

# MANNA *in the wilderness*

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The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

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## Requesting your Support for Works of Mercy

by Julia Occhiogrosso

I awake to the sound of tree branches scratching on the window. The rain has been hard and continuous throughout the night. It is four a.m., and I am picturing the men from the soup line draped in blankets, searching in the cold dark for a place to rest, a patch of dry pavement to lay their heads.

Still in a half dream state, I rise to prepare soup. A refrain from a song Joan Baez sings pops into my brain; "...and we left Him to die like a tramp on the street."

I feel sorrow and regret for the personal and collective inability to repair the illness, addiction, trauma and poverty that pushes humans to the edges, the margins of society. While I have come to accept my limitations and surrender what is truly out of my hands, I am always inspired by what is possible when humans respond, even with small acts to the suffering they see.

For the Catholic Worker, these acts are expressed through the Corporal Works of Mercy: Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, giving drink to the thirsty, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned and burying the dead.

Each morning as we prepare soup, people from all across Las Vegas arrive before dawn. They emerge from the dark with enthusiasm and energy to partake in these simple gestures of mercy. They carry pots, ladle soup, pour tea, hand out bread. Some days it's salad, coleslaw, chips or sweets on the side. They hand out warm washcloths, they listen, they pray. They come in the heat, the cold, the rain.

They are young and old, from different spiritual paths, but bound by a common compassion for the poor.

We need your financial support to help sustain our projects. Together, committed volunteers and donors make for the vitality and endurance of the Catholic Worker mission in Las Vegas. We are grateful for the generous gifts you have shared over the course of our twenty-eight years.

This night in Las Vegas and in cities across the nation, there are men, women and children sleeping on the streets. We have become accustomed to the human

crisis of homelessness. Meanwhile, our commitment at the Las Vegas Catholic Worker will be to carry out the Gospel mandate of welcoming the stranger. Our hope is that by scattering the small seeds

of merciful acts we will in time harvest a world where no one is forced to sleep out in the rain. Fuller understanding and compassion will guide us on the path to a heaven on earth.



Humble Beginnings: Ricky Chun and Julia Occhiogrosso serve cold water to day laborers in the summer of 1986.

## Gifts of the Catholic Worker

by Julia Occhiogrosso

I remember clearly the conversation. My mom was on the telephone with my older sister Rosemary. As an impressionable teenager, I idolized my older sister, and I listened with intense curiosity. Rosemary was reporting to my mother the latest turn of events in her adventures in a distant land, California.

Rosemary was the first member of my family to trek away from Brooklyn, the place where our Italian heritage took root in the turn of the century when our great-grandparents came from Italy to land in Ellis Island. Now, nearly two generations later there would be another journey. This time from New York to California. The goodbyes were epic. There were days of family gatherings, farewell embraces, tears and worry which proceeded the departure.

Recruited by her Catholic High School teacher, Sr. Pearl, Rosemary first headed to California to work in Delano with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union. The United Farm Work-

ers had established a medical clinic and needed volunteers to staff the operation. Rosemary was a nursing student and would have an opportunity to gain some practical nursing experience. In exchange, she would receive room and board and a fifteen dollar weekly stipend.

She had worked at this clinic for a year and was now on the phone, explaining to my mother that she was leaving her work with the farm workers, moving to Los Angeles to live with a "community" and work in a free clinic on L. A.'s Skid Row. She would still be receiving room and board with a slight decrease in her stipend to five dollars a week. My mom sighed with exasperation as the phone conversation came to an end.

That summer, my twin sister and I were given a high school graduation gift; airline tickets to go to California and stay with Rosemary. Until this day, I am convinced that we were sent to California in the hopes that we could bring home to the family evidence of Rosemary's misguided (continued on next page)

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pursuits. Instead, my eighteen year old enthusiasm was ripe for a summer's adventure at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. That first summer with the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community set in motion my life commitment to the Catholic Worker movement.

Even as I returned to New York to commence my first year of college, my thoughts were distracted by my summer experience with the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. My textbook reading assignments wandered to images of the hungry men and women, gratefully accepting the simple meal of soup and bread. College lecture halls could not compete with the provocative discussions and cultural critiques that took place in conversations around the soup kitchen chopping block while cutting onions. That first year in college I followed closely the Agitator's updates of Jeff's sentencing for his civil disobedience action. My heart was stirred by this witness.

With the help of Catherine Morris's signature postcard communications, my twin and I were easily recruited to return the next summer to help run a playground project for the children living in the skid row hotels. I tagged along with Mary Smith, a nurse in the community and veteran Catholic Worker as we went from door to door informing the families of the playground project. I followed tenuously as we navigated the dark hallways and broken glass. The air reeked of urine. Moms cautiously cracked the doors as Mary conveyed in Spanish the cause for our visit. I stood and watched the children peering out from behind with a dazed curiosity. Moved by their vulnerable expressions, my heart knew I was being invited to be with the poor. In that graced moment, I decided to leave school and join the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community.

Now close to thirty years after that summer experience in Los Angeles, I recollect with appreciation lessons learned and the gift of the Catholic Worker vision. In 1986 after four years of living with the Los Angeles community, I was commissioned to start a Catholic Worker in Las Vegas, Nevada. Born out of a period of struggles and discernment in the community, this decision represented the community's new mission of cultivating and preparing community members toward the possibility of starting Catholic Worker houses. The Las Vegas Catholic Worker would be the first of 12 "sister houses" to form out of the support and mentoring of Jeff, Catherine and the Los Angeles community.

During the last 27 years the Las Vegas Catholic Worker has evolved from our beginnings serving ice water during the heat of the summer to serving a hardy soup meal four mornings a week. In 1986, we began providing hospitality in a three bedroom track house. Today we are blessed

with three hospitality houses. We began our weekly peace vigils opposing the testing of nuclear weapons at the Nevada Test Site. Today our peace vigil persists in proclaiming this message as well as calling for an end to the deadly use of drones.

Gary Cavalier joined the community in 1991. We were married in 1994. He too had been a student of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker tutelage. He had lived with the community part-time for five years and had opened a hospitality house in San Luis Obispo, California, before joining the Las Vegas community. Our shared connection to the Los Angeles house made for a strong partnership in our commitment to each other as well as our understanding of the Catholic Worker vision.

Gary and I have been enriched by the many volunteers who brought and continue to bring their creativity and inspirations. There have been carpenters, architects, contractors, writers, gardeners, painters, musicians, cooks, scientists, scholars, doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers and journalists. Volunteers are young and old, from different spiritual paths, but bound by a common compassion for the

poor and the meaning found in the Catholic Worker witness. Together, they nurture the vitality and endurance of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.

I tend to think that formative years of adulthood parallel the formative years of child development. Just as my parents and family members gave me the foundations of loving relationships, integrity of action and Christian example, which lead me to the Catholic Worker, my early adult years at the Catholic Worker gave me a cohesive and inspirational model of a radical Christian discipleship, that today affords me a legacy of hope to pass on to others. What I learned and internalized from my Catholic Worker introductory years has and continues to inform how I convey the Catholic Worker witness today.

Whether I am teaching someone how to cook sixty gallons of soup, or explaining the principles of nonviolence, or greeting volunteers as they emerge from the dark dawn for the morning soup line, I am grateful for the Grace that brought me to the Catholic Worker movement and the chance to share what I have inherited.

## Pope Francis denounces "trickle-down" economics

Pope Francis has released a sharply worded take on capitalism and the world's treatment of its poor, criticizing "trickle-down" economic policies in no uncertain terms.

In the first lengthy writing of his papacy — also known as an "apostolic exhortation" — Francis says such economic theories naively rely on the goodness of those in charge and create a "tyranny" of the markets.

"In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world," the pope wrote. "This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting."

The theory holds that policies benefiting the wealthiest segment of society will also help the poor, by allowing money to "trickle down" from the top income levels into the lower ones. Critics, including President Obama, say the policies, usually focused on tax cuts and credits that primarily benefit upper-income Americans, concentrate wealth in the highest income levels and that the benefits rarely trickle down to the extent proponents suggest.

The pope also likened the worship of money to the biblical golden calf.

"We have created new idols," Francis wrote. "The worship of the ancient golden calf ... has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose."

The pope also attacks "consumerism": "It is evident that unbridled consumerism combined with inequality proves doubly damaging to the social fabric."

**CHRISTMAS BREAKFAST:**  
WED., DEC. 25, 6:30 A.M.  
**EMPTY BOWL BENEFIT:**  
SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 2014  
**SOUP LINE CLOSED:**  
JAN. 1 - 11, 2014

## PLEASE JOIN US:

**Wednesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.:**  
Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

**Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:**  
Breakfast served to 150-200 poor & homeless people.

**Friday, 8:00 a.m.:** Rosary for Peace

**Wednesday, 8:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.:**  
Hospitality Day, we invite 20 homeless men home for showers, to wash clothes, and for a great lunch.

**Thursday, 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.:**  
Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Courthouse, 333 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

**Thursday, 10:30 a.m.:**  
50 lunches taken to the homeless.

**Third Saturday of the month:**  
Deliver food boxes to homes in need.

*Excerpt from an article by Aaron Blake in the Nov. 26, 2013 Washington Post.*