



Catholic Worker Thought & Action

A Peter-Predicted Transition by Joe Kruse

It was the second night of occupation at the 4th Precinct Police Station. The sun had just set and a November chill gradually replaced the day's warmth. Normally the cool crisp of fall evenings brings me centeredness. But that night, the tension in the air kept me vigilant and anxious. Jamar Clark had been killed the day before by Minneapolis police. Most witnesses said that he was handcuffed when he was shot. That day, at the recently initiated 4th Precinct occupation in protest Jamar's murder, I was witness to the heart-breaking rage and mourning of many Northside residents. Some of that rage was understandably directed at white people taking part in the occupation. Many of us white people did not live on the Northside of Minneapolis, a predominantly black neighborhood cut off physically, socially, and economically from the centers of wealth that lend Minneapolis its designation as "one of the best economies in the country." That same economy is embedded in a Minnesotan white supremacy that upholds the most egregious racial wealth disparity in the country. The "liberal" economic and social policies of our solid blue state, enacted by our disproportionately white political bodies, make this a great city to live in, if you're white. According to a study done by the Huffington post profiling the 10 worst US cities for Black Americans "...only 3.9% of all Twin City residents are unemployed, one of the lowest figures in the country, (while) the unemployment rate among the city's black residents is 12.8%."(1) Like the implementation of the New Deal and the GI Bill, the distribution of wealth in Minneapolis seems to stop at the color line.

So, understandably, white Minnesotans at the 4th precinct were targets of some frustration and outward expressions of pain. I remember a black man yelling at a white clergy, "Where do you live?! What is your address?! What is your address?!" bringing attention to the socio-geographical barriers that inherently separate many white people from his exact depth of despair and grief. He brought attention to the dream many of us live out in other neighborhoods, blissfully unaware of the state-sanctioned body breaking and psychological scarring that is part and parcel of life on the Northside. At one point, several men pulled down the American flag in front of the police station. As they lit it on fire, one of them said, "Where are the white people? We need a white person to hold this with us!"

His request immediately pulled me into a new awareness. I glimpsed what a deeper and more empathetic solidarity might look like. As a Catholic Worker, much of my spiritual world-view centers around the philosophy of non-violence, ways of maintaining peace both in myself and the world, and a questioning of anger as a tool for social change. While these beliefs are central to my core being, they are also products of my upbringing and a personal history entrenched in racial, gender, and economic privilege. Perhaps the ease with which I proselytize non-violence is because I have never experienced a real threat of violence in my life. Perhaps the way I deemphasize anger as a useful emotion is because our social

systems have never rendered me hopelessly trapped.

Being called to question my assumptions and to stand in solidarity that day has not resulted in the relinquishing of all of my deeply held values. It has, however, forced me to sink into an important paradox. It has allowed me to sit with compassion for my identity while questioning my assumptions and compelling me to follow the blueprint for revolution outlined by women, queer people, poor people and people of color. It is within the context of this paradox that I see a possible transformation for the Catholic Worker movement.

Last Spring at the 2015 Midwest Catholic Worker Faith and Resistance Retreat in St. Louis, Catholic Workers and other like-minded communities came together to discuss a long ignored reality: racism within the Catholic Worker. In listening to Catholic Workers during that intense weekend, it became clear that many of us had begun to notice how our "radical" communities often unintentionally embody the systems of oppression we work against. Charismatic white male leaders often control the form and voice of communities. Predominantly white Catholic Worker core communities "serve" their guests who are often the only people of color in our houses. And the sacred tradition of Catholic Worker direct action is often dedicated to the liberation of the oppressed but planned and carried out by predominantly white organizing groups. Understandably, the realization of how deep these systems of oppression have infiltrated our beloved movement has left many of us confused and spiritually lost. Afraid our movement is too contaminated with the vestiges of white supremacy, some have understandably chosen to leave the Catholic Worker entirely. But others, too in love with the poetry and culture inoculated by Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, have chosen to stay. I believe that our ability to sit in the tension, to stay open to criticism and change within the Catholic Worker, and to stay relationally accountable to communities of color and other oppressed groups, will result in a rebirthing of a Catholic Worker movement that is more keyed in to the heartbeat of the unfolding revolution.

In his important article, "Undoing the Politics of Powerlessness," Yotam Marom, a white organizer from New York and a facilitator with Wildfire, recalls a time when he was asked by leaders of color to step up and offer his unique knowledge and gifts to a particulate project. He writes,

"The feedback makes me a bit blurry. I can't remember the last time anyone told me they wanted me to be powerful. I'm a straight, white, class-comfortable male in the North Eastern United States, certainly not part of the groups most impacted by the systems we are fighting. I've spent the past few years duking it out with the voices in my head — on one hand knowing I have something to offer in this important moment, and on the other hand internalizing deep shame about where I come from and guilt over the mistakes I've made along the way as a result. In the



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midst of those mistakes and in the face of a movement culture that seemed to see me as a threat, I internalized the message that the best thing I could do for the movement was to mitigate the damage I've done by existing — that my job, really, was to disappear. There are historical reasons for this dilemma, and current reasons that our movements have adopted these knee-jerk responses to what it perceives as power or privilege. But in the end, the impact was that it made me less effective, whether as an ally to other oppressed people, a leader



Midwest Catholic Workers acting in conjunction with Black Lives Matter activists in Minneapolis, 2016. Photo: Vanessa Shuck on BLM Minneapolis FB Page

in Occupy, or a facilitator with Wildfire.”

I think the tendency to make ourselves invisible to mitigate the damage of the racist legacy we represent is an understandable response for white people in the Catholic Worker. I also know that it is a response that is ultimately self-centered, grounded in shame, and useless to oppressed people struggling for liberation.

The reality is that the Catholic Worker is incredibly important. Our communities have remarkable gifts to offer the wider movement for social justice and access to important social and economic capital that could be allocated to leaders of color. There are few organizations (or organisms) more nimble, more unaccountable to corporations and the government, or more willing to open its spaces to strangers and people in need. These qualities are gifts that we offer in the fight against white supremacy. But we must be held accountable to the leaders of the unfolding movement moment. We must try to be in relationship with leaders of color who can guide us in utilizing our gifts and transforming our movement so it stays relevant and useful. We must exist in the paradox of embracing our sacred identity while relinquishing our need to control the narrative.

In the spirit of this accountability we at the Minneapolis Catholic Worker have committed to organizing an experimental 2016 Midwest Catholic Worker Faith and Resistance Retreat. Our retreat will happen this spring and has been organized, from start to finish, under the guidance of activists from Black Lives Matter Minneapolis. So far our roles have primarily been orchestrating logistics like housing for retreatees, food preparation, and fundraising. Much of the content of the retreat will be designed and carried out by BLM activists. The goal is that the work done at the retreat will benefit the work of BLM locally. Through this retreat we hope that we are embracing and using the beautiful tradition of Catholic Worker resistance in the service of incredible organizers of color. We're not saying that what we're working on is perfect or is the direction in which the Catholic Worker must move. After all, many Catholic Worker communities are already doing incredible and creative anti-racism work. We simply

offer this retreat up as one way to maintain what is beautiful about our Catholic Worker culture while shifting our work so it is accountable to the leadership of women, queer people, and people of color.

During an intellectually rigorous conversation I had (and which I barely understood) with Catholic Workers Eric Anglada and Lincoln Rice at Sugar Creek, it came up that Peter Maurin predicted that the Catholic Worker would transform every twenty years. It would be hard to argue that we are not in a moment of Peter-predicted transition. What unfolds over the next few years, and the role the Catholic Worker plays in this progressing racial justice movement, is in our hands. Perhaps now is the time we shift our already adaptable movement from a culture that focuses heavily on direct service to an ethos that takes more time to listen and build accountability. Perhaps we might focus less on (but not completely abandon) our action-oriented anarchistic politics, and listen more to activists of color and what they are asking of us. Perhaps our houses and communities can act as places of healing and hospitality for white activists trying to make sense of their place in the movement while also attempting to cultivate deep love of self.

It's time to cut ourselves free from the constraints of rigid expectations and crushing self doubt, and fall into the reality of God's infinite love. We are innately and completely good. At the heart of oppression is a lie we've been told that tricks us into believing that we don't deserve love, that we have to earn it, and that there's not enough to go around. This lie, that we have to be "better" to be "good," is how we white people destroy other people, our planet, and ourselves. Let's be liberated from this yoke and fall into sacred change with abandon.



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Footnote:

1. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/worst-cities-black-americans_us_5613d10ee4b0baa355ad322f