

# MANNA *in The wilderness*

Winter 1988

The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

Vol. 2, No. 2

## The Harvest Is Ready

by Julia Occhiogrosso

On the outskirts of the Las Vegas Strip, departing from celebrity marquees, obscured from the glitter of fame, sits St. John the Baptist house. It is a three-bedroom tract house with a Peace Pole in the front yard and a poustinia (prayer house) out back. Above the front door is the familiar Catholic Worker symbol of Christ and the workers.

Upon entering the house you find yourself in a room that serves as both an office and a dining area. The walls are covered with images of hope and inspiration. Pictures of Dorothy Day and Ammon Hennacy hang alongside photographs of more recent actions and events. The bulletin board is layered with an assortment of communications. Icons and other religious symbols bring it all into focus.

Our guests sit at the table by the picture window, reading the paper, sipping coffee, or just gazing at the birds playing in the back yard. Streams of sunlight come through the window and strike the scene with a splendid glow. I look on convinced that I am witnessing a glimpse of that vision of integrity and peace that Dorothy and Peter wanted for the world—a place where it would be easier to be good.

Out of this simple, almost anonymous, existence has emerged a community with renewed enthusiasm for the values of the Gospels—a community eager to serve the poor and address the issues of violence and injustice. Yes, a community of individuals who have been inspired by the mustard seed of faith that gave rise to St. John the Baptist house.

This simple little witness has stirred up an assortment of generous deeds that seem almost contagious. Voluntarily, people come from all parts of Las Vegas to chop vegetables at our kitchen table, to make hundreds of sandwiches, to help lift heavy pots and to go out in the early morning to feed the poor. People give us their own coats and blankets and then go to get

their neighbors and church groups to do the same. Over half the parishes in the Diocese offer some type of support. Loyal helpers and friends humbly stuff significant contributions in my pocket as they slip out the door.

As people grow more personally involved in serving the poor, they become more open to understanding our resistance work. For many of our local supporters, the National Catholic Worker gathering in Las Vegas last November helped to clarify connections. Catholic Workers came from all over the country to honor Dorothy Day by nonviolent witness at the Nevada Test Site. Las Vegas supporters heard speakers discuss nonviolence and the implications of embracing the radical Gospel. They also had personal encounters with movement people who have struck the balance in their lives of serving the poor and resisting systems of violence.

Yet the challenge to teach these connections continues at St. John the Baptist house. "Vigil, what's a vigil?" he asks as we roll out the butcher paper on the kitchen floor. "You'll see," I assure him as I hand him a paint brush. After a quick brainstorming session, we come up with just the right statement and get to work. When evening comes we collect our candles and signs and head out to the Federal Building. In the still darkness we attempt to bring an alternative light to the streets of Las Vegas.

In keeping with the longstanding Catholic Worker tradition, St. John the Baptist house chooses to teach through word as well as deed. *Manna*, the Las Vegas Catholic Worker newsletter, goes out to nearly 900 subscribers in its second year of publication. It is an opportunity to reach out to many and perhaps provide a little "manna"—food from the desert.

As we reach out in word and deed to feed each other with the goodness of the Gospel, we must also recognize the presence of God as the Source of our own nourishment. The model of St. John the Baptist house would be incomplete without a commitment to the discipline of prayer. Our witness would be faulty if we could not celebrate the strength of scripture as well as the vulnerability of the Eucharist. Weekly liturgical celebrations, as well as daily mass, have become part of the fabric of life at the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.

I must admit there are days when this humble abode lacks sufficient excitement. I catch myself fantasizing about having a small crowd to cheer me on as I scrub the toilet. Indeed it would be nice just once to receive a standing ovation for my gallant pesto plate, instead of blank stares and requests for more ketchup.

In my weakest hours I am preserved by embracing the mystery of Christianity. The challenge is always with us—to change what is ordinary into what could be divine. When the mundane task of chopping vegetables mingles with the loving gesture of placing candles on the table, a holy banquet is served. Then it is easy to believe that the tiniest of mustard seeds could yield a harvest of plenty.

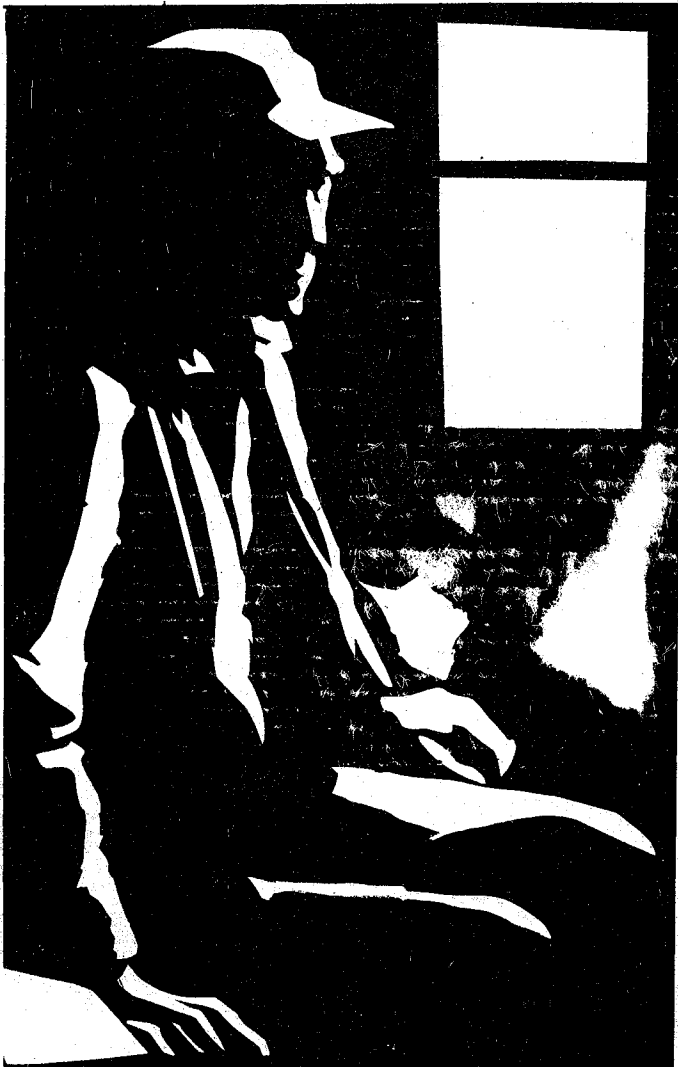
## The Gift

by Sue Koepf

The Christmas season was upon me and once again I was behind the wheel of my station wagon on my way to Julia at the Catholic Worker. I was transporting another load of new blankets and sleeping bags that had been received from families in my parish, responding to our Christmas outreach program. Despite the holiday traffic on top of the usual frantic Las Vegas driving, I found myself overwhelmed with a sense of inner peacefulness. My thoughts told me it was from the "joy of giving" and my mind began to dwell on this.

I chuckled as I thought of the comparison between my carload of lovely, soft, new blankets in a "variety of decorator colors" going to the people on the street and my own supply of blankets at home, frayed and polyester "pilled" from over twenty years of use. I was actually looking forward to sending

(Continued on back)



them with my son to college, in hopes they would get lost! The contradiction was strange and thought-provoking. These beautiful blankets and good quality sleeping bags were going to people who would be throwing them on the dirt, huddling in them next to a thorny bush, spilling food and drink on them. They would be rain-soaked and then the desert wind would sand blast them. They would be forgotten in a back alley. Suddenly I was startled by what this contradiction told me and I sensed this was what was at the heart of the peacefulness within me. These blankets were an unconditional gift, no strings attached, no expectations of their use, or abuse, came with them. Freely given!

I spent more driving time contemplating my own gift-giving to those closest to me. I recognized how I attach strings and expectations to them. How I look for recognition, for thanks. In that moment I realized how, for me, the Catholic Worker brings me a vision of the KINGDOM and the hope that I can participate in that vision; something that I find it so difficult to do with my own family! There was pain in this realization but also I became aware of my solidarity with those on the street in my own human failure. I give a blanket, I share your pain. I give a blanket, I see my need for comfort. I give a blanket, I seek forgiveness. Why is the "giving" at the Catholic Worker so special for me? As I provide for others, I am united with each person and recognize how much I also need to be provided for. The impact of Christ's birth flooded me as I looked at these gifts freely given, and I accepted His gift again, in a new way. The gift of the KINGDOM, freely given.

Now it's March 1st. Julia called me yesterday and asked a favor. She wants me to write on what the Catholic Worker has meant to me. I hate to write. I'm a talker and I process my thoughts talking with others. Suddenly, my Christmas gift surfaces and I say yes, I'll write. Hard, hard work for me; writing and taking time for reflection. But the gift was so precious, I tell myself that I really need to do this. Several days ago I had been caught again, giving a gift to someone so close to me and attaching a really big string to it.

The Catholic Worker provides my opportunity to experience unconditional love, given and received. I can move out of my "self" where I play a role of responsibility, guide, model, etc. I can experience KINGDOM love, unlike the world I live in. Because of this, I experience the hope of the KINGDOM as I find unity in those who come in need of a meal or a blanket. I see my need for wholeness, for healing, for the courage to move out of my weakness and bring KINGDOM love to those close to me. I give a blanket and hope for the KINGDOM.

In this I reflect on the respect and the concern for the dignity

of our guests at the coffee line or the meal or at the house. And I become aware of my own attitude when I'm being provided something I need, be it a material, physical or emotional need. I'm aware of when it's given begrudgingly or out of a sense of duty, of obligation. I'm aware of when I'm being given leftovers. A glance, a shrug, a condescending "making space for you" attitude informs me too quickly of my value. So I give a blanket and I see the hope for the KINGDOM. The gift is given, no questions asked. You are special, you matter, I have time for you!

It's hard to accept the gift; God's gift of the KINGDOM. It comes with no strings attached but I can't accept it that way. And I realize this in the way I relate with those close to me. I don't accept the gift freely. I get caught up in goals, competition, insecurities and false securities. The ways of the world creep in and tell me what to want, to need. If I accepted the gift, I'd be free! But I am caught up in lack of faith, unwilling to risk, to trust. So I give a blanket and see the hope for the KINGDOM.

I have become aware of how I give reflects my image of God. I give to my husband, my children, and I have expectations. I don't give them the freedom to respond to my gift. I control that response! Do I believe God has given me the gift expecting a certain response from me so that I deserve this gift? No! But do my actions prove this? So I give a blanket and expect nothing and hope for the KINGDOM.

I give you a blanket. You, in need of a bath, shuffling your feet, with an alcoholic tremor accept the blanket—and gift me with YOU. And I experience the KINGDOM.

Sue Koepp is part of the extended volunteer community of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.

## LVCW WEEKLY SCHEDULE

**Monday - Saturday, 6:30 - 8:30 a.m.**

Serve coffee at D and Bonanza Streets.

**Wednesdays, 5:30 p.m.**

Liturgical Celebration at St. John the Baptist House, 1309 Gold Ave. Potluck dinner to follow.

**Thursdays, 4:30 - 7:30 p.m.**

Serve dinner meal at St. James the Apostle Church, 821 N. H St.

**Fridays, 6:00 - 7:00 p.m.**

Stop Testing Vigil at Federal Building, 300 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

To volunteer for any of these activities, call (702) 647-0728.

*Thanks once again to the many who responded to our appeal.*



## SIGN ME UP!

Yes. I want to receive **MANNA**, the L.V.C.W. Newsletter.

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