

HOMILY

Labor Day Monday ~ September 7, 2009

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Most of the world observes May 1st as Labor Day; but not us. This September date was chosen way back when because it was halfway between the 4th of July and Thanksgiving. September, 5, 1882, saw the first American Labor Day parade. It was held in New York City with 20,000 participants carrying banners, calling for eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, and eight hours for recreation. Samuel Gompers, the founder and longtime president of the American Federation of Labor, said of Labor Day: “It differs in every essential from the other holidays of the year...all other holidays are in a more or less degree connected with conflicts and battles of strife and discord for greed and power.”

Labor Day is seen by most folks as the last long weekend of summer—the day to celebrate work by not working. A lot has changed since the first Labor Day. The American labor movement is not what it once was. These days less than 15% of American workers belong to unions, down from a high of nearly 50% in the 1950s. Job losses, cuts in wages, loss of benefits, and high household debt permanently could downsize the American dream for a lot of people.

Michigan has the highest unemployment rate in the nation at 15%, with unemployment in Flint at 28%. Michigan has lost more than 700,000 jobs since the last employment peak ten years ago in 1999. Economists say the state’s job-loss toll could hit one million by the end of the decade.

In the face of such dire stats, more than ever we need to call upon our Catholic faith that becomes our shelter and shield in these challenging times. We must never lose sight of the number one principle of creation and salvation: **Each individual is important.** No one must be lost in the crowd. Each has a face. Each has a name. Each has a part in God. Jesus was fascinated with the number one—*one* lost sheep, *one* lost coin, *one* Zaccheus, *one* woman at the well, *one* Good Thief, and *one* sinner returned home. This idea that everyone has the right to work, the right to a

fair day's wage, a right to good working conditions; this means that every sharecropper, every migrant worker, every tenant farmer, every employee is important.

Our Catholic faith teaches that a person is both body and soul. The body is to be nourished as the creation of God. Closely related to this is Jesus' teaching that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. "Bread for myself is material," wrote Berdyaev, "but bread for my neighbor is spiritual." More than ever we need to be people with heart—*sympatico* as the Latinos speak of it. Being *sympatico* is being a compassionate, love-filled person.

The artist Flandreau has painted a picture of Christ looking over a modern city. From his face and posture, the viewer of the picture can easily imagine that in that city the poor are neglected, widows are uncared for, and graft and greed are to be found in high places. On this Labor Day, the Christ looks over the world. What does he see? Does he see people seeking only their own welfare or does he see us attempting to share with others less fortunate?

What he sees is determined by the desire of those who work to move beyond the bread and butter to that which is truly serving the needs of one another. For there and only there is where we find the meaning and purpose of our life work. May we never become so involved in earning our daily bread that we forget the service which we may render to God by serving the needs of one another.

