



## Carmelite Spiritual Center

8433 Bailey Road \* Darien, Illinois 60561 \* 630-969-4141

June 3, 1999

9-99

### Life is Worth Giving

PETER MCGUIRE AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF LABOR

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

A little over 100 years ago, in an impressive White House ceremony, President Grover Cleveland signed the bill that established Labor Day as a national holiday. The year was 1894, and many labor leaders attended the ceremony.

But one man, alas, was missing: Peter J. McGuire, a devout Catholic who was actually the "father" of Labor Day. The 10th child of an Irish immigrant family on New York's East Side, he watched his father march off to fight for the Union cause in the Civil War. Although Peter was only eleven, he began his working career to help support the family.

Years later, after five long years as an apprentice, he received a card identifying him as a qualified carpenter. At the time McGuire began working, there was no national union for carpenters, so he thought it was time to establish one.

With his flaming red hair and handle-bar mustache, accompanied by a powerful and convincing voice, McGuire became a natural leader and later was elected the first president of the national union known as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. He had achieved one of his earliest goals.

-more-

Fr. Kevin/ LIFE (Labor Day)/ 2

On May 8, 1882, he gave a rousing speech to the Central Labor Union in New York in which he called for a special day to honor the workers of America.

With characteristic fortitude, McGuire suggested calling the event "Labor Day" to honor those "who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur which we behold."

From his own Irish Catholic background, McGuire was steeped in the ideals of the dignity of human labor, and how that effort could be understood as ideally a cooperation with the God of creation to renew and embellish the earth. He saw human labor not as enslavement to toil, but as a means to earn a livelihood to support a family decently, and also to make the world a better place.

He rejoiced, as did many Labor leaders, when Pope Leo XIII issued his famous encyclical "Rerum Novarum" (On Capital and Labor) in May of 1891. In this world-wide state<sup>MENT</sup>, the first from an international leader, Pope Leo stressed the rights of working people to organize labor unions for their own protection and benefit, and to receive a decent "living" wage so that they could live in human dignity with their families.

Such ideas were the foundation of the spirituality with which Peter McGuire attempted to inspire all the members of the Labor Movement at the turn of the 20th Century.

Fr/ Kevin/ LIFE (Labor Day)/ 3

Unfortunately in his lifetime, Peter McGuire was not recognized as the founder of Labor Day and credit was given to others. In 1901 illness forced him to retire and the family moved to Camden, N.J., where wondered if all his efforts had been in vain. He could hardly afford food and heat for his family. In 1906 he died a poor and disillusioned man in spite of his having championed an eight-hour work day, child labor reform, and justice for all workers.

Peter McGuire was buried in Arlington Cemetery in Pennsauken, N.J. Fortunately, the American Federation of Labor recognized his great achievements and erected a life-size statue there to honor the "father" of Labor Day! And in 1956 the U.S. Postal Service honored him with a commemorative stamp.

His life's work and spirituality had, indeed, been  
<sup>(WORTH)</sup>  
worth ~~the~~!