledger. Without denying the importance of a balanced budget, we worry that such a conception of the common good leaves little room for the inclusion of concerns of NTTF faculty today, as well as future colleagues who may seek to organize.

As Catholic theologians, we are also deeply concerned that when we teach our students that the “promotion of justice” includes the rights of workers, including the right to organize as articulated in Catholic social teaching, they will see our words as insincere posturing. We worry that the families of future students will perceive this hypocrisy and opt not to send their children here. Most of all, as we speak to colleagues and students across our campus, we perceive that those who are most heartbroken by this decision are those who actually understand and are most committed to LMU’s mission.

Please take this in the spirit in which it is intended, as a response to your decision that is solidly rooted in our scholarship and training as Catholic theologians. It is not intended as a personal attack on any member of the Board of Trustees or the Administration, and we remain grateful for your work as a Board as fiduciaries of the university. **We simply want you to know that we do not understand this decision as something that can be reconciled with Catholic teaching on the rights of workers.** We remain happy to discuss this further if that would be helpful. LMU is all of us. It is our love for this institution and the shining light it represents in the world that motivates us. Let us not dim that light. We can make a different choice – together.

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*Teaching: Commentaries & Interpretations* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

Respectfully and with kind regards,

**The following Catholic theologians from the LMU Department of Theological Studies:**

John R. Connolly, Professor Emeritus (1971-2011)

Cecilia González-Andrieu, Ph.D., Professor and President of the Academy of Catholic  
Hispanic Theologians of the United States

Rev. James Fredericks, Professor Emeritus (1992-2016)

Kim Harris, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Brett C. Hoover, Ph.D., Professor

Michael Horan, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus (1994-2022)

Layla A. Karst, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Marie Anne Mayeski, Ph.D., Professor Emerita (1975-2006)

Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Ph.D., Professor and T. Chilton Chair of Catholic Theology

Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Ph.D., Professor

cc: President Thomas Poon

Vice President John Sebastian, Division of Mission

Dean Richard Fox, Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts

SEIU LMU NTTF Bargaining Team

*Los Angeles Loyolan*