

MANNA *in the wilderness*

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Social Teachings and the Catholic Worker

by Julia Occhiogrosso

I was asked to speak about the social teachings of the Catholic Church to young adult catechumens. Standing at the lectern, I referred them to the handout as I read aloud, *“The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred, and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society ... We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the person.”*

As I finished this sentence, I was aware of how I yearned to convey the significance of these teachings beyond just words on a page; of how enriched my life has been by merely striving to follow these teachings. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the founders of the Catholic Worker movement, were convinced that the full potency of these teachings could only be realized by concrete decisions and actions. Embodied and animated though daily practices of the Works of Mercy, these teachings would become the underlying principles for the Catholic Worker vision and mission. I continued the presentation with an explanation of the seven essential themes of Catholic social teaching and some examples of how they find expression in the Catholic Worker life.

Recognizing the Life and Dignity of the Person is a stance we strive to attain in our interactions and relationships in community life, as well as with those we care for whose dignity has been diminished. It is often difficult to heal the indignities inflicted through poverty and homelessness. On our food line and in our neighborhood, we witness scenes that display these indignities. In the alley behind our house, a few individuals are encamped under a worn-out tent. It is easy to forget how dehumanizing these conditions can be. Absent options for trash disposal, they often dwell amidst discarded debris with no easy way to wash themselves or tend to their bodily functions. Some people go into shelters, but many who are victims of trauma or cognitive limitations cannot navigate crowded shelters, even if there were enough beds.

Hospitality in its different forms has been the way the Catholic Worker strives to recognize and restore the dignity of the individuals we encounter in our food line, shower project and hospitality houses. It includes learning people's names and seeing them in their full humanity. This teaching challenges us to persist in kindness and hold boundaries with tenderness and deep respect, even when our kindness is not reciprocated. As Dorothy would say, “striving to find the Christ in each person.” Once a guest from our line spit in Gary's face when confronted about stealing condiments. The next morning, repentant, he apologized. Mike became a beloved guest welcomed for meals at the Catholic Worker house. Another time at the food line, a woman became angry and verbally abusive towards a volunteer server when he mistakenly



referred to her as a “sir.” When I explained to her that he was visually impaired, she began to weep apologizing profusely while holding the volunteer server in an emotional embrace. Repeatedly when we are graced with the capacity to be true to this teaching, even in difficult exchanges, it bears fruit. Dignity is restored and we grow together in our common humanity.

The Call to Family, Community and Participation encourages cultivating loving, committed relationships within a family context that serve as a foundation for fruitful relationships outside of the nuclear family. Ideally the bonds formed within a family strengthen our capacity to recognize our shared connection to the greater human family. This call is especially relevant in our times as false narratives hold sway: they have the power to turn our cultural, economic, religious or political differences into an overriding determinate of how we perceive and interact with each other. These false perceptions create walls that prevent us from authentic human encounters where we can discover each other's essential goodness despite the differences. Our hospitality houses are places where people from diverse backgrounds and experiences live and work together. At our best we grow to love and care for each other. We form connections among individuals who were once strangers. Community forms. In the same way, among our volunteers, bonds of friendship develop that transcend difference. We find what we hold in common. The desire to participate in a work that offers compassionate presence to outcast human beings is more potent than the smallness of whatever illusions of separateness we hold.

Rights and Responsibilities recognizes that the dignity of the human person includes acknowledging necessities for people to enjoy the fullness of their human potential. People have the right to a humane existence including access to food, housing, clothing, healthcare and human companionship. If, for whatever reason, they are not able to secure this for themselves, Christian personalism requires an embodied personal re-
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sponse. When did **you** see me hungry and feed me? When did **you** see me thirsty and give me to drink? When did **you** see me sick and cared for me? For the Catholic Worker, being members of this greater human family motivates a sense of personal responsibility toward our brothers and sisters in need. It invites us to respond to this scripture through lived interactions with particular human subjects. It is in this relational context that human rights and responsibilities can be fulfilled and reciprocated. The dignity of each and all participants is enhanced.

The Option for the Poor and Vulnerable compels us to listen, to seek out and to understand the struggles of the poor and marginalized. The Catholic Worker practice of living with and among the impoverished is motivated by this teaching. Living among the poor offers a window into economic disparity. Gary and I are able to drive the two miles to a decent store to buy food. What if you do not have a vehicle? Public transportation is slow and costly. Vacant lots and boarded up buildings dominate the aesthetic of our impoverished neighborhood. Where are the trees? Where is the beauty? Access to public amenities like libraries, schools and parks is limited. Pope Francis spoke of building a culture of encounter, including stepping outside of our comfort zone and going to the margins of society to listen and learn. Opening our hearts to the pain of poverty can shatter the lens of privilege. Making a human connection with someone who is poor is different than relying on the interpretations of those not personally impacted by those realities. When we make a choice to be present with the poor in their environment, we begin to view the world differently. Presumptions and judgments are replaced with understanding and mercy.

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers has been an important part of the Catholic Worker witness. The Catholic Worker movement was born on May 1, 1933 (The Feast of St. Joseph the Worker) as Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin distributed the newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*, which aimed to give a message of hope to the unemployed workers in New York during the depression. Dorothy and Peter understood that much of the dignity of the human person was dependent on dignified labor. Dignified labor should yield the fruits necessary for the laborer to meet their essential needs. Dignified work considers the needs of the whole person: body, mind and spirit. It is a path to finding human fulfillment and purpose.

While work in modern times is often associated with exploitation and labor is a commodity to be bought and sold, the Catholic Worker fosters a Benedictine perspective of *ora et labora*, recognizing the relationship between work and prayer. When our work can affirm and amplify the Gospel call to love one another it becomes a prayer. When we can make personal sacrifices on behalf of social justice our work becomes an offering toward the building up of the Beloved Community.

Solidarity refers to the belief that we are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic and ideological differences. The Gospel mandate to love our neighbor and our enemy has global implications. Dorothy Day interpreted this teaching through her belief in the Mystical Body of Christ. As members of His Body we are each connected to each other. When any member of the Body suffers, the whole Body suffers.

This belief was foundational to the Catholic Worker's consistent opposition to all war. In line with the perspective of the early Christians, to cause violence or death to another human being, a life created in the image and likeness of God, was a sin. Catholic Workers, through writings and public witness voice their opposition to war, nuclear proliferation and social injustice. They advocate for a compassionate and humane response to immigrants and refugees. They take seriously the problem of violence and choose active engaged Gospel nonviolence as a response to societal conflict and division. At times this response includes nonviolent civil disobedience and risk of arrest. To take this teaching of solidarity to heart is to be faithful to the call to oppose policies that afflict our brothers and sister around the world.

Care for God's Creation must begin with recognition that the created world is a divine gift and gratitude for this gift is expressed in how we care for and steward this gift. One of the greatest causes of destruction to the planet is our insatiable desire for more material goods. We are all steeped (Catholic Workers included) in the culture of conspicuous consumption. It is difficult to untangle ourselves from the market culture which skillfully convinces us of what we need to possess. Like addicts, we cannot seem to free ourselves from the consumptive practices that are destroying the planet and human life as we know it. In response, the Catholic Worker encourages living simply and challenging the cultural assumptions regarding what we really need to live an abundant, meaningful life. Catholic Worker communities foster a mindful understanding of the connection to

our purchases and their relationship to human exploitation and environmental degradation. We acknowledge the challenges of freeing ourselves from the power of market forces and our cultural dispositions while continually thriving to simplify our lives and make lifestyle choices to show care for God's creation.

Although I was raised Catholic and attended parochial grade school, I did not hear about these teachings until I was a young adult, living with the Catholic Worker community in Los Angeles. It is no wonder! They are hard to put into practice, stand in contrast to dominant cultural values, and seem beyond the scope of expectations for mainstream Catholics. These teachings awakened an inspiration in me that this vision of a society guided by these teachings could hold. For the Catholic Worker these were not just utopian rhetoric but teachings meant to be lived. However imperfect the attempts and outcomes, the commitment to these teachings more than ninety years ago has persisted, becoming the blueprint for putting Gospel love into action and claiming Divine love as a relevant and effective force for responding to the social ills of poverty, injustice, war and materialism.

To foster such a grand moral vision for society requires spiritual rootedness. In my many years of striving to follow this path, I have had to face my limitations, wounds and inadequacies time and time again. In knowing my dependence on the Divine Reality as the Source of All Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit, I gain sustenance. I am grateful for the hidden gem these teachings are for those who open their hearts and minds to them. They are a direct spiritual counterpoint to the cruel indignities and social injustices that dominate the news these days. The spiritual potency found in these teachings when they become more than words on a page are the hope we can offer our suffering world.

For further information from the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Catholic Social Teaching search: USCCB Catholic Social Teaching

We will be Closed
August 27 - September 6



View resources and take action at:
JusticeforImmigrants.org

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