Welcome to The Catholic Worker Anti-Racism Review! The Review is dedicated to printing articles, poems, art, and prayers that reflect on how to make the Catholic Worker an intentionally anti-racism movement. The idea and initial organization for this Review came from the spring 2017 Midwest Catholic Worker Faith and Resistance Retreat, which also spawned the Midwest Catholic Worker Statement on Racism. As the statement remarks, “The Catholic Worker is a racist institution. It is a white-dominated movement that, despite its best efforts, often perpetuates the culture and systems that marginalize and oppress people of color.”

Those of us who have contributed to this publication do not claim any moral purity or superiority over any of our fellow Catholic Workers. We are complicit in and contribute to the cultural patterns of racism found in the CW movement. To a great extent, this publication documents our personal conversion experiences, which motivate us to encourage fellow Catholic Workers to explicitly and intentionally address racism.

This publication begins with the 2017 Midwest Catholic Worker statement on racism that the New York Catholic Worker graciously mailed out to every Catholic Worker community in the United States. In the short time this statement has been in circulation, we have received thanks and condemnation from fellow Catholic Workers. One CW wrote, “We have just started discussions on this uncomfortable topic for those of us who are white!” and asked for an electronic copy of the document so that they could use it as the basis for a clarification of thought. Another Catholic Worker wrote, “I think you need to see a therapist - this stuff is toxic, evil and not of the Holy Spirit.”

The next piece is a resource document that the St. Louis CW created on confronting racism in direct service organizations. They made the document more Catholic Worker friendly and included a list of pitfalls that white-led organizations often fall into. This list has been very helpful for us at the Milwaukee CW in examining the unconscious decisions we have made that reinforce a culture of racism.

We have also included a prayer from Helen C. Reilly, an African American who founded a Catholic Worker in Memphis in the 1950s and was an associate editor of the New York paper in the 1960s. Her prayer is written for Afr-
This is a letter for the Catholic Worker movement from many of us who gathered for the 2017 Midwest Catholic Worker Faith & Resistance Retreat. It is a letter for the Movement as a whole but specifically for the white Workers who have come to find meaning, value, and hope in our communities, our work, our shared Aims and Means, and our collective tradition. It is a letter about racism.

Racism is a cultural phenomenon that creates institutionalized patterns of discrimination against people of color so as to consolidate and bestow power and privilege to white people. Confronting anti-black racism has been the focus of the last three Faith and Resistance Retreats. It has led to many questions: Is there racism in the Catholic Worker? What does it look like and why is it there? Study, activism, conversation, and prayer have led the authors of this statement to a painful conclusion: The Catholic Worker is a racist institution. It is a white-dominated movement that, despite its best efforts, often perpetuates the culture and systems that marginalize and oppress people of color. We have come to realize that we engage in white supremacist practices. Adopting the language of critical race theory, we use the term white supremacy to name any political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy a structural advantage over people of color. It is with this in mind, that we reach out to you, our fellow Workers. This letter is an invitation to join us as we ask: How do Catholic Worker systems and cultural practices perpetuate white privilege? How can we make amends for our participation? How should we move forward?

Lament and Repent

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

We recognize that before we can repent and before we can make amends, we must name the wrong we have committed. We begin with our laments.

We lament our blindness towards whiteness. Though we may engage in conversations about race and racism, we often speak as if "race" is something only people of color experience, ignoring the impact our own "white" identity has had on us. Those of us who have committed our lives to social justice work often believe racism is a problem we have "solved" in our personal lives and thus fail to explore the experiences and realities of whiteness. Without seeing whiteness, we ignore our continued complicity and participation in racism. Thus, we refuse to come to terms with the power, privilege, and wealth racism bestows on white people (a part of white supremacy), absolving ourselves of a crucial component of racial justice work.

We lament our failure to recognize and confront racism’s systemic nature. Racism is a hate infused into every single institution, perpetrated on the structural level and not just by an individual or group. We have failed to expose how white supremacy utilizes legislative policies, cultural norms and perceptions, social dynamics, and systemic violence to prioritize white interests and perpetuate white reality. While we may be able to identify the explicit manifestations of racism, we often miss its subtle, implicit forms.

Similarly, we lament that we have failed to recognize the ways we perpetuate many of these same sins: in the dynamics of our communities, in our workspaces, in our deference to white donors, and in our often-absent systems of accountability to those we profess to be laboring for.

We repent that:

- The Catholic Worker movement is not generally accessible or appealing to people of color. We know this because there are only a handful of non-white Catholic Workers.
- Communities of color have been ignored, undermined, and undervalued in the Catholic Worker
movement, particularly since the beginning of World War II, when pacifism became a greater focus for the movement. We give lip service to the truth that the Movement needs more racial diversity, but this is often done without honoring the voices and aspirations of people of color in the Catholic Worker movement. By doing this, we exclude their valuable contributions (present and future), we fail to learn from their perspectives, and we leave members of our community unsupported and undervalued.

- We often fail to examine our community decision-making structures, our finances, and our social interactions for patterns of white supremacy.
- We often unquestionably prioritize our ideological purity, interpreted from our own personal understanding of scripture. This can manifest itself in an unwillingness to fully support the visions of grassroots communities of color in fighting for their own liberation.
- Even with so many white workers in the Movement, few communities have prioritized the responsibility of engaging other white folk to address white supremacy.

**Repair**

More than simply recognizing and describing this truth, we desire to articulate a way forward. All acts that sever our relationships with God and each other must be atoned for and made right. We desire to make amends to those who have been harmed by racism in the Catholic Worker, and we desire to dismantle racism in the Catholic Worker. In making suggestions for how to move forward, we do not mean to ignore the racial justice work that many Catholic Workers are already engaged in; in fact, many of the suggestions are drawn from work that Catholic Workers have already begun. We would like to expand the conversation, however, so that we can better support one another in strong and courageous action.

Let us first consider expanding the Aims and Means to reflect our strong commitment to anti-racism work. Let us also keep racism a part of our conversations, round tables, workshops, and retreats. We aim to utilize the resources that exist in the Catholic Worker community to facilitate discussion, reflection, and action that supports anti-racism work.

Second, let us remember that being an anti-racist movement is not simply a label we can claim for ourselves. It is a way of being in the world that affects our work and our relationships. Being an “anti-racist” community and institution is impossible without true accountability. As a predominantly white movement, we need to center the voices and visions of communities of color who are targeted and directly impacted by our unjust systems. It is essential that we follow their lead and support them in the ways that they ask us. Our goal is not to recruit people of color to the Catholic Worker. But we recognize that the Catholic Worker will be a more just and diverse movement if we support black and brown struggles and actively work to dismantle white supremacy in our communities.

Third, let us honestly examine the complex dynamics of a white Catholic Worker house operating in a predominantly black neighborhood. Are we taking resources from the local community? Are we contributing to gentrification? Do we see ourselves as saviors among the less fortunate? In what ways can we step back and let the neighbors lead us?

Fourth, our access to resources and power indicate less that our work is righteous and more that we live in a world where other white people like to invest their wealth in white-led organizations. Let us come to terms with the fact that the accumulated wealth and income of our white donors is inextricably linked to the system of white supremacy that has extracted wealth from the stolen labor of people of color (many of whom we serve daily). We can create our own Jubilee by tithing money to support communities of color in their self-determined pursuits. Maintaining control over how the money is spent and to which of our programs (or other Catholic Worker communities) it is allocated is not being a good steward; it is perpetuating privilege.

Finally, more than just giving...
of our financial resources, we have the chance to utilize all our resources and assets to support grassroots organizations of color. The land and properties we rent and own – which exist on land stolen from Native Americans – can be used to provide spaces for these organizations. We can learn the visions of people of color so as to be accountable to those visions for liberation; assuming we can lead people of color to racial freedom is another expression of white supremacy. In a world that constantly assaults the bodies of people of color, we can volunteer our bodies to stand where they are needed in local struggles for racial justice.

And so we, white Catholic Workers, have the chance to ask ourselves: Are we willing to commit our lives and our communities to the work of healing from a culture of racism? Are we willing to prioritize this work, knowing that racism is at the root of many injustices? Will we struggle to hold each other, our community members, and Movement family accountable to this goal? And though we may never feel perfectly ready to begin this, let us not forget that fear of imperfection is a tool of white supremacy. May God grant us the strength to continue this lifelong work of building the new in the shell of the old as we journey towards liberation together.

In love and resistance,

The Midwest Catholic Worker Faith and Resistance Gathering 2017

Welcome, continued from page 1

can Americans, addressing the harsh reality of racism while trumpeting their dignity.

Jenny Truax of St. Louis provides a probing article exploring the influence of white supremacy culture on the practice of voluntary poverty and also provides suggestions for creating a practice of voluntary poverty that is more inclusive.

Eric Martin, of Charlottesville, Virginia, attended the recent clarification of thought weekend on racism hosted by the New York Catholic Worker. He provides a summary and reflection of that intense and productive weekend.

Finally, Brenna Cussen Anglada of the St. Isidore CW Farm reflects on the implications for a back-to-land movement when the land that Catholic Worker farms inhabit was stolen from its original native custodians. It also includes an invitation to join the next Catholic Worker Faith and Resistance Retreat against the building of a new pipeline near Duluth, Minnesota. We have been welcomed by Anishiinabe friends of the Duluth Catholic Worker communities. We hope you can join us in this collaboration of resistance if you are able.

We are not certain how often this review will be published, perhaps once or twice a year. Most of the works in this booklet were authored or arranged by the editors, but we want the next issue to include a broader segment of the CW movement. Additionally, we want to recognize that all the editors are white. Although this is not ideal, we felt compelled to move forward with this publication because the response to racism cannot be silence. We plan to diversify our editorial collective and/or create more accountability into this publication moving forward. If after reading this publication, you feel you have a writing, poem or artwork that would fit with our mission, email linencln.rice@outlook.com. Also, please feel free to contact me if you would like to support this publication with a donation to cover printing and mailing costs. We hope you find this issue useful to your work!
A Black Man’s Prayer - Helen C. Riley

The following is a prayer composed by Helen C. Riley (1926-2013), an African American convert to Catholicism who founded Blessed Martin House of Hospitality in Memphis. It remained in operation from 1952 to 1956. The house provided hospitality for mostly Black children of working mothers who could not afford daycare. Afterward, she moved to Barstow, California with her husband and son, where she worked as a librarian. During the 1960s, she was also an associate editor the New York Catholic Worker and contributed the following prayer to the October 1963 issue. It addressed the harsh reality of racism while trumpeting the dignity of African Americans. The prayer is presented as she originally wrote it, which includes sexist language.

Our Father:

You call all men sons—help us to see and recognize our son-ship and our brotherhood.

Apartheid-nigger-jim crow-white man’s burden—all those expressions which we use to express feelings of superiority—of separateness and hate—let them have no place upon our lips nor in our hearts. Help us, instead, to know and understand that there are no strangers here—just sons and brothers.

Have regard, O Lord and see how we, your black children, have been denied and disinherited by our fairer brothers—as if we were bastard children, to be explained, to be apologized for, to be kept hidden and out of sight, to be exploited-blamed-despised.

Help us to see in our own sufferings, a pale reflection of your sufferings, and so, unite our own to Yours. Give us the will and strength and courage to fight mightily for justice—yet meanwhile to endure injustice patiently and with charity toward those who make us suffer most—let us not fight hatred with hatred, but hatred with love.

Let us understand that in us you are crucified again across our nation and the world—and let others see and understand this too.

Our little children, Lord who are barred from schools because they are black—or who worse still are mocked and ridiculed and spat upon because they are not barred from schools—help us to see Who really suffers in them: “Whatever you have done to these—you have done to Me.”

Lest I should come to despise and hate myself for being black—or come to resent and hate all others for not being black, remind me of these things often, that I may worthily and becomingly call you: Father.

Amen
Intentional Community Life: Tools for Spotting Racism
St. Louis Catholic Worker Community

It’s often difficult for white folks to determine how racism may be playing out in their organizations. Like white privilege, white culture can seem invisible to white people, like the air we breathe. Following are four ways that racism can play out in our organizations, with an emphasis on service and justice groups. The topics are listed in the Catalyzing Liberation Toolkit from the Catalyst Project and Criss Crass, with summaries by the St. Louis Anti-Racism Collective. The St. Louis Catholic Worker created the list of examples for a 2016 Workshop entitled “Racism in Direct Service Organizations.”

A. Universalizing White Experience
When “white” is considered standard, normal, and good, people with white privilege internalize this superiority and sense of being “normal,” which has consequences on the personal, institutional and societal level. Examples of whiteness as normative can include ideas of leadership and ways of communicating. In social justice organizations, white folks can view their organizing styles, meeting culture, and organizational policies as normal and average. White folks may react poorly to suggestions, or different ways of doing things from people of color. Examples include:

- White folks wondering why people of color can’t get on board with the program or agenda, or “fit in” to the normative style of organizing and communicating
- Urgency dictating how the group operates, rather than relationship building or listening
- Failing to recognize that a white-led organization has specific cultural ways of communicating and running meetings, campaigns, and programs, which can inadvertently marginalize people of color
- White folks escalating tactics because of a strong sense of urgency, even though there are different risks posed to Black, Brown, and undocumented activists

B. Deracialization
Deracialization involves removing an issue from the larger context of racism and failing to challenge the impact of racism on that issue. Deracializing restricts the self-determination of the people who are most impacted by that issue to define their own struggle. This term was developed by Critical Resistance, a prison abolition organization. Examples include:

- Organizations combatting homelessness, war, or climate change, and not naming and challenging the intersection of racism with these issues
- Treating injustices like climate change and war as if they affect all people equally
- White folks feeling free to speak in newsletters, to volunteers, and publicly as experts on subjects that disproportionately affect people of color, while groups and people of color are often ignored or not believed.
- White-led organizations failing to acknowledge both the history, and current organizing, of people of color doing similar work

C. Contradictory Resistance
In the dynamic of contradictory resistance, white folks work to end oppression but simultaneously fight to maintain the privileges they have. This can look like fighting to maintain positions of power in an organization, or white activists sacrificing long-term strength and the goals of activists of color in order to win short-term gains for their own agenda. Sometimes this looks like prioritizing the clout or power of an organization over the cause by playing it safe or avoiding the appearance of being “too radical.” Examples include:

- Organizations addressing war, poverty, or education (issues that disproportionately affect people of color) without people of color being in leadership or even at the table
- Organizations placing greater focus and emphasis on the (mostly white) members and donors of the group rather than those impacted by the injustice
- White folks being unwilling to be uncomfortable, have less control, or less power within a group. Demanding that the group give them something “useful” to do, prioritizing that their skills are being used well over the larger goals of the group

D. Centered On the White
This is a dynamic of white activists ignoring or misunderstanding the resistance coming from communities of color. 500+ years of liberation struggles on this continent have been led by people of color, from colonization on through today. The idea of “recruiting” people of color into “the” movement (defined as white radical struggle) ignores this historical and contemporary reali-
ty. Examples include:

- White folks asking the question “How can we get more people of color to join our group?” or “How come more people of color don’t realize how important this issue is?”
- An organization focusing in a tokenistic way on diversity rather than implementing an anti-racist analysis
- A predominantly white organization using Black and brown icons (like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Gandhi, etc.) to further their agenda without challenging present-day racism
- A predominantly white organization putting energy and resources into appealing to white donors, participants or board members and ignoring its lack of diversity

These four dynamics are very common in white-dominated groups such as the Catholic Worker. The following exercise provides specific examples of these four main dynamics to help communities look at their specific cultures, policies and practices. It can be used in meetings or retreats to open up a conversation about how race and racism play out in our communities.

Indicate if the following statement is true for your community:

1. White folks dominate leadership positions and also dictate the way that organizing and communicating happens.
2. Generally, our group culture favors working efficiently and completing tasks over building relationships.
3. It is NOT an expectation that people joining our community will learn about the culture and history of the folks we serve, or the original inhabitants of the land we inhabit.
4. I have noticed that white folks in my community attain official and unofficial leadership positions sooner and easier than their counterparts who are not white.
5. I have heard, or been a part of conversations that blame the victim, focusing the sole responsibility for ending racism and poverty on individual behavior without acknowledging or addressing institutional oppression.
6. My community does not consistently acknowledge the influence of racism on the issue we focus on.
7. My community encourages white folks in the group to speak publicly (to volunteers, to groups, and in our newsletter) about issues that disproportionately affect people of color without first ensuring that the voices of people of color have been centered.
8. My community does not generally acknowledge the history of people of color working on the same issue.
9. Our community has at times have preferred to remain silent rather than to appear too radical in supporting a people of color-led cause or action.
10. My community often prioritizes white volunteers over the comfort or privacy of the guests we serve.
11. My community has not prioritized building relationships and accountability with the people and institutions in the neighborhood/area where we work.
12. In my community, I have observed white folks seeming desperate to help a certain person or group of people, regardless of whether they were asked for help.
13. In my community, I have observed white folks cultivating situations where people of color are dependent on them.
14. In my community I have heard the question asked (to myself or others), “How can we get more people of color to join our group/activities?”
15. I have seen white folks appropriate and whitewash Black and Brown icons (like MLK, Gandhi) without challenging present-day racism in the US.
16. My community has many donors, volunteers or board members who are disconnected from the communities of color that we serve.
17. People in my community, myself included, have at times talked in disempowering and paternalistic ways about the communities of color that are targeted by oppression. For example, we have at times ignored or underestimated a community’s resourcefulness and resistance.
18. Over-valuing the righteousness of our particular cause has kept us from forming relationships with groups led by people of color.
Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker and one of my heroes, knew what it was to be rooted to the land. His family had tilled the same piece of earth for 60 generations—“since the days of Saint Augustine,” Peter claimed. The French village that birthed him had kept alive many of the customs it had employed since the Middle Ages: sharing work and tools, maintaining the commons, and working with their hands. Maurin, one of 22 children, championed this type of communitarian ethic as one that negated the need to rely on corporations or the state. Nobody knows exactly why Peter left France for the US (he likely was avoiding military conscription), but after a few decades of wandering, Peter sought out a way to enact on a large scale his vision for a “green revolution” based on his village experience and understanding of Medieval history. He dreamed of lay Catholic communes who, like the Irish (“green”) monks of the seventh century, would practice prayer, scholarship, and cultivation of the land to create small, self-sufficient societies where it would be easier for people “to be good.” It was, and remains, a captivating vision.

Maurin’s dream included defeating capitalism by populating the countryside with “back-to-the-landers.” As a European immigrant, however, he failed to take into account the reality that the land he encouraged people—mostly Euro-American people—to go “back” to had been acquired for their use through the forced removal and genocide of native communities, most of whom were still in existence and still actively fighting for their survival. Over the last several years, I have done a lot of reading, listening to, and learning about the histories and present realities of the people of this continent told from the perspective of American Indians, and I have been saddened to realize how little the CW has taken this reality into account.

We in the Midwest CW have only recently begun to grapple with what it means to work for justice given the reality of hundreds of years of institutional racism. Might it also be time to look critically at how we have participated in the ongoing colonization of this continent, and what it could look like to repair the harm?

In *Unsettling Minnesota*, white decolonization activist Derrick Jensen, in collaboration with Dakota activist Waziyatawin, seems to affirm Maurin’s original vision when he calls on people to “break their loyalty to industrial capitalism,” and instead re-discover their loyalty to the “real physical world, including the land where you live.” Like the Catholic Worker, Jensen calls people to recognize that “the luxuries of the dominant culture do not come free, but rather are paid for by other humans [and] nonhumans.” Waziyatawin adds that decolonization entails “overturning the institutions, systems, and ideologies of colonialism that continue to affect every aspect of Indigenous life.” However, Jensen points out that for white settlers, decolonization must also include “recognizing that we are living on stolen land” and “working to return that land to the humans whose blood has forever mixed with the soil.”

How might we in the CW use our well-practiced critical analysis of capitalism and industrial society for the benefit of, and in collaboration with, our indigenous neighbors? Many of the ideas below are adapted from suggestions given at Standing Rock to settlers who joined the struggle:

A good first step is to combat the “myth of the disappearing native” by learning whose land we are on and the specific details of how this came to be (Treaties? War? Forced Removal?). We can also know our own family’s history, learning specifically about how/why our
ancestors ended up on this land, breaking the “great silence” around the atrocities perpetrated by them or for their benefit, with the intent of healing and creating reparative relationships with our indigenous neighbors that are based on truth.

Once we know whose land we are on, and have educated ourselves about the history of the area and its current struggles, we can begin to ask permission to be there. It is also important to research where our water, heat, and electricity come from, as many such resources come at the expense of the destruction of Indian reservation land through strip mining, dams, and other extractive projects.

A request that I have heard from many American Indians for non-native people is to embrace our own traditions, rather than trying to “become Indian.” Descendants of European settlers, in the process of becoming white, have lost many of our roots; however, we often mistake this real longing for connection with the illusion that we are entitled to help ourselves to Native culture, an appropriation that has been a central feature of colonial oppression for centuries. As Catholic Workers, we can go deep into our own fertile tradition to stay grounded while we learn from and collaborate with others.

A final request is to ask permission to join one of the ongoing indigenous-led struggles for land and self-determination taking place all over the continent. The CW, which does activism well, can use our experience and our networks to support land return and treaty rights. The Duluth CW has already begun collaborating with many Ojibwe and other indigenous activists in northern Minnesota, and through this has offered the wider CW an opportunity to participate in this work. Enbridge Energy, a Canadian corporation, is attempting to add a new segment of pipeline in Minnesota in order to ship fracked tar sands oil through wetlands, wild rice lakes, and Ojibwe sovereign territory. Many people have been fighting the pipeline on the legal front, which will delay the final decision at months, if not years.

In the meantime, several camps, including the Makwa Initiative – an Ojibwe-led resistance camp – and Ma’ingan Prayer and Cultural Aki – an indigenous-centered, self-sustaining, healing community that has kept a sacred fire going continuously since May – have opened up in the North. Hildegard House and Loaves and Fishes CWs have started building community with their Anishinabe friends and other anti-pipeline activists. In particular, they have spent much time listening to, collecting donations for, and splitting lots of firewood for these two camps. In coalition with, and with permission from, the indigenous communities in their area, the Duluth CWs are planning the annual Midwest CW resistance retreat against the pipeline from April 6-9, 2018. Please consider joining the retreat. (For more information, contact Michelle Naar-Obed, Hildegard House CW, Duluth: hildegardhouseduluthcw@gmail.com).

May our rich spiritual practices of faith-based resistance to empire and care for the land be put to use (as well as challenged and stretched) as we humbly participate in a process of decolonization.
White Supremacy Culture is a powerful article from white anti-racist educator Tema Okun listing some of ways the belief system of white supremacy can inadvertently show up in behaviors and organizations. White people may not even realize there is such a thing as white culture or tendencies, because they are like the air we breathe -- invisible, and taken for granted by white folks as the only way to be. But this culture has distinct qualities and is often experienced as racism by people of color.

It can be a helpful practice to examine the ways that the culture of our individual communities may inadvertently manifest dynamics of white supremacy culture. This article will explore a few of the characteristics - perfectionism, competitiveness, individualism and either-or thinking - and examine some of the pitfalls of the way they can play out in how we manifest voluntary poverty.

To start, let’s examine some definitions. We think of culture as the way of life of a particular group including the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept (generally without thinking about them). Culture is powerful precisely because it affects everything, but often from an underlying level. White supremacy culture is when the norms, values, beliefs and standards of white folks are considered normal and good, while other ways are considered other, marginal, or inferior. Without personal and organizational work, most white-dominated organizations will end up embodying many of the characteristics of white supremacy culture, regardless of their radical or progressive intentions and philosophies. The Catholic Worker is not an exception.

Perfectionism: Making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong equals being wrong. There is little appreciation for successes in a perfectionistic community; folks mostly point out each other’s failures behind their backs. This is related to individualism, and is the opposite of collaboration. In terms of voluntary poverty, the communal standard can provide a litmus test on whether people will feel a sense of belonging. For example, how well a community member comports, avoids driving and lives simply will affect their level of being respected and whether they feel like they really belong. With voluntary poverty, perfectionism often looks like an emphasis on personal purity over collective (flawed) engagement.

Antidotes to Perfectionism: Develop a culture of appreciation for people’s efforts. Emphasize collective integrity over individual purity. In a regular, structured way, create communal time to appreciate people’s work and efforts. Develop a community culture that learns from mistakes and values vulnerability. Commit to learning HOW to share better, rather than expecting people to arrive with the necessary skills. Regularly, communally, ask about different aspects of Catholic Worker philosophy, but particularly voluntary poverty: in what ways does our community culture embody perfectionism?

Sense of Urgency: We need to embrace voluntary poverty NOW, in THIS SPECIFIC WAY. The sense of urgency makes it difficult to be inclusive and encourage thoughtful decision-making, especially when people have different class identities. It also deters us from considering the long-term repercussions of our actions, many of which (like resisting student loan debt) can have lifetime consequences. A sense of urgency frequently results in over-valuing quick or highly visible actions that may be “performative” rather than relationship building or transformative. These types of actions rarely manifest into longer-term practices after the person has left the Catholic Worker.
Antidotes to Urgency: Build in a spacious amount of time for thoughtful planning. Embrace people’s different interpretations and practices of voluntary poverty. Acknowledge that different class and race backgrounds will affect people’s experience of voluntary poverty. Treat the commitment to right relationship with community, guests and the planet (the root of the voluntary poverty concept) as a life-time journey that evolves rather than a box to check off. Regularly, communally, ask: in what ways does our community culture around voluntary poverty and radical simplicity feel overly urgent?

Quantity Over Quality: We over emphasize voluntary poverty in terms of material possessions and amount of things, and under emphasize relationship-building and process. Things that can be measured (pounds of trash saved, amount of electricity saved, pounds of produce grown) are more highly valued than things that cannot (relationships in the community, process of decision-making, ability to constructively deal with conflict).

Antidotes to Quantity over Quality: Include process or quality goals in your planning; make sure your community has a values statement which expresses the ways in which you want to do your work; make sure this is a living document and that people are using it in their day to day work. Create a culture that focuses on the root aims of voluntary poverty rather than policing physical results. Regularly, communally, ask: how are we building each other up and growing in love in our practice of voluntary poverty and radical simplicity?

Either/Or Thinking: You’re either the Catholic Worker who cares about the poor and the environment, or you’re not. This can be related to white savior model and Catholic guilt - you are either in this martyr-model with us, or you’re part of the problem. There is no sense that things can be both/and, and very little thought into how people’s different identities impact their interpretation of voluntary poverty. Can be used to manipulate people into following a specific agenda, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives.

Antidotes to Either/Or: Notice when this is happening and try to present both-and concepts. Name unspoken expectations about voluntary poverty, resource use, and behavior. Value creativity. Create a community culture of flexibility and a welcome for many paths leading to the same goals.

Individualism: “Who can consume the least, grow the most or dumpster-dive the most?” Voluntary poverty can become an individualistic practice that feels more competitive than collaborative. Personal choices are valued over systemic change, with people and communities overly focused on individual purity over mass movement work. This can lead to isolation; if you can’t “take it” (because of physical health, economic reasons, or whatever), you risk not belonging to the group.

Antidotes to Individualism: Make people accountable as a group rather than as individuals to encourage collaboration. Create a culture where people bring struggles to the group. Acknowledge that no one is pure, and that we are all responsible for each other. Explore the role of privilege in how people practice voluntary poverty. Ask: In what ways is our community a part of the larger neighborhood and community? In what ways is our community accountable to the people where they live?

The deep purpose of voluntary poverty involves forming right relationships towards each other and the planet; sharing what resources we have, and taking what we need. Voluntary poverty means resisting materialism and defying the tropes of capitalism that say that we need to produce (whether it is money, volunteer hours or number of meals) to be worthy. It aims to enable people to be more available to seek justice. To better represent these root values, it’s essential for Catholic Workers to examine and change the way that it’s expression appeals mainly to white, middle class people.

Sources and Further Reading

Tema Okun: White Supremacy Culture


Other CW Reflections on Voluntary Poverty: catholicworker.org.nz/the-common-good/what-is-voluntary-poverty/
livedtheology.org/reflections-on-voluntary-poverty/

Book: Living Sustainably: What Intentional Communities Can Teach Us about Democracy, Simplicity, and Nonviolence
Editor’s note: A group of Catholic Workers from the Midwest traveled to the New York Catholic Worker in February to facilitate a conversation about racism and how it impacts the CW movement. Joe Kruse from Minneapolis kicked off our Friday night Clarification of Thought with the following reflection:

After Mike Brown was murdered, while his body lay uncovered under the Missouri summer sun for four hours, the suburb of Ferguson began to tremble. Mike Brown’s death was the beginning of an avalanche. The protests in Ferguson were a shockwave felt around world. In the Age of Obama, the intertwined, inseparable twin evils of neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy had forced a boiling over amidst decades of pain and violence. The rebellion in Ferguson became a crucial wake up call for many of us with more racial and economic privilege about the enduring reality that poor and working class black people are gunned down by the state with impunity. The shockwave of the Ferguson protests grew in strength over the years as instances of state-sanctioned murder continued to plague black communities around the country and brilliant, resilient forms of organizing rose up to combat them.

And, of course, these shockwaves were felt deeply within the marrow of the Catholic Worker Movement, compelling many communities to act. Involvement in protest movements around racial justice is definitely not new to the Catholic Worker. As you all know, many Catholic Workers participated in the Civil Rights struggles of the 60’s and 70’s. Dorothy’s last arrest was amidst a labor struggle of, by, and for Mexican and Mexican-American agricultural workers. And I’m sure we would all agree that our movement’s historical anti-imperialist focus combats white supremacy exported abroad via the US military.

However, for many of us in the Catholic Worker, the recent revolutionary movements around systemic racism and police brutality have called us to be increasingly honest in acknowledging our own shortcomings; specifically the ways that the Catholic Worker has upheld racist power structures and ignored systems of white supremacy embedded in our own Movement and its history.

For me, a textbook example of a way in which racism is embedded in our Movement can be found in the story of Peter Maurin’s Harlem branch of the New York City Catholic Worker. Peter was, of course, deeply disturbed by the economic and social oppression heaped upon Black people in New York. In 1934, he received a large donation from a Catholic attorney to start a Catholic Worker house in Harlem, which at the time, was a predominantly Black community. Peter’s project stemmed from his genuine concern for an exploited people, but he was also worried about the ways in which Communist activists were empowering Black Americans and recruiting many into a secular and un-Christian vanguard. A significant piece of Peter’s motivation in starting the Harlem branch was to ensure that the movement for black liberation in Harlem followed his Christian decentralist, distributionist, agrarian blueprint.

Peter’s Harlem project was an almost immediate failure. After just a couple of weeks of strong attendance at lectures and roundtables, enthusiasm for the Catholic Worker house plummeted. Corresponding to a friend, Dorothy Day wrote, ”I wish you would drop in to see Peter when you have time. It is pretty hard sledding up there. There is great opposition to the work and it is hard to get along... His school is not going well at all and

This reflection, and panel discussion, is available for viewing by searching “Anti-Racism Round Table Discussion: New York Catholic Worker” on youtube.com
only a few people show up.”

Peter’s time in Harlem was littered with cringe-worthy experiments. Once, he booked himself as a co-comedian and got on stage during ameuteur night at Harlem’s famous Appolo Theater. He began reciting his Easy Essays and was booed, heckled, and escorted off stage almost immediately. Another time he organized a group of students to participate in a “poster walk” through the streets of Harlem. Each student carried a poster with an idea from one of Peter’s Easy Essays on it. They walked in a straight line, so when read in sequence the posters conveyed a coherent Easy Essay message. As soon as they started, community members insulted and hurled garbage at them, bringing the performance to an immediate end.

According to Marc Ellis, Peter’s experiment collapsed largely because he was a white Catholic in black Protestant surroundings. I believe that not only was Peter out of his element, he insisted that his idea was what black Americans needed to overcome racism. Because Peter did not go to Harlem with a posture of listening, his project reproduced a patriarchal white savior evangelism and reinforced the white supremacy that he sought to challenge.

I recall this kernel of our movement’s history because I believe it is indicative of a systemic racism still embedded in the Catholic Worker today. I know that parts of my own experience at the Minneapolis Catholic Worker follow a similar trajectory to Peter’s Harlem house. When we started the Rye House, our entirely white community chose to live in a neighborhood that was Latino/a, Somali, black, and American Indian. We did not ask our new neighbors how we could be useful. Like Peter, we felt that we had created something awesome for our neighborhood, without consulting the community about how, if at all, we could be good, supportive neighbors.

It is in this spirit of exploration around the ways in which the Catholic Worker has manifested white supremacy, that brings us here tonight, to dialogue with you all. We believe that the Black Lives Matter movement has led to what are perhaps historically unique forms of dedicated and prolonged work taking place within the umbrella of the Catholic Worker. In the wake of Ferguson, and following the lead of committed Catholic Workers in St. Louis, many Catholic Workers in the Midwest have begun to earnestly, and often clumsily, grapple with the overwhelming whiteness of the Catholic Worker movement and the systemic racism embedded in the internal, day-to-day workings of our communities.

For three years now, as a collective Midwest CW movement, we have been discerning clarification of thought around questions like: What does it mean that the Catholic Worker movement is overwhelmingly white? What does it mean that many (but not all) Catholic Workers come from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds? What does this tell us about our culture, about how power is held and distributed in our movement? What do some of the “core” values of the CW movement, like voluntary poverty, say about the “typical” Catholic Worker? And most challenging of all; given these realities, how should we move forward?

And to be honest, after years of conversations and hard work, after three faith and resistance retreats focused on these specific questions, it often feels like we dig up more confusion than answers, that we are almost always stumbling along. It is this continued exploration that brings us together tonight. Our hope is to widen this conversation to include more CW communities, especially those so intimately connected to the vitality of our founders and the 85 year old history of our movement. We need your help and your wisdom. And we also feel like we have important insights and questions to offer to the wider CW movement. We believe that it is only together that we can address these questions and move forward to more fully embody the beloved community within the Catholic Worker Movement.
When Ferguson made headlines in August of 2014, Marjorie Corbman, once a member of Su Casa Catholic Worker in Chicago, brought me to Harlem to protest and march against racist policing. We were two of the only white faces in the crowd. One year later, Martha Hennessy of the Mary House Catholic Worker called me about a Black Lives Matter event at the First Corinthian Baptist Church on 116th Street. “We need to be present,” she said simply, and I was surprised to find her name and the affiliation “Catholic Worker” on the list of sponsors. Carl Dix and Cornel West spoke, but I remember most painfully the grandmother of Aiyana Jones, the seven-year old killed in her sleep by a Detroit police officer. Again, we were among only a handful of white people present.

The crowd was very different when I returned to New York on February 2 and 3 as Midwest Catholic Workers guided discussions on white supremacy and the Catholic Worker at Maryhouse. Brenna Cussen Aneglada, Eric Anglada, Jenny Truax, Lydia Wong, Maria Bergh, Joseph Moore, Joe Kruse, and Leah Levinger brought the fruit of their experience working with activists of color and their retreats on anti-racism to the coast. The crowd was overwhelmingly white, underscoring the point the speakers had come to address. Why is our movement so homogenous, we asked, and is that a sign of greater systemic failure on our part? In what ways is the Worker complicit in white supremacy and in what ways do we perpetuate it?

Representatives came from from Catholic Worker communities in upstate New York, Charleston, SC, Durham, NC, Harrisburg, PA, Hartford, CT, Norfolk, VA, and various parts of Massachusetts. On Friday, the group shared their journey of the last four years with the public, and heard the concerns and experiences of the audience. Early Saturday morning we reconvened for a day-long workshop breaking down and defining racism, white supremacy, manifestations throughout history and in our communities, and how we could join the anti-racism movements in our own hometowns. It didn’t take long for us to feel resistance to the idea of Catholic Worker complicity. Weren’t these Midwesterners familiar with the story of Dorothy getting shot at while visiting Georgia’s Koinonia Farm, where she went to work against racial injustice? Didn’t they know the Black folks in Harlem thought Peter Maurin was “okay”? Hadn’t they heard of the work Willa Bickham and Brendan Walsh do in Baltimore’s Viva House Catholic Worker?

Ultimately we agreed that complicity in white supremacy did not mean that nothing good had been done on race issues. Despite the vocal resistance to the topic by some, most of us embraced the need to address racism and the Worker. In fact, many expressed that an in-depth discussion was long overdue.

The Saturday exercises alternated between mini-lectures and time for group discussion. We spread a centuries-long timeline across the tables where CW newspapers are labelled, and filled it with race-related events, then took a contemplative walk through time in silence, letting the imbalance of horrific crimes against people of color and liberation movements sink in. The communal space gave time to consider the brutality and allow it to fester and interrupt.

We challenged
each other to contemplate our pervasive rejection of just war theory while tacitly consenting to a just policing theory. In the face of increasing calls to disband the racist police system, why do we not add our voices with the same zeal with which we call for the disbandment of the military? Does this discrepancy stem from a reasoned conclusion that policing is more in keeping with the beatitudes and Matthew 25, or from a failure to hear black and brown voices decry a police violence that can blur the line between security and warfare?

We examined the Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker. Just what does it mean for a predominantly white group to speak of going “back to the land” that was taken by genocide? How would indigenous people read this? How does the phrase “voluntary poverty” sound to people of color, who suffer involuntary poverty at an unequal rate? Are the Aims and Means written, in fact, for a presumed white audience? We broke into groups and each examined a paragraph with white supremacy in mind in order to edit our section, coming back together to form the basis for a whole-text revision.

Small groups provided the opportunity to get more specific than we could with the whole group. The image that will stick with me came from Sue Frankel-Streit of the Little Flower Catholic Worker in Virginia. She explained how aware she became in prison that inmates, mostly people of color, were at the mercy of those who had the keys, who were mostly white. When she returned home, a black house guest came up to Sue and asked if Sue could unlock the pantry so she could get some food. Sue knew then, years ago, that the Worker had to have conversations about unseen, systemic racism in their own houses.

Who holds the keys? Who serves whom? Is our notion of hospitality itself racially-weighted? Who gets to make decisions? Who is invited to the meetings? Whose ideas get printed? And who gets to choose? These questions relevant to day-to-day community life are just as important as the ones relevant to the wider community, such as whose movements we support, whose leadership we trust and follow, and how our often-white presence impacts the more diverse neighborhoods in which we buy homes.

Two topics that briefly arose which generated fruitful disagreement for future discussions were (1) whether pacifism functions to reinforce white supremacy and (2) in what ways (if at all) the Catholic Worker is an institution. Whatever the end-result, both conversations would aid any attempt at revising the Aims and Means. Our collective effort at Maryhouse to do so was met with some trepidation, but quickly gained momentum. Re-examining the document through the lens of race was provocative and fruitful with nothing to fear from a disciplined clarification of thought.

I learned so much from everyone in that room. I wish we could have heard from Jenny Truax of the St. Louis Catholic Worker about her experience in Ferguson, as well as from Sue Frankel-Streit in Charlottesville. I know, too, that a number of Workers have stories to tell from Standing Rock. I hope their insights can be read in these pages in the future. I hope we can explore the ways race intersects with patriarchy and heterosexism, which we also need to self-reflect deeply on. I hope that soon it will not be surprising to see the words “Catholic Worker” on a Black Lives Matter sponsor list, and that we react to the murder of a seven-year old black girl by police in Detroit with the same vigor we give to defending drone victims, as both are killed by state violence. And I hope we face the hard questions about power within our own communities and adjust accordingly.

It is absurd to presume we have remained untouched by something so central to our society as white supremacy.