



Catholic Worker Thought & Action

The Catholic Worker through an Anti-Racist Lens by Carolyn Griffeth

All too often when someone really annoys me, I realize that the very thing that irritates me about them is also a part of myself. This happened recently when I visited a rural, white eco-village; I cringed at the self-satisfied, triumphant way that they described their sustainable lifestyle without any mention of privilege. “Why does it bother me so much?” I questioned. The answer was obvious: It was all so white, and I had to admit, so familiar.

I too am a white radical, though of a slightly different school: the Catholic Worker. In the CW my lifestyle has been framed by the narrative of having the answer to society’s problems, and of being a moral exemplar who is willing to make sacrifices in service to others. Though at one time I may have enjoyed seeing myself as such, looking deeply at racism and white superiority has fundamentally challenged this narrative. I no longer see myself as a moral exemplar, sacrificial helper, or friend of the poor; instead, I have begun to see myself and the CW through the lens of whiteness: the unique conditioning given to white people.

One of the marks of being raised white is an almost desperate search for identity to make up for the lack of inherent belonging within our families and communities and the lack of cultural heritage resulting from our ancestor’s assimilation process from a variety of unique cultures into whiteness. Because of this loss, whites often use their relationships with people of color to create an identity for themselves. Since whites are also taught to see themselves as moral and superior, there is also a pull to take on the identity of saviors, or helpers who have all the answers. As a Catholic Worker, I have been positioned to further enforce this myth: I am the white savior for other whites to follow. You can have this identity too by supporting me and my community!

Though this critique is harsh, I remain committed to the Catholic Worker. I believe in our non-violent spirituality and our capacity to evolve by grappling with challenging questions. Nonetheless, looking at whiteness has challenged my identity and my self-righteous sense that I, or the Catholic Worker, have all the answers. My question now is: How might an anti-racist identity frame the Catholic Worker differently? Here are a few of stabs at an answer:

Most fundamentally, a commitment to ending racism challenges whites and white-dominant communities to acknowledge white privilege. This is particularly important when talking about economics. Voluntary poverty, simple living, and the gift economy are generally made attractive and plausible because of white connections, familial financial security, and privileged access to education. Also, without acknowledging white privilege, white Catholic Workers, like me, can sound



“Tree of Life” - Hori Kurisu

rather self-congratulatory when speaking of our chosen lifestyle: “Look at me and all the amazing things I am doing!” To maintain perspective, I sometimes ask myself, “How much have I really extended myself compared to the fast food or farm workers striving for a living wage?” That said, I am equally weary of the tendency of whites to over-extend themselves in acts of service, solidarity, or resistance because of white guilt, and then to expect others to admire us, or cater to us, because of our over-extensions. By neglecting self-care and acting as martyrs, whites both hurt

themselves and fail to build a movement that is either healthy or attractive to people of color.

I also believe that an anti-racist lens challenges us to act in ways that are more committed and accountable to our local communities. This would include supporting and promoting the leadership for social change coming from people of color—even if these groups have different philosophical starting points. It would also compel us to be more connected to our neighbors and local communities and responsive to the inspirations and requests that flow out of established relationships—just the opposite of the cookie-cutter, “I’m going to start a CW community” approach. Lastly, I believe an anti-racist lens challenges us to shift our activism away from the paradigm of being the lone prophets acting in isolation, toward acting alongside others, often from our own communities, to address the issues that targeted populations deem important.

I write this just after the St. Louis CW hosted an anti-racism workshop attended by many CWers in the Midwest. Not surprisingly, the workshop brought into question many of our tightly held values and entrenched ways of organizing our communities, striking at the core of our CW identity.

This identity crisis was brought this into focus for me by an exercise led by Crossroads, who asked us to draw a picture of a tree representative of the Catholic Worker. The roots were to represent our guiding values, the trunk represented our structures, and the fruit was the outcome of our values/structures. Our trees were put on display. Looking at the variety of trees, I was both struck by the deep roots that hold the movement together: personalism, non-violence, care for the earth, faith, resistance, and saddened that ending racism was, with a few exceptions, not included. The question I am holding now is: What if it was? How might the value of ending racism reinforce, or be in tension, with our other values? And, how might the adoption of this value transform the future of the movement? While holding dear to the core CW values, I imagine a future CW, deeply rooted in the value of anti-racism, that is more connected, vibrant, and fruitful. ✦



With her son, Ghana, thriving while living with Grandma, **Carolyn Griffeth** is reconnecting with her practice of contemplative prayer, spiritual direction, and gardening in communion.