

MANNA *in The wilderness*

Spring/Summer 1989

The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

Vol. 3, No. 1

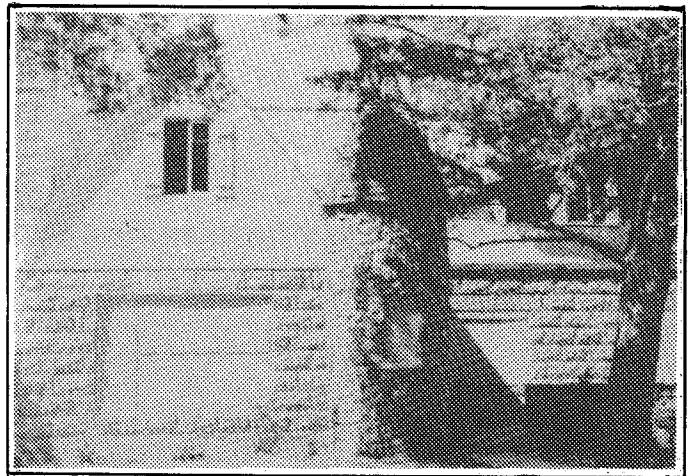
Advocacy for the Homeless

by Michael Radding

If you spend any time around "Catholic Social Justice" types, like some of those who haunt the kitchen of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker, you're bound to hear the expression "preferential option for the poor." It comes from the Latin American Bishops, who at Puebla, Mexico insisted that the needs of the poor take priority over the wants of the rich. Therefore, the economy must be restructured so that the poor are raised out of the type of poverty which diminishes their humanity and leaves them without hope. The Canadian Bishops explained several years later: "This does not mean more handouts for the poor. It calls, instead, for an equitable redistribution of wealth and power among peoples and regions."

This idea of a preferential option for the poor is pretty well in-bred in me. Working with the homeless for most of the last eight years and hanging out with Catholic Workers and Franciscans will do that to a person. In November, Julia and Fr. Louis Vitale asked me to start a Homeless Advocacy Project. They wanted a program to work among and for homeless people in order to improve services and to oppose police harassment. In my few months here I have seen a small group of people who are deeply committed to the poor and the cause of justice. The community at large, however, is often characterized by a preferential option against the poor, especially the homeless.

Recently I spoke to a community leader who explained that for years the prevailing attitude was



Thanks for Your Support!

In our last issue of *Manna* we made an appeal to raise funds to buy a hospitality house. Since that time and with your generosity we have received over \$25,000 which enabled us to pay in cash the total amount to make the purchase. We thank you for your loyal support and request continued financial support as we venture the next step of renovating the house.

that homeless people were not to be accepted here. Therefore every effort was made to force homeless people to move to Phoenix, Denver, San Diego—anywhere but Las Vegas. However, in the last eight years the numbers of homeless people have dramatically increased and diversified. No longer are homeless people mostly middle-aged alcoholics, but increasingly families and former mental patients live on the streets. This community leader begrudgingly admitted that improved services for the homeless are necessary here.

Unfortunately, many Las Vegans, some of whom work for the city or drive patrol cars, haven't reached even that limited state of awareness. They still hope that the problem can be solved through the criminal justice system. A twenty-four hour foot patrol, originally called the "Vagrancy Suppression Unit," has the specific task of arresting homeless people, especially near downtown, where they are seen as a threat to tourism. The crackdown extends to the West side of town, where day laborers on D Street and those who sleep in the nearby fields regularly face arrest.

Near the morning coffee lines four old men make camp on a dusty lot. They are there with the owner's permission, and though their camp is a simple affair of mattresses, sleeping bags, and a small fire, they have fallen under the critical eye of the Public Works Department and Metro. Bulldozers once threatened the camp; Metro awoke them at 3:15 one morning, cited them for loitering and then towed one of the men's truck. They stay on, but at a psychological toll. One of the men, age 60, is distraught at his first citation. Another struggles valiantly against mental illness, but the morning after the citation he was having real problems speaking coherently.

As far as I know, Las Vegas is the only city of its size that doesn't fund a year-round emergency shelter, yet does support a twenty-four hour patrol specifically to



arrest the homeless. In addition, there is no detox facility, no accessible medical care, almost no public transportation to construction jobs, nowhere to leave one's luggage or to clean one's clothes and no shelter with support services to meet the needs of the homeless mentally ill. At the Catholic Worker coffee line one of the men told me, "I've never seen a town like this. They give you no place to stay at night and they arrest you for sleeping outside."

The Catholic Worker movement has always stood for a new order geared towards bringing dignity and hope to the poor. Peter Maurin envisioned "a new society in the shell of the old." The inner-city houses of hospitality stress a personal service to the poor, where everybody is treated with the dignity they are entitled to as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Julia and Peg's Catholic Worker home follows this model of hospitality and witnesses to a new order that seeks to liberate the poor. What characterizes their work is that beyond providing a number of valuable services, they do it in a way that respects the dignity of each person they serve. One of the men who frequents the Thursday night meal at St. James Church summed it up best: "Julia and Peg serve good food and they serve it with love." And if this model was followed on a municipal or even national level we would see an inevitable restructuring of our economic system that would seek to end destitution and allow everyone to seek the higher good in life.

Jesus' words, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," take on added force in this age of homelessness. As we recognize the presence of Christ in the poor, we

strive to treat the poor with respect and dignity they deserve by performing acts of mercy in our personal lives, and by working toward just and fair economic and political systems that fairly distribute the wealth.

Michael Radding is coordinator of the Homeless Advocacy Project in Las Vegas.

LVCW Weekly Schedule:

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

Serve food and coffee at A and Wilson Streets.

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

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

Fridays, 11:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Stop Nuclear Testing Vigil at the Federal Building, 300 S. Las Vegas Blvd. (Call 647-0728 in case of time change.)

Labor and materials needed to renovate the new hospitality house. Please call 647-0728.

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

SIGN ME UP!

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

Name _____

Address _____

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Send to: L.V.C.W., 1309 Gold Ave., Las Vegas, NV 89106

Volunteers Needed:

The Las Vegas Catholic Worker is looking for full-time live-in volunteers for the Summer.



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