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Longtime AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka is seen in an April 4, 2017. Trumka, a Catholic, died Aug. 5, 2021, at age 72. (CNS/Reuters/Yuri Gripas)



by Clete Kiley

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Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, died unexpectedly this week. His passing is a deep loss for the American labor movement and for working men and women across the country.

He had the amazing capacity to bring together the various ends of the labor movement. One of his great contributions was to see the common ground between the labor movement and the immigration reform movement. He was a great leader and a great friend to working people across this country.

Rich was dedicated to his family and he never forgot his family's roots in Nemacolin, Pennsylvania. Rich died while camping with his family. In many ways, he was in his favorite company in his favorite setting.

But there was even more to Rich. He was also a man of deep faith.

I remember the first time I sat with him in his office at the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington, D.C., to discuss a way to connect Catholic pastors with rank-and-file workers. He believed there was a natural connection because of our church teaching about the dignity of work and the rights of workers. He was very encouraged by Pope Francis' call to create a "culture of encounter." This kind of encounter was something he had heard about and seen from his parish priests growing up.

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On a shelf in his office, there was an old-fashioned miner's carbide light helmet. The helmet had a family history. As he held that helmet, Rich talked about the old pastor in his parish in Nemacolin. One night when coal miners were meeting to form a union, the coal company's armed guards broke up the meeting and chased the miners, catching up to them on the steps of the parish church. There stood their Catholic pastor holding a cross and warning the guards to stay back. He declared the miners were welcomed in the church.

This understanding of the church, the importance of a parish priest accompanying workers, of workers themselves as people of faith and as union members shaped Rich Trumka as a man of faith. When we started the initiative to raise up a new

generation of labor priests, Rich was all-in.

In recent years, Rich had teamed up with several U.S. cardinals and bishops in an effort at strengthening the bond between union members and Catholic leadership. When the U.S. Supreme Court was taking up the *Janus v. AFSCME case*, which remains a threat to workers' unions, the Catholic bishops responded with an amicus brief to support labor.

For Rich, faith and work came together in this. The Catholic Labor Network had anticipated Rich doing one of the Scripture readings at our Labor Day Mass to be celebrated by Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory. We will miss this brother in the faith.

As he leaves us now, Rich Trumka does so "in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection." May flights of angels welcome him into the heavenly Jerusalem.

Read this next: Richard Trumka, AFL-CIO president, dies; Catholic faith shaped his career

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