

MANNA *in the wilderness*

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Reflections of a Catholic Worker Mom

by Julia Occhiogrosso

It has been a little over a year since we welcomed Cody and Nicky into our family. We are told that the adoption will be finalized within six months. We are full of gratitude for the gift they are to us.

Despite the adjustments and daily challenges involved in parenting a three and four year old, I was surprised at how familiar I was with mothering. It was easy for me to see the parallels between my new role, and the role I have played for twelve years on the soup line. In both instances I am faced with vulnerability and weakness and invited from a place of power to respond compassionately.

I have written many essays on caring for the estranged and marginalized. This is an essential part of the Catholic Worker practice drawn from the Gospel of servanthood. And even as we are committed to model this practice of the corporal works of mercy, we know that when we are exhausted and pushed beyond our limits we have the option to cut down on hospitality or close the soup kitchen for a while. My life as a parent does not provide that option.

It took many months of discernment before arriving at a decision to move out of the hospitality house, a lifestyle I had embraced since my introduction to the Los Angeles Catholic Worker in 1979. Yet it was clear to me that our decision to have a family would necessarily affect the degree of precarity our lifestyles would be able to handle. It was one thing for me to accept the stresses of living in a neighborhood plagued with drug-related violence. To parent young children in this environment when I had options to do otherwise did not seem right. What made this decision particularly troublesome is my knowledge of the many children who have no choice but to grow up in a pain-filled environment. While I would not want our children to be continually im-



POVERTY OF JESUS BY MEINRAD CRAIGHEAD

mersed in this context, I am also convinced that it is beneficial for their spiritual development for them to be exposed to the reality of poverty and to the suffering others endure. Gary and I continue to work at the hospitality house and on occasion involve the boys in our activity there.

While the essence, the heart and soul of the Catholic Worker spirit runs through my veins, this move raised the question for Gary and I

whether we were living up to the radical gospel interpretation of the utopian Catholic Worker vision set forth by the founders, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. Yet, it seemed inadequate, verging on ridiculous for us to abandon the soup line and our work with homeless families because we were making this change in lifestyle. I was also convinced that parenting by no means compromised the essential chal- (continued on back page)

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lenges set in place by this radical gospel lifestyle I wished to embrace. Parenting forced upon me the task of experimenting fiercely with the transforming power of divine love in action. It is only because of my years of testing out this faith in divine love in souplines and hospitality houses that I gleaned courage and desire to become a mother. It is clear to me that many of the Catholic Worker tenets fit well into the witness of parenting. Examples that come to mind are finding holiness in the mundane daily tasks, living simply, servanthood and nonviolent love.

From the beginning of the movement sixty-five years ago, family life has been in tension with the Catholic Worker model. Generally speaking there were two options; you either lived on a farm or you sent your child to boarding school as Dorothy did. Certainly children have been raised in other Catholic Worker models but often with difficulties and in some cases where the children carry enormous burdens.

Precarity or living close to the edge is the most difficult Catholic Worker value to reconcile with parenting. Catholic Worker communities live with financial precarity, and they live with the poverty/precarity of being family to the disenfranchised. Many Catholic Worker houses are located in places where overt violence is the norm. Some worker houses are involved in arrest actions for acts of conscience, another aspect of risk taking and precarity.

I want to honor these values and have experienced the spiritual significance in living this way. Yet the natural inclination of mothering seems to be in direct opposition to thrusting children into precarious situations. As a mother it is incumbent upon me to provide nurturing, stability and security. The challenge for me these days is to live in such a way as to honor the intuitions of parenting without diminishing the cogent implications held in the assumptions of the Catholic Worker vision.

A movement person once responded to the question of family life to say in effect that in God's eyes your child is not any more important than any other child. There may be some truth here and certainly the doctrine and concept of the Mystical Body of Christ challenges the cultural model of nuclear family where the full extent of one's identity begins and ends within the confines of his or her own kin.

It is also true to say that your child is not

any less important than any other child. When Catholic Workers strive for justice they are hoping to create the beloved community where each life is given the opportunity to fulfill its need to be human. As Catholic Workers, our commitment to this task is motivated by the divine value of the person. As Larry Holbin describes in his book *All the Way to Heaven*, This assumption grants **"that every human person is in and of himself or herself the whole, total and complete focus of the self-emptying love that burns at the heart of God"**.

The Catholic Worker emphasis on the poor is based rightly on the fact that more often than not the poor and the marginalized are the ones left out of this assumption. And while we need to work tirelessly to include them, we would contradict the assumption if we were in the mean time to exclude other relationships that happen upon our path in life because they were not the marginalized.

At a recent gathering of Catholic Workers, there was a workshop called "Why I left the Catholic Worker and How I Cope with the Guilt". To embrace a Catholic Worker lifestyle is to also embrace a whole set of assumptions that touch profound truth about who we are and who we are in God. To deviate from particular expressions of these assumptions found in the model of Catholic Worker lifestyles often feels like a betrayal of these assumptions. The changes in lifestyle I have made to adapt to family life will never alter my desire to embrace the underlying assumptions that for most of my adulthood have given meaning to my life.

I heard a story about Dorothy Day recently. It seems that she did not want to treat her daughter any differently than she treated anyone else that came to the hospitality house. When her daughter arrived pregnant at the Catholic Worker farm she had her stay in a room in the barn until other Catholic Workers convinced her that she needed to have her daughter stay inside the main house with her. Dorothy had high moral standards that she upheld and because of this the movement has a unique strain of integrity and dedication that is probably a good part of why it is still flourishing. Dorothy's personality set a tone for the movement that makes Catholic Workers known for their uncompromising commitment to certain principles. Even Dorothy came to realize

that moralism had its limitations as she writes in an effort to describe the essence of the Catholic Worker movement; "the final word is love". Moralizing ceases to serve its purpose when it impedes our capacity to love. If Gary and I chose not to deviate from the radical life of living with the poor we would not have room in our lives for Nicky and Cody and all that entails.

The new challenge for me and for many others attempting to give expression to the radical uncompromising principles of the Catholic Worker vision while raising a family, is to free ourselves from the trappings of moralizing that dictate what is or is not authentically Catholic Worker expression. One can quibble over the particulars of that expression while missing the point, much like the Pharisees who knew the letter of the Law but sometimes forgot the Spirit behind it all.

We are part of a *movement* set up to be fluid and to encourage Christian freedom. This freedom compels us to move within the heart of the assumptions, laid out by the founders and grounded in the gospels to create expressions of the vision appropriate to each context.

In an article written in *America*, it was said that Dorothy Day is the most influential Catholic woman of this century. Certainly the Catholic Worker is an important lay movement in this country. Yet to be a lay movement and exclude family in the expressions of the lifestyle is to cut off a vital limb.

When I reflect upon these issues I am never completely sure as to whether or not I am merely attempting to explain away my personal evolution. Yet what I keep returning to is a sense that Catholic Worker families are pioneering new land. No longer can we leave the movement because we do not meet self-or-other-imposed expectations. There is too great a need for people to live alternative values to what are espoused by the prevailing culture. Perhaps a time is coming where we can lay out expanded assumptions that address the particular needs of family life in the movement.

In the mean time, Gary, Cody, Nicky and I with God's enduring grace and your support will continue to be faithful to experimenting with a model of Catholic Worker lifestyle that upholds the legacy of love entrusted to us.

PLEASE JOIN US:

Wednesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.:

Morning Prayer at the house

Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:

Serve breakfast at Ethel Pearson Park (E and Washington St.) to the homeless.

Tuesday, 5:30 p.m.:

Mass or Liturgy at Catholic Worker house, potluck following.

Seven Days a Week:

Hospitality (IHN) to 3 to 5 homeless families, we need volunteers.

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