

MANNA *in the wilderness*

September 2010

The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

Volume 25, Number 1

Four Assumptions of the Catholic Worker

These four assumptions are excerpted from the book All the Way to Heaven (A Theological Reflection on Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and the Catholic Worker) by Lawrence Holben, 1997 (There are six assumptions, we will print the last two in a later Manna)

THE FIRST ASSUMPTION

The first assumption has been made so numbingly trite through pious overuse that it may take us some time and reflection to realize just how profound its meaning and consequences are. That first assumption is: **God is love.** Ultimate reality, the source of everything that exists, is – in the deepest and most intimate sense – love. And unlike so much of our love, that love is not sentiment, cheap feeling, the need to control, or a hunger to be useful, appreciated, or affirmed. It is not love that grows from need at all, but rather love that overflows from fullness. Nor is it what so often substitutes for love in our culture: a kind of disinterested disengagement passing as tolerance – what C.S. Lewis trenchantly terms a “senile benevolence” that accepts anything and everything “so long as the young people are having a good time.”

Rather, the love that is God is a passionate, active, purposeful self-emptying for the highest good of the other, an other to whom ultimate value is given.

If we take this seriously for a moment, it is nothing short of shocking. It means that God, the ground of reality, is most profoundly God’s Self in pouring out that Self for what is *not* God, for the created. It means that this self-emptying, this onrush of self-immolation, is the very core of the mystery we approach in coming into the presence of God.

We should note, as well, that to say that “God is love” is to say much more than “God is loving.” It is to affirm that self-emptying love is ontologically the very “stuff” of divinity. Self-emptying love is God being God. And God being God is a ceaseless activity in which the One with all the power chooses to relinquish that power for the good of the beloved other. God being God is a love that is enfleshed and enacted perfectly in the self-emptying that wedded the uncreated Word with human flesh in the person of Jesus and sent Jesus on the hard road from Nazareth to the cross. Such self-emptying love, the Christian proclaims in joy and awe, is the fundamental fact of the universe. It is our source and it will be our destiny, and not ours only but the whole of creation’s.

THE SECOND ASSUMPTION

Like the first, the second assumption

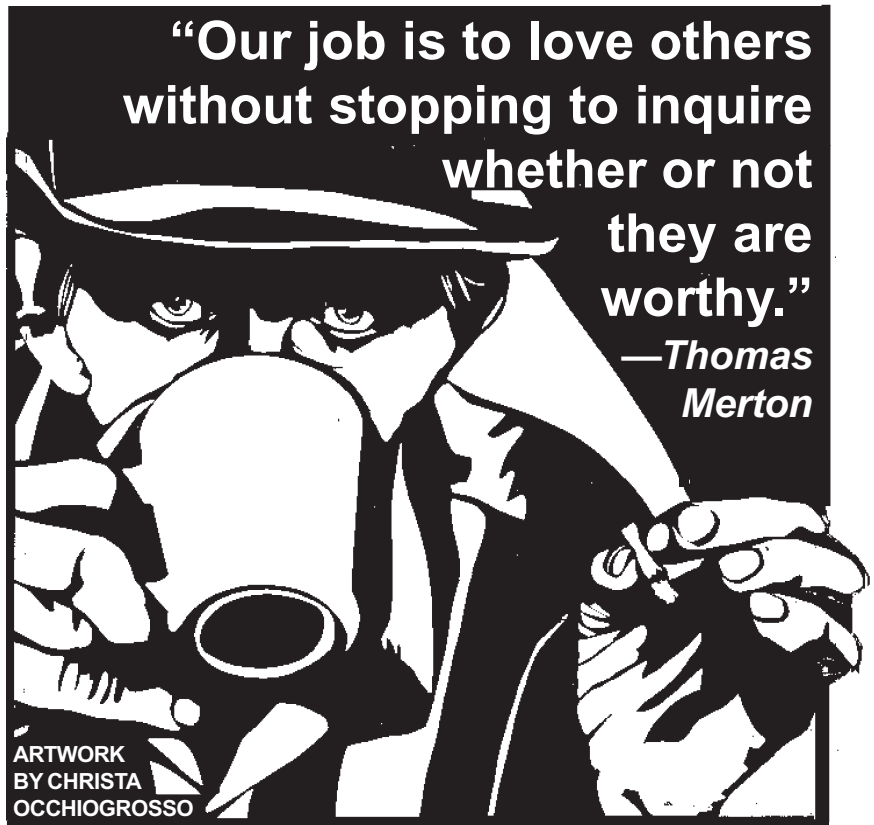
– though we hear it less often – may seem hackneyed until we consider its consequences. It is: **Every human person is, in and of him or her self, the whole, total, and complete focus of the self-emptying love that burns at the heart of God.** To put the matter in the vernacular of the movies: there are no “supporting roles,” there are only

terrible dignity that fact entails.

To regain something of the astonishing meaning of this assertion, we need to remember that, in the ancient world, an “image” was more than a mirror reflection or “little picture” (although it was those things as well); it was an icon that to some extent carried, communicated and participated in the power of the thing it

“Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.”

—Thomas Merton



ARTWORK BY CHRISTA OCCHIOGROSSO

starring roles.

Of course, it is part of the mystery of God’s being that God can focus fully and perfectly on every single human that ever was, is or will be – and do so, at any point in what we know as time, simultaneously. It is not up to us to sort out how God can do this, how, out of the multiplicity of “stories” that are being lived out at any particular moment, God can give absolute, loving attention to each one. What is ours to do is admit what it means: there are no expendable people.

THE THIRD ASSUMPTION

The third assumption, like the first, is something we have probably heard so often that its force has gone stale for us. But again, when we let the truth of it engage us, we may rediscover its shattering power. It is: **every person is an image of God.** That is to say, *every* person – the least, the greatest; the most gifted, the most challenged; the most delightful, the most repellent – is made in the likeness and image of the God who is passionate, self-emptying love, with all the

represented – which is one of the reasons the prohibition of graven images was so fundamental a part of the Hebrew religious ethos.

Applied to human persons, then, the affirmation that each of us has been created in the divine image does not mean simply that we are called to some sort of pious game of make-believe along the lines of “wouldn’t the world be a better place if we all acted *as if* every person we met were God encountering us?” No! It means that, in actual fact, each person that crosses *(continued on back page)*

25th Anniversary Book & Event

If you have anecdotes or ideas for our 25th anniversary book or event contact Julia at julia@lvcw.org or call 702-234-0755. In 1987 & 1997 we hosted large national Catholic Worker events in Las Vegas. *Should we in 2011?*

(continued from front page)

our path is a living icon of the God that made and sustains all that is. Thus, each person is both glorious in his or her essence and potential and, to some extent, tragic or terrifying in the distortion of such potential through the effects of that breach of God's intent for creation which we call sin.

Clearly, to allow this reality to seep into our consciousness immediately turns everything about the way we normally live with each other on its head, smashing the implicit complacency of our lives.

Suddenly, everyone (and thus, everything) has overwhelming importance. Life and all its choices are discovered to be exploding with moral energy. There are no small issues, just as there are no small people. If God is self-emptying love and if each individual is both the object and a living icon of that love, then there is no one for whom anything less than a full realization of these realities is acceptable.

But this is not, of course, the way we usually live. The dominant society, class, gender or caste at any given point and place in human history tends to posit what we might call a "big story" (which, not surprisingly, is always its own story), which is what God is really interested in, and then any number of secondary stories about "the others" who are seen either as obstacles to the goals of the big story, or – at best – sidebars to its overwhelming significance.

The putatively "Christian" civilizations of the West have skirted the patently anti-Christian implications of such self-aggrandizing mythologies by several different theoretical devices which uphold the primacy of the "big story" while appearing to deal with the inconvenient fact of all those other, sometimes competing stories.

One such device is to cast the "other" as a specifically demonic force at war with God's intent in history. This was the case with many of the inimigrant Christian interpretations of the conflict with Native Americans in the New World. If the other is a "devil," he is clearly not an image of God and we may, thus, treat him as we will, cheerfully confident that in slaughtering him, enslaving him or divesting him of land we are merely clearing the decks for God's higher purposes centering on us and our kind. We can even be said to be "doing God's work."

An only slightly less pernicious strategy is simply to deny the full humanity of the other,

without going on to outright demonization. Such an approach can be seen in some of the theological defenses raised for the slavery of Africans prior to the Civil War.

Finally, Christians have often fallen back on an argument that, while all human persons have their share in the dignity of the divine image, some have been created in God's wisdom for a secondary, supporting role in the human drama (rather like Orwell's famous dictum in *Animal Farm*, "all pigs are equal, but some pigs are more equal than others"). In the ante-bellum South, those who were willing to admit that black slaves were fully human (and therefore to evangelize them) nonetheless justified their enslavement by such an argument. And, it would seem to many, a similar theory is still the basis asserted for limiting the full scope for ministry of women in the Church.

Yet despite these and other like attempts to soften their force, if we truly believe that these first three assumptions express unvarnished reality, then every human life, every human story in all its parts, is a shattering, vivid, eternally significant engagement with ultimate meaning – and one which we devalue at our peril. Further, if we accept these first three assumptions as true, how can we feel anything but moral horror and anguish not only at the limiting, dehumanizing suffering of the poor, which blunts and stunts their full development into all they were created by God to be, but also at the soul death of society's "successes," the rich and powerful, cut off from their own full humanity in different but equally deadly ways

**PRAY FOR
PEACE
IN OUR
WORLD!**

(FOR
TAB)

*Rosary:
Fridays,
8 a.m.*

by the seduction of privilege and the addicting stupefaction of material excess?

We are all inextricably a part of a process which is killing people spiritually at both "ends" of the social spectrum. The "haves" may be doing better than the "have-nots" in certain short-term ways, but – in terms of ultimate reality – everyone is a victim, and it is this fact which underlay Dorothy Day's often-repeated disgust with what she called "this filthy, rotten system."

THE FOURTH ASSUMPTION

The fourth assumption follows logically

upon the first three: because God is passionate, engaged, self-emptying love, and because every woman or man that ever lived, lives or shall live is that love's object and image, **every human being has a call**. Each of us confronts a call from God that is built into the nature of reality and the essence of who we are: to express in and through the uniqueness of our personhood, circumstances and moment in history (what we see as our "crosses" as well as our gifts) the reality of self-emptying love, to inject that love into history in the individual way that is ours alone, to en flesh that love for our singular place and moment. Nobody else can do this for us, because nobody else *is* us.

Once again, we are confronted with the truth that every human life, every human story, is profoundly significant because it is irreplaceable. Which means that, from the perspective of reality, the life of the most forgotten, obscure individual – the street person dying of AIDS, the child cut down in tribal war in Rwanda or Bosnia, that most annoying person we must deal with day in and day out in our work – has as much gravity and importance in terms of God's activity in history as the life of any of the "great men" (and the occasional great women) who populate our history books.

The call is the same to each one of us: to bring to life in the particularity of our existential moment that self-emptying love which is the underlying principle of the universe. When we do this, or make it possible for another to do it, in however small a way, our actions – like rocks dropped into a limitless pool – have reverberations that will ripple to eternity. They are that which will last. They are the atoms of the new creation.

**Our Volunteer
Mark Kelso's
Thesis for Regis University
is available on our website:
"Praying the Our
Father in the Context of
a Carmelite Community
and a Catholic Worker
Community" Go to:
<http://www.lvcw.org/mkelso.pdf>**

Website: www.lvcw.org

PLEASE JOIN US:

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

Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

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

Breakfast served at G & McWilliams to the poor & homeless (about 150 people).

Wednesday, 8:00 a.m. - noon:

Hospitality Day, we invite 20 homeless men home for showers, to wash clothes, and to have a great lunch.

Thursday, 8:30 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.:

Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Courthouse, 333 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

Thursday, 11:30 a.m.:

50 Bag lunches delivered to homeless.

Last Saturday of month, 8:00 a.m.:

Deliver food boxes to homes in need.

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