

## CATHOLIC WORKER FOUNDER DOROTHY DAY SAID TO ME:

### "Isn't This What Franciscans Ought To Be Doing?"

by Franciscan Louis Vitale

When I was attending the seminary in the early sixties it was the time of the Vatican Council. One of the effects of this great event was a new attention to the "lay church". I recall that we Franciscans were very inspired by a new movement that seemed to express the ideals of Franciscan poverty much better than we did; that was the Catholic Worker movement. Dorothy Day was already becoming a folk hero to us. In fact shortly after I left the seminary one of the young friars arranged for her to come and share some of her inspiration with the friars there. About that time I had moved to our inner city parish in Stockton, California for the intern period mandated for newly ordained priests. One of the parishoners had spent some time at the Catholic Worker House in New York and to our great delight arranged for a visit with us by Dorothy. I remember the day well. It happened to be my day to celebrate the noon Eucharist. I prepared my homily with much fear and trembling. Of course, I was eager to see her response. Dorothy instead preached to us by her obvious piety as she "told her beads" with relative indifference to my forensics. (I was comforted later to read in one of her books that she "never heard a sermon she didn't get something from.") But she did touch us that day. We had a simple meal of soup and bread. She raved about it. For us it was enough to hold us until after she left when we could run for bologna sandwiches. Dorothy had a sense of presence and belonging in that skid row area that perhaps for the first time made us feel at home.

Sometime later one of my former friar students —Patrick Jordan— received permission to spend a year with the Catholic Worker in New York to learn what this poverty we profess really looked like. He never returned. Having left the friars, Pat was subject to the draft. He resisted. His trial in federal court in Los Angeles was a Catholic Worker event. Dorothy came and testified. The judge was so impressed with Pat and Dorothy and the others from the L.A. Worker that he said if this group was even half of what he heard, that is where Pat should serve his time. Even though the prison terms were rough at that time, some thought that it might have been an easier destiny. Pat did return to New York. I visited him there. I remember showing up one morning just as they were beginning the chores. I drew the toilets (a grace according to L. A. Catholic Worker Jeff Dietrich). Shortly after, Dorothy showed up. I was glad for my brief participation in the cleaning as the first question she asked me was "Did you

help with the clean up?" Never was I so happy to be able to acknowledge my humble task. (Actually my Sicilian father assures me this was the route for many a Sicilian to riches.) Dorothy was aware that Pat had left the friars and we felt his loss, but she said to me "Isn't this what Franciscans ought to be doing?"

That was about twenty years ago. I learn slowly. Always I had carried a feeling that it

would be good to be part of the Catholic Worker life and involvement in the world. Thus it was a wonderful coincidence for me when Julia came to Vegas. She said she prayed that I would return. But she perhaps was not aware how much her coming seemed to me an opportunity of the Spirit. In the beginning Brother Harry (see Franciscans, back page)



## On Journey with the Franciscans

by Julia Occhiogrosso

"Hey where's the dude in the brown dress, ya know that brother guy?", someone standing in our soupline asked one morning. Even with this brief description I knew he was speaking of Brother Harry Vasile.

Brother Harry was a part of the Franciscan community in Las Vegas for the last three years. In September he was asked to help out in a community in New Mexico. It is a tribute to his time here that the people in our line continue to inquire about him. They recall the monk wearing the old traditional Franciscan robe, fashioned with the contemporary personal additions of baseball cap and flourescent hi-tops. More than just a detailed description of Brother Harry's attire, the above implies a metaphor which characterizes the Catholic Worker/Franciscan relationship in Las Vegas.

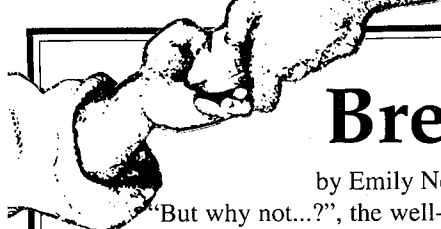
This combination brings together the enduring strengths of the Franciscan institution with the more precarious non-institutional personalist approach identified with fifty-nine years of the Catholic Worker Movement.

For the last four years Franciscan men and women in the community have been an important part of our serving ministry as well as other aspects of our lifestyle, through liturgy, celebration and friendship. It is certain the providential coming together of both these traditions have enriched the living expression of each of them.

I sometimes imagine Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day (founders of the Catholic Worker movement) comparing notes with St. Francis and St. Clare on the collective witness of their followers in Las Vegas. Today, Catholics with

progressive social and political inclinations are often in tension with the institutional church, its history, symbols and dogma. It is easy for "do good" Worker-types to abandon the total culture of Catholicism for contemporary ideologies that are sympathetic to the poor. It is tempting to forget the significant role other Church teachings and tradition have played in formulating the Catholic Worker vision. In fact, there are Catholic Workers across the country who have lost a sense of this significance. With the decentralized unstructured nature of the Worker, this dilemma is difficult to remedy. Hence, I am sure that Dorothy and Peter would be relieved to know of our connections with the Franciscans. With their eight hundred years of grounding in the Church, they offer the young Catholic Worker movement a sense of roots. We can see a vision modeled after the radical gospel, still being moved by the Holy Spirit. In the Franciscans we discover a part of ourselves buried in the evolving story of the Gospel. Like long lost relatives at a family reunion, our coming together gives us a better sense of who we are and who we are called to be.

In the same way, I could imagine St. Francis and St. Clare, delighted to see the Franciscans together with the Catholic Workers feeding the hungry ones among us. The two Saints have surely watched through time as their vision of the gospel message has spread all over the world: (see Journey, back page)



# Bread Alone Does Not Give Life

by Emily Neufeld

"But why not...?", the well-intentioned suggestions of visitors and volunteers again and again challenge this Catholic Worker to the very core of its philosophy. Why *not* enlarge? So many more could be fed. Why *not* institutionalize? The vision could be preserved from perversion. Why *not* establish financial security? We could be insured to continue.... The concerns of onlookers cause my own doubts to surface: How can we who claim to give ourselves to serving the poor reject the things that would allow us to serve a greater number of people, and to promise to serve them for as long as they have needs?

Indeed, the same worries arise in my mind about God's work in the world: Why does God not heal all of our wounds with a single touch of the divine hand? Always, the seemingly-paradoxical mystery of God's goodness, immanence, and omnipotence in this broken world moves contrary to our impulses for immediate solutions. But as we are con-

tinually confounded, we are also inspired to resist worldly progress in our attempt to model the radical Christian community.

Ours is a culture that measures itself by progress. We strive always to aim higher, build bigger, last longer, increase profits, and expand technologically. But as corporal and spiritual destitution worldwide grow in direct proportion to our skyscrapers, industrial indices, and weapon stockpiles, we see that these paths destroy us. Works of service alone do not suffice to end our collective misery or bring the divine Kingdom to its full glory, for even slaveholders give food, clothing and shelter to their human property.

The essence of the Christian identity is love for God and creation. And Dorothy Day wrote that "love is the measure" of all that we do. This love is our path and our destination. It is the answer not only to war and hatred, but also to hunger and thirst, nakedness, homelessness, loneliness, and spiritual poverty. And love is the only answer. So, from the roots of the Christian tradition comes the response to our insecurities: "Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess, and even give up

my body to be burned — if I am without love, it will do me no good whatsoever" (1Cor 13:3). True Christian works manifest love, and so are called works of *mercy*, which means love. The food we give must communicate our love, or it will bring only full stomachs and empty hearts. Therefore, we do not seek security or permanency because our precarity keeps us close to God. And we resist growth because our smallness keeps us close to those we serve.

While the fruit of progress that hangs before us is good to eat, and pleasing to the eyes, and enticing for the results it will give, the nourishment it offers is wholly superficial. And so we echo Dorothy Day in saying, "We confess to being fools, and wish that we were more so." For in the end all of our victories, and all of our failures, will be judged only in love.

*Emily Neufeld is taking a semester off from studying theology at Notre Dame to help us here at the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.*

*(Franciscans, continued)*

and I thought perhaps we could even merge with Julia's new community. We spent time in the mountains sharing the charism of our founders and found an incredibly close parallel. Yet there are some differences. We have lifetime vows. Dorothy told me their charism seemed to be more that of a sieve through which the greatest prophets flowed. (Obviously Dorothy and others are also great witnesses to a lifelong fidelity to their call.) Perhaps we look to more stability from our Franciscan community. Anyway we did establish our little community and Julia hers. Yet the places we touch are so great. The morning "coffee line" is the most important part of my day. We often eat together. We join for daily Eucharist, we share our hopes, aspirations, times off, discouragements and even fears. We practice civil resistance together. It all seems to fit. And so I remember fondly those words Dorothy told me those two decades ago, "Isn't this what Franciscans ought to be doing?" I am sure she is right.

*Father Louis Vitale is past Provincial of the Western Province of Franciscans and he currently co-directs Pace e Bene in Las Vegas.*

## WE ARE NOT TAX EXEMPT

All gifts to the Catholic Worker go to a common fund which is used to meet the daily expenses of our work.

As a community, we have never sought tax-exempt status since we are convinced that justice and the works of mercy should be acts of conscience which come at a personal sacrifice, without governmental approval, regulation or reward. We believe it would be a misuse of our limited resources of time and personnel (as well as a violation of our understanding of the meaning of community) to create the paperwork necessary for obtaining tax-deductible status. Also, since much of what we do might be considered "political," in the sense that we strive to question, challenge and confront our present society and many of its structures and values, some would deem us technically ineligible for tax-deductible, charitable status.

## OUR SCHEDULE

**Monday - Saturday, 6:30 - 7:30 a.m.**

Serve breakfast at E and Washington St.

**Thursday, 4:00 p.m.- 5:00 p.m.**

Prayer Vigil in front of downtown Federal Building.

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

Mass or Liturgy at Catholic Worker house, 500 W. Van Buren, potluck following.

*(Journey, continued)*

how it has grown in size and scope. Yet, they have also witnessed the cost to the vision in this growth. Institutionalization as a means to accommodate this growth brought about an insulation from the radical embrace of poverty that Francis fervently espoused. While it is certain that there are many Franciscans that still live this radical expression of poverty, it is also true that the security and *modus operandi* of the institution diminish the potential for the direct encounter of the messy circumstance of poverty in Franciscan life.

The raw daily exposure to the poverty on the streets is what the Catholic Worker has been able to offer the Franciscans. With the Catholic Worker's free-style personal approach to feeding we offer a simple opportunity to find Christ in the poor, as St. Francis so poignantly experienced in his moment of conversion. When I watch as Brother Louis comforts a young man coming out of a seizure, I am stirred by the timeless remembrance of the Holy man from Assisi who found God in the embrace of the outcast leper.

And so too, the Franciscan's connection to the life of the Worker helps them rediscover a bit of themselves buried in the success of the institution.

In the end both the Catholic Worker and the Franciscans can trace their beginnings to the common ground of the radical gospel message. The radical gospel is the root of the Church tradition which modeled the values of community, Eucharist, voluntary poverty, hospitality, pacifism, redemptive suffering, incarnational love and servan-

thood. These are also the values where we find the strongest commonality among the two visions.

And, as we continue to be nurtured by our common journey, we can also see that those attracted to our collective witness also draw strength from our life together. For the fringe Catholics somewhat alienated from the Church, our witness can offer a taste of the redemptive aspects of the institutional Church. And, for the conservative Catholics who look with suspicion at the semi-hippie nature of Catholic Worker communities, the Franciscan presence offers legitimacy and constancy. On mornings when such a variety of volunteers gather for prayer before going out to serve, I am amazed how love and compassion for the poor can bring people on different paths together. When our different journeys lead to the common place of the radical gospel enfleshed, we can see how God's love penetrates all human boundaries and the Holy Spirit is free to build the reign of God once again.

*Julia Occhiogrosso is founder of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.*

**Thank you**  
for all your support at Christmas and  
throughout the year.  
-the Catholic Workers in Las Vegas

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