



THE CATHOLIC WORKER

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It is almost a truism to say that the American Catholic Church has changed dramatically in the twenty years following the second Vatican council. The publication of the U.S. Bishop's statements condemning the arms race and criticising the unjust functioning of the U.S. and world economies, the rapid growth of peace and justice committees in formerly staid parishes across the country, and the over-all high visibility of Catholics in such diverse areas as nonviolent civil resistance to U.S. military intervention, the struggle for justice among America's three million homeless, and the sanctuary movement, all have marked deep changes in a church once known more for the intensity of its flag-waving than the depth and compassion of its social analysis.

Though many might remember the activities of the Berrigans and the 'Catholic New Left' of the 60s and 70s as inscribing forever the image of priests and nuns being led away in chains, the current "Catholic renaissance" reaches beyond any single group of intellectuals and activists. This change in the tenor of American Catholicism seems to be truly democratic, reaching across the Church's broad social spectrum to include Bishops, clergy, and laity. For example, Detroit's Bishop Thomas Gumbleton was arrested at the Nevada Nuclear test site in May last year with Bishop Buswell of Colorado; they were a part of a nationally-organised Catholic civil disobedience action. Arrested with the Bishops were ninety-eight catholic soup-kitchen workers, political activists, nuns in habit and veil, and just plain folks from middle America. Bishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle has been extremely vocal in condemning the Trident submarine base in his diocese and supporting the efforts of Catholic theologian and peace activist Jim Douglass and his Ground Zero community's actions against Trident. When Hunthausen was reprimanded by the Vatican for some of his controversial views, the people of his diocese united behind him until the Vatican relented. In short, what is happening in the Church is a radical re-examination by both clergy and laity of just where their faith is calling them to stand in modern America.

Notably, this movement has not been afraid to speak in the vocabulary of its faith for fear of seeming reactionary. It

has been unashamedly Catholic and Christian in its intent to forge a new 'spiritual politics'. Avoiding the pitfalls of political 'issue-hopping' which often plagues broad movements of social change, it has deliberately engaged the secular social order in dialogue at the deepest level, challenging its core commitment to a politics of greed and violence and the religion of somnolence which rubber-stamps these things with a blessing. Central to the movement's understanding is the insight that social-political disorder is fundamentally rooted in religious disorder, with religion defined along the lines of Paul Tillich as one's 'centre of ultimate concern'. Centred as it is on the 'false gods' of wealth and the will-to-power as ultimate concerns, the 'idolatrous' social order can only be deeply challenged by defining — and beginning to live out — a new social order based on justice and love of neighbour, a state known by Christians since New Testament times as the Kingdom of God (cf. Luke 17: 20-21).

Catholic understanding of such central biblical images, which were commonly used to inspire Protestant sects such as the Anabaptists and Quakers, improved greatly with the new openness towards scripture inspired by Vatican II. It was one woman, however — and the movement she helped to found — which gave American Catholics the first look at the gospel radicalism burgeoning today: namely, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement.

Dorothy Day and the Impact of the Catholic Worker

The pursuit of utopia is as American as apple pie and killing Indians. One of the most basic metaphors governing American self-understanding has been that of pulling the 'Chosen Ones' out of a corrupt and dying culture and establishing a new society within the shell of the old. Associated with this metaphor has been a series of social movements which have strongly protested over the drift of the dominant acquisitive culture: including the godly Puritan villages of New England in the 17th century and the utopian socialist communal experiments of the Oneida community and Brook Farm in the 19th; also the 'Social Gospel' preachers of the Progressive Era and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Radical critiques of the dominant culture on the basis of a transcendent social ideology have always functioned in American culture as both a **refuge**, (a place where people can 'be sane' and remain true to what they value in the company of others), and an **answer**, (a solution to the most troubling social, spiritual, and psychological problems of the day). Occasionally, these lived critiques can, by their integrity and the unique way in which they offer solutions to crises, capture the imagination of large sectors of the population and lead to social change. It is this larger connection with the history of American radicalism which enables Daniel Berrigan (who was deeply influenced by the Catholic Worker) to claim that Catholic radicals are, at the roots, conservative, looking to those spiritual pioneers, both in the history of their nation and their Church, who discerned the times, said 'no', and proceeded to build something different.

Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker fit this analysis neatly. The Catholic Worker's birth in 1933 was in response

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to two crises: Dorothy's personal struggle to relate a radical social critique and concern for the plight of the oppressed (which she had developed as a writer for socialist and communist publications in New York during the early decades of the century) to her conversion to Catholicism in 1927; and the second crisis of national proportions as America sunk into the depression. Six years after her conversion (an event which alienated her from radical friends, including her anarchist husband) Dorothy met Peter Maurin, an itinerant French philosopher, who described himself as an 'agitator' on job applications. Maurin had worked out a programme of social reconstruction based on Papal encyclicals on Social Justice and on a synthesis of the ideas of several leading Catholic intellectuals, writing on such diverse topics as work, agriculture, religion, and economics. Dorothy quickly became a convert. Maurin appeared to be an answer to her prayers as he boldly announced to anyone who would listen that the Catholic Church had a theory and a programme of social reconstruction. What Maurin needed, he told Dorothy, was a way of spreading the news to the masses of unemployed roaming the streets. Dorothy responded eagerly, and in May 1933 the first edition of the **Catholic Worker** was published. In a few short years the newspaper's circulation reached 100,000, and a network of about thirty houses of hospitality and farms offering shelter and work to the homeless had been established nationwide.

Maurin's plan for social reconstruction had three planks, all organically linked: (1) round table discussions for the clarification of thought; (2) houses of hospitality for the

homeless in every parish and a 'Christ Room' for homeless guests in every Christian home; and (3) 'agronomic universities' on the land. The thrust of Maurin's programme was the tearing down of those barriers of class and self-interest which are the legacy of capitalist secularization: scholars and workers, labour and capital, poor and rich, religious belief and daily life. Round table discussions where the crises of the day could be dissected and analysed from all points of view and courses of action suggested; houses of hospitality where the rich and poor could interact, the poor receiving soup and shelter and the rich receiving insight into the evil of the social system; and farming communes where the unemployed, who left the dying and over-extended cities, could receive re-training in useful agrarian skills in order to meet their basic needs — these measures formed the broad sweep of Maurin's truly ambitious programme. Almost from the start it was doomed to be dismissed as 'utopian'. Maurin's vision of the just society, like that of other utopian thinkers, was based on the belief in the fundamental capacity of human beings to make moral decisions directed towards the 'common good' — a keystone of scholastic ethical thought. He wrote in his 'easy essay', **The Case for Utopia**:

The world would be better off
 If people tried to become better.
 And people would become better
 if they stopped trying to become
 better off.
 For when everybody tries to
 become
 better off
 nobody is better off.
 But when everyone tries to become
 better,
 everybody is better off.
 Everybody would be rich
 if nobody tried to become richer.
 And nobody would be poor
 if everybody tried to be the poorest.
 And everybody would be what he
 ought
 to be
 if everybody tried to be
 what he wants the other fellow to
 be.⁽¹⁾

Furthermore, Maurin believed that this programme could not remain just an exercise in academic theorising: he considered himself above all a **personalist** and was deeply influenced by Emmanuel Mounier's journal **L'Esprit** and by the philosopher Jacques Maritain. Maurin's personalism meant that

each moment is the revolution, each individual the focus of liberation... each moment is the

Kingdom of God, each individual the presence of Christ... To be a personalist was to accept the call, to recognise the need to internalise the revolution/Kingdom, to actualise it in the moment, at once, without waiting for the world to catch up, without struggling to change institutions, even to change others (at least at first). The call was to drop everything and change oneself, to start living as if (and in the assurance that) the Kingdom of God was indeed present (whether anybody else knew it or not), to live as if Christ truly did confront one, moment by moment, in other persons (especially in their need), to live as if the revolution (in its deepest sense) were here.⁽²⁾

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This new structure for society would not be imposed from above by violent revolution but would grow organically within society by individuals changing themselves. It was to be (and Maurin coined the word fifty years before the Germans) a **green** revolution, based on love, voluntary cooperation and humane work. It was to be won through personal example.

Maurin was profoundly aware, however, that modern, urban, industrialised society had seriously crippled the spiritual capacities necessary to make such a revolution possible. 'Rugged individualism' and collectivism, the legacy of modern political and economic systems, had to be rooted out. In the tradition of Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, Maurin's programme presupposed, in his words, "**une régénération sociale fondée sur une rénovation mentale**".⁽³⁾ All plans for social reconstruction in this fundamentally corrupt age required a prior total spiritual revolution lest, as Martin Buber argued, the new house that a person hopes to erect becomes his/her burial chamber.⁽⁴⁾ Maurin often quoted Maritain on the subject:

It is not a question of changing the system, it is a question of changing the man who makes the system. It is not the temporal that creates the spiritual, it is the spiritual that created the temporal environment... There is no social revolution without a spiritual revolution. The trouble



Dorothy Day

with radicals is not that they are too radical but not radical enough. External radicalism is not radical enough because it is external. Inner radicalism is true radicalism.⁽⁵⁾

The goal of the spiritual revolution was a new synthesis of 'cult, culture, and cultivation', what Maurin believed were the three elements of classical Catholic culture, which had reached its height in the 13th century. To his scoffers Maurin pointed out that industrialism and urbanisation are blind alleys leading to war and alienation; when you cannot go forward, he warned, the only way to go is backward. A common intellectual and spiritual life would give birth to shared values upon which to base daily patterns of work, play, etc. In the decentralised village people drawn and kept together by shared values would engage in creative, decent work which met human need, not greed.

Anarchist thinker Gustav Landauer, a friend of bourgeois religion, also recognised the value of 'primacy of the spiritual' in reconstructing the social order:

A degree of high culture is reached when the various social structures, in themselves exclusive and independent of one another, are all filled with a uniform spirit not inherent in or proceeding from these structures, but reigning over them purely in its own right. In other words, such a degree of culture arises when the unity pervading the various forms of organisation and the supra-individual formations is not the external bond or force, but a spirit dwelling in the individuals themselves and pointing beyond earthly and material interests.⁽⁶⁾

Landauer, like Maurin, argued that the society of societies' achieved by the high Middle Ages was the best example of this type of culture in the West.

Tradition and Innovation

Since the Enlightenment intellectuals have tended to categorise tradition, particularly religious tradition, as the chief enemy of social change. In their enthusiasm for the newness made possible by industrial technology, they have regarded any group looking backwards for answers to present problems to be at best reactionary. For radical gospel groups in general, and the CW in particular, however, tradition meant the continuance of values and beliefs which had for millennia worked together for human good. The aim was not to move beyond this history, but to 'recover the holy ways which had come to fruition in times past'. To deny tradition was to separate oneself from



one of the characteristic black and white illustrations from the "Catholic Worker" by Sr. Kay Francis

generations of struggle and spiritual achievement and leave the social order open to the denigration of the individual and to the holocaust which has been the terrible legacy of 20th century civilisation. Tradition, in short, provides both a place to stand firm in appropriating generations of wisdom and a place from which to evaluate the drift of the culture and its spirit. Tradition provides us with some idea of where we have come from, where we are going, and some inkling of how to get there.

Rootedness in sacred stories, myths, and rituals, combined with an eschatological view of present history, has had the power to mobilise groups to take dramatic action when the gaps between faith and reality become too wide to ignore. From Israel's exodus from Egypt to Martin Luther King's view of a racially-harmonious America, recovery and reapplication of religious tradition has always been the matchstick threatening to blow up the dominant social order. Peter Maurin caught this paradox when he wrote that the CW preached 'a message so old that it looks like new' which sought to 'blow the dynamite' of the Church's social teaching.

Christianity, though traditionally the supporter of the dominant social and political arrangements, is particularly susceptible to the reapplication and re-energising of tradition due to both its historical roots in social protest and its continual insistence on **conversion** and **faithfulness** as the dominant themes of Christian existence. The CW has its roots deep in an oft-repressed strain of Christianity which holds that levelling a spiritual challenge to the dominant unjust social order represents an essential act of Christian faith. This

tradition of gospel radicalism encompasses the communism and pacifism of the early Christian community, the voluntary poverty of St. Francis of Assisi, and the innumerable examples of suffering in the cause of justice found among the saints and martyrs of the Church. Its origins go back to the Sermon on the Mount and to other sayings of Jesus concerning wealth, justice, and love of one's neighbour, as well as to his example of faithfully proclaiming a new social order despite the overwhelming political power arrayed against him. Again, it is the dialectic between **inward** conversion (faithfulness) and **social** practice (the Kingdom of God) — in short, a dialectic in the use of human freedom and choice — which forms the crux for understanding a personalist revolution such as that behind the Catholic Worker.

For radical gospel groups, as we said earlier, the conversion/faithfulness axis is of prime importance. Success or effectiveness can only be secondary. This commitment to a transcendent principle allows such groups to be outspoken in presenting their ideas and living them without concern for their popularity. The willingness to be unpopular allows the groups to get an **issue** off the ground and to sustain a commitment to a principle during times of little support. Dorothy's strong pacifist stand during both the Spanish Civil War and World War Two alienated her from many people both sympathetic to and within the movement. Nevertheless, fifteen years later the movement was as strong as ever. This willingness to suffer provides both the suppleness and the backbone to carry issues and principles forward in difficult times.

The Catholic Worker, however, has avoided some of the pitfalls of many small religious groups seeking to live out radical ideas. Instead of becoming out-of-touch and sect-like, the Catholic Worker's vital connection with the Catholic Church, though occasionally strained, has kept the movement in touch with the Church's broad social spectrum. The common experience of a shared set of symbols and beliefs has enabled even the most conservative of Catholics to readily understand, if not appreciate, at least some parts of the Catholic Worker's radical message. The reappropriation of traditional Catholic symbols such as the cross, the Works of Mercy, and the Mystical Body of Christ has helped many luke-warm Catholics to re-energise their faith. With the movement's insistence that there is within these ancient symbols and practices a core of meaning not dependent on the spirit of the times — in fact, contrary to it — whole

generations of people seeking meaning in life have discovered anew the power of orthodox belief. By stressing as well **orthopraxis** many years before the liberation theologians made it fashionable, the Catholic Worker has challenged adherents of a merely privatised faith to look at the Gospel's social implications. Moreover; it has rebuked critics who insist that religion has no role to play in the reconstruction of the social order. The critique leveled by the Catholic Worker at a nation in crisis — and the immediate, wholistic, coherent and intensely personal response it outlined to that crisis — has had the power to attract and simply change people's lives; by providing a concrete alternative plan of action it has challenged the political and moral paralysis of people confronted with the horror of living in the modern world.

From Ideal to Reality

The answer Maurin and the Catholic Worker put forward to the problems of modern civilisation almost inevitably placed them at the margins of a society which was possessed by, in Berdyaev's phrase, 'the Bourgeois spirit'. But the margins were, for the Catholic Worker, a fine place to be, because it was there that the things of true significance happen. At the margins of society a world driven to the point of insanity could come back to its senses, and see face to face the lines of the hopelessness of the present order of domination etched in the faces of the outcasts of that order. For Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, the faces of the people in the long soup and clothing lines, which continued for years despite massive government welfare, were both a prophetic reminder of the urgency of change and the opportunity for a numb and dying culture to fight its way back towards human solidarity and love.

Once an eager idealist had handed out his 2000th cup of coffee to the cold, hungry men and women who swamped the houses, social change would never again be a matter for academic objectivity or boards of review. The personalist approach, because it was lived, gave an almost frightening **specificity** to things, a specificity which both daunted and clarified. The unemployed were linked with names and faces, and the 'hidden poor' of the tenements, railway yards, and shacks spoken of so often in the pages of the various CW newspapers became brutally and vividly present — at least in the consciences of individuals who met them there. The call to justice represented by the suffering of human faces both energised and deepened the tiny community's actions and analysis, even though spirits could sometimes flag due to the overwhelming demands of the work.

The poor the Catholic Worker served were often those ineligible for other

assistance. Partly because their needs had to be given immediate attention, the CW was never able to build "effective" structures for social change. That became increasingly clear as the first farming experiments collapsed and the world slipped into the darkness of the post-Hiroshima age. Many of Maurin's ideas thus did not come to fruition. Mel Piehl notes in his history of the Catholic Worker, **Breaking Bread**, that

in every gospel radical group there is a tension between its goal of preserving the integrity of the gospel ideal and of witnessing the utopian vision to the larger society. Efforts towards preserving the ideal tend to make the group inward-looking and sectarian, while attempts to evangelise the wider society tend to water down the purity of the original vision.⁽⁷⁾

Maurin distinctly felt that the community compromised its ideals too often, especially through Dorothy's insistence on involvement with trade unions, which he believed were no solution to industrialism. He urged workers to 'fire the bosses' by walking off their jobs for good. Social protest activities, he maintained, could never lead to a positive plan of reconstruction.

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However, as the labour movement bureaucratized and became part of 'establishment' politics, and the horrors of modern warfare seemed to herald the beginning of an age of mass genocide and decline, the Catholic Worker stood out primarily for its steadfast opposition to human degradation in all its forms. The Catholic Worker became, according to Marc Ellis, a **witness** against the obscenities of modern civilisation and a witness to higher ideals. It was in this witness role that the Catholic Worker reached out to stir not only the Church but wider American — and even world — society.

Thus, the Catholic Worker has played a major role in movements for justice in the United States for almost 60 years from the labour struggles of the 30s to the anti-war movement of the 60s, to the plowshares disarmament movement of the 80s. The commitment and zeal of this spiritually centred group pioneered unpopular causes long

before other groups were prepared to face the social ostracism of the majority.

The Catholic Worker and the Anti-Nuclear Movement

Another Catholic Worker, Ammon Hennacy, was at the forefront of a campaign against nuclear testing in Nevada. In August 1957 he staged a week-long vigil and fast at the site which received national attention. On August 9, 1957, twelve Catholic Workers and some other pacifists were arrested for entering the test site. With mounting international outrage and protest, above-ground testing was stopped in 1962 by all nations except France and China. In recent years, however, testing has again become a major focus of nonviolent resistance in the U.S., once more with the Catholic Worker movement and people who have been deeply influenced by its radical Christian pacifism in the forefront.

For instance, the present anti-testing campaign, started by a group of Franciscan monks, was greatly influenced by the Catholic Worker. In November, 1987, 500 Catholic Workers gathered at the Nevada test site for a conference and civil disobedience on the 90th birthday of Dorothy Day. Then, in March 1988, the largest mass-civil disobedience action in U.S. history occurred in Nevada with over 2,000 arrests. Since August 1987 the Las Vegas Catholic Worker has played an important part in maintaining the resistance to testing.

The widening of the perception of Christianity as standing apart from — yet critically engaged with — the wider society is an exciting development. The language of faith in such nihilistic times is like fire. It speaks the language of the human heart: of love, of compassion, of rootedness within a faithful community. The language of faith, of discipleship may hold some of the answers which modern technological society has promised but not been able to deliver.

If Christians recognise within their tradition the seeds of revolution, they can arouse a powerful force for change.

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