

A Brief Introduction to the Catholic Worker Movement

Original Article by Tom Cornell, revised by Jenny Truax in 2014

The Catholic Worker movement is made up of people motivated to bring about a "new society within the shell of the old, a society in which it will be easier to be good." A society in tune with these teachings would have no place for economic exploitation or war, for racism, homophobia, sexism or xenophobia. This society would be marked by a cooperation, without extremes of wealth and poverty and a nonviolent approach to legitimate defense and conflict resolution.

Started by an itinerant French worker-scholar (and illegal immigrant) Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, a veteran left-wing journalist and Catholic convert, the original CW paper was first sold in New York City, at a Communist Party May Day rally in Union Square, for a penny a copy, in 1933. The price remains the same.

Peter Maurin

Peter Maurin saw the need for a new intellectual synthesis to meet the material and spiritual crisis epitomized by the great Depression and lasting to this day, a synthesis grounded in cult, that is prayer, in culture, that is literature and the arts, and agriculture, that is labor and the crafts. Houses of hospitality in the cities would make possible direct personal response to the needs of the wounded members of the larger community through direct practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Farming communes on the land would encourage scholars to become workers and workers to become scholars while obviating unemployment and forming "cells of good living" as a practical alternative to a moribund society. In city houses and farming communes regular meetings "for the clarification of thought" would be held. People of all persuasions would dialogue, to explore the causes for the present disorder and to find a way from where we are to where we ought to be.

Peter Maurin was a man of the soil, with deep roots. His family had worked the same land, in southern France, the Languedoc, for fifteen hundred years. His region had been evangelized by Irenaeus, disciple of Polycarp, disciple of John. Peter had worked with Le Sillon, a Catholic lay movement in France for political and social democracy. He worked as a laborer and as a teacher before emigrating to Canada as a prospector. He entered the US looking for work, prospered as a private teacher of French, returned to casual manual labor in order to study at his own pace a curriculum of his own design.

Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day was a city woman, a Bohemian as well as a pioneer in the "engaged journalism" of the Left. She was born in New York City, grew up there and in Oakland, California, and Chicago before returning as a young adult to New York and a staff assignment at the daily Socialist Call. She worked on The Liberator staff and was acting editor of The Masses when it was closed by order of Attorney General Palmer during the Red Scare after World War I. Dorothy was jailed for picketing President Wilson's White House for the women's vote and participated in a hunger strike at Occoquan Prison. Her friends and fellow workers were socialists, anarchists and communists. She was an intimate as well of the literary circles in New York that centered around Eugene O'Neil, Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley. It was a heady time to be young and in New York.

And there was love. Dorothy's love Forster, was a passionate anarchist who loved nature. Together, they had a daughter, Tamar. Dorothy felt an incessant pull towards becoming more rooted; this call led her baptize herself and her child in the Catholic Church. This decision meant the end of her relationship with Forester, who she considered her soulmate and love of her life.

A Movement Begins

Peter had an idea. Dorothy had passion and ability and an unfulfilled desire to work, as she had with the

radicals of the Left, for social justice, but now as a Christian and a Catholic. Out of their meeting in 1932, the Catholic Worker was born and the paper first offered to the public five months later. Some early visitors to the Catholic Worker headquarters noted its similarity in style and tone to L'Esprit, the lay Catholic intellectual journal in Paris at that time, identified with Emmanuel Mounier, Charles Peguy and Jacques Maritain. Maritain actively encouraged the work.

The circulation of the paper quickly reached 150,000, to plummet drastically during the Spanish Civil War and World War II, when the editorial position of the paper remained consistently Christian pacifist, and many volunteers and staff members went to prison or public service camps for refusing the draft. Post war recovery was slow but steady, and the movement distinguished itself for resisting Cold War hysteria and red-baiting. The movement took a leading role in stimulating opposition to the Vietnam War, and has stood steadily for racial justice.

Over the years independent Catholic Worker house of hospitality and farming communes have sprung up, now numbering over 200, many with their own publications. Anyone may seek help at the Catholic Worker. Anyone may volunteer who has the ability to take personal responsibility and work respectfully with others. Most of the volunteers are Catholics committed to active nonviolence. There is no means test and no religious test.

Contemporary Issues

The widening gap between rich and poor in our country and between nations has spurred greater urgency in the quest for a more just social order. The nuclear age has sharpened awareness of the need for disarmament and alternatives to war. The distinguishing marks of the movement remain smallness, decentralization, personal responsibility. Catholic Workers respond to persons in need directly and search for answers to the questions that arise from that meeting: Why are there so many poor and abandoned? What is honest work? What is due workers and the unemployed? What is the relationship between political, social and economic democracy, and between these and the common good? Just where are we, where do we want to be and how can we get there?

Catholic Workers attempt to alleviate the sufferings of the poor by adopting lives of radical simplicity in order to be free for direct, personal involvement, not so much dispensing charity as sharing in the lives of others. This simplicity also frees us to respond to militarism, exploitation and racism in the spirit of Christian nonviolence, with the creative weapons forged by Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the many others dedicated to ending oppression. This struggle brings heartbreak, relationship, great meaning, and joy.

Catholic Worker Legacy

The Catholic Worker movement has inspired many off-shoot and parallel movements, including the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, the Catholic Peace Fellowship and Pax Christi, USA, and Voices for Creative Nonviolence. Catholic Worker alumni can be found on the editorial staffs of major publications, on university faculties, in labor unions and in monasteries, working the land on CW farms, and occasionally in jails and prisons for acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. After 80 years, Catholic Workers continue to seek the society where, in the words of Peter Maurin, "it is easier to be good".