

Solidarity, Praxis, and Discernment: Formation at the Catholic Worker

Casey Mullaney

WHEN THE CATHOLIC WORKER IS MENTIONED in the context of Church history or twentieth-century social movements, it is typically as a lay organization caring for the homeless and an auxiliary to the peace movement. While the performance of works of mercy and advocacy for peace are significant parts of the Catholic Worker vocation, movement founders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin also understood the Worker as a place of learning and formation.

In a 1970 column in *The Catholic Worker*, Day wrote “‘What is it all about, this Catholic Worker movement?’—So many ask us this question ... I usually try to explain it in simple terms. We are a school not only for the students, the young, who come to us, but for all of us. We are also a house of hospitality, for worker, for scholar, for young and for old.”¹ Even before the founding of the first house of hospitality, the Catholic Worker movement had been invested in education. The labor movements where Day received her political formation and the earliest texts of the Catholic social tradition all articulated the capabilities of the poor and working classes for intellectual development and self-determination. These convictions inspired Peter Maurin’s program of “round-table discussions for the clarification of thought,” a practice which continues in Catholic Worker communities to this day.²

In our community, St. Peter Claver Catholic Worker in South Bend, Indiana, these discussions typically take place in the evening after a big potluck dinner. Once the dishes are cleared away and the

¹ Dorothy Day, “On Pilgrimage—Our Spring Appeal,” *The Catholic Worker*, May 1970, 1, 2, 11.

² The Catholic Worker movement was founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in New York City on May 1st, 1933. The pair began by publishing a newspaper addressed primarily to unemployed laborers, outlining the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, which Day and Maurin saw as a solution and theoretical framework for addressing the rampant poverty and homelessness during the Great Depression. Day opened the first Catholic Worker “house of hospitality” soon after this, offering meals and overnight housing to the poor of New York.

kettle is put on for tea, someone passes around reading material—copies of a recent article from another community’s newsletter, selections from a book on a relevant social issue, or a short text on theology or political theory. The conversation that follows is inevitably lively; the informal setting helps level distinctions in status or level of education, and the mix of community residents, guests experiencing homelessness, college volunteers, and other friends allows for questioning, side-tracking, tangential remarks, and a certain amount of serious and genuine reflection. These conversations are an education in solidarity, both in form and content. As an event, “clarification of thought” is an opportunity for members of the community to connect theory to practice and forge intellectual and affective links between the foundational values of the Catholic social tradition and the events and experiences of their own lives.

The work of Russian philosopher Peter Kropotkin inspired Maurin to encourage workers and scholars to share each other’s lives; communities where “workers could become scholars and scholars become workers” would overcome intellectual elitism by developing relationships across class lines and enable each person to develop their physical and intellectual capabilities regardless of the type of labor they performed.³ The roundtable discussions and clarification of thought grew out of these anarchist principles; outside of the Catholic Worker, I have encountered few other settings where undergraduate students, homemakers, and people experiencing homelessness gather together for a meal and contribute their insights and life experiences to the discussion of a text. Clarification of thought is a long-term process, one that continues through the praxis of reflecting on readings and discussions in light of the daily tasks and interpersonal interactions that take place in our men’s and women’s residences and our drop-in center, where our unhoused neighbors can come to have breakfast and do a load of laundry or take a shower. I have noticed that it is our younger volunteers—the middle-school to post-college age bracket—who are most drawn to these deep, introspective conversations held across a weedy garden bed or a dishpan full of coffee cups. As educators in the Catholic social tradition, we can look to the 1979 Puebla conference and recognize these as opportunities to enact the “preferential option for young people” and enter into these conversations with the seriousness and sincerity they demand. Our students are also interlocutors.

The Catholic Worker is a movement dedicated to hospitality; I have found these informal exchanges with young volunteers to be sites where I am most aware that I am both offering and receiving openness

³ Jim Consedine, “Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” *The Common Good*, December 2010, edition 55, wp.catholicworker.org.nz/the-common-good/anarchism-and-the-catholic-worker/.

and welcome. By taking young people seriously in acts of conversational hospitality we can give them a great gift: stability and the opportunity to put down deep roots in a rich intellectual and spiritual tradition. In the life of the St. Peter Claver Catholic Worker community, I have spent a significant amount of the past six years shepherding and working alongside student volunteers. Students have a long history of participation in the Worker movement, not only in our community, but in many of the Catholic Worker houses and farm communities around the country. In the year before her death, Day wrote about them with gratitude in her column for the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, "On Pilgrimage." "There are a goodly number of students with us who 'have the house' on certain days or hours, and what a good example they set for others," she wrote. "They have what Peter Maurin called 'a philosophy of work.'"⁴

After a semester, a summer, or a year or two in and around our community, what I hope students and volunteers take away is an orientation towards bone-deep solidarity and responsibility to other human beings, other creatures, and the Earth. The young people drawn to the Worker, and I think to other environments where they will encounter the Catholic social tradition, have an intuitive sense of the urgency and vitality of the Gospel. They are seeking a counter-witness to the "throwaway culture" Pope Francis speaks of in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where "everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless," and where "masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape" (no. 53). The Church and the world are in aching need of the intelligence, wisdom, energy, and fresh perspective young people bring to these conversations. In turn, what they require from educators and others charged with their formation are a sense of coherency and authenticity, a willingness to respond to challenging inquiries, and communities in which young people can test out the ideals of Catholic social teaching and make a meaningful contribution from their own gifts and inner resources. The texts of the Catholic social tradition are broad and contain few specific prescriptions for policy or individual action. To be fully integrated into their formation, our students must have a space to put these ideals into practice.

In my experience as a guide and educator in the Catholic social tradition, it is the move from dialogue, conversation, and reflection to action that students find most compelling. Those who are young right now understand that we do not have time to wait; we must act. We do not have time to wait and see what happens to our planet's climate, we do not have time to let anti-Black racism gradually "fade away," and we do not have time for a small percentage of the world's wealth to

⁴ Dorothy Day, "On Pilgrimage," *The Catholic Worker*, June 1979, 2, 6.

trickle down to the millions of children living today in extreme poverty around the world. John Paul II anticipated the type of reactionary resistance this urgency often generates, and stated clearly that “anyone wishing to renounce the difficult yet noble task of improving the lot of man in his totality, and of all people, with the excuse that the struggle is difficult and that constant effort is required, or simply because of the experience of defeat and the need to begin again, that person would be betraying the will of God the Creator” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 30). The young people who come to volunteer at the Worker know this already. They are asking what they can do, and in this readiness to act, I see the kind of responsibility we at the Catholic Worker identify with as holiness.

The political ethic and interpersonal posture of the Catholic Worker is one which preserves the priority of the image of God in each and every human being. This ethic also prioritizes personal responsibility and interdependence. In 1987, this is how Pope John Paul II spoke about solidarity in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, which builds on the claims of *Populorum Progressio* (1967), the first papal document to affirm “that the social question has acquired a worldwide dimension” obligating us to act (no. 9). In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II expands upon the obligations identified in *Populorum Progressio* and claims that the most significant contribution of his predecessor’s encyclical was not in its naming of the global nature of social concerns, but in impressing upon the Church their moral dimension.

Looking back at the world of 1967 from twenty years’ distance, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* sees that the promises of global development did not come to fruition. From our own standpoint, well into the twenty-first century, the vast disparities of wealth and opportunity between the rich and the poor have only increased, and although this encyclical focuses on relationships of solidarity across national boundaries and between nations and peoples of different countries, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* is able to shed helpful light on the American context and the need for work based on cross-class and interracial solidarity here today.

On a domestic scale, the question of solidarity that John Paul II addresses in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* is very much alive in our dealings with guests, neighbors, city officials, and volunteers at St. Peter Claver Catholic Worker; considering solidarity in the context of our community has been an immensely helpful process of discernment for many of us. Today, with near-constant and unlimited access to the internet, we are even more aware of world issues and the interconnectedness of various social struggles; however, the moral evaluation of these realities remains challenging. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* is helpful in that following *Populorum Progressio*, it clarifies a duty to act. As John Paul II writes, all of us “have the moral obligation, according to the degree

of each one's responsibility, to take into consideration, in personal decisions and decisions of government, this relationship of universality, this interdependence which exists between their conduct and the poverty and underdevelopment of so many millions of people. Pope Paul's encyclical translates more succinctly the moral obligation as the 'duty of solidarity'" (no. 9). Beyond simply asserting that solidarity is in fact a duty, this statement also identifies degrees of responsibility; all of us share in the vocation of labor for the common good, but those who are in positions of greater privilege and influence are obliged to use that outsized share of power to ensure that those not so positioned are able to meet their own needs.

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, human relationships and the world of work and imagination are the raw materials which can potentially facilitate an encounter with the holy. Labor, struggle, and human efforts to construct a just social order are graced sites where through discernment we might come to better understand how generously God desires to provide for all Creation. These are the things we are attempting to understand better through our efforts at community-building and hospitality at the Catholic Worker. In this context, interdependence is a moral category, and it is within this framework that John Paul II explains in very practical terms what he means by our vocation to lives of solidarity:

When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a "virtue" is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. (no. 38)

Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, speaks of the "habits" of solidarity. He writes that

solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them. These convictions and habits of solidarity, when they are put into practice, open the way to other structural transformations and make them possible. Changing structures without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same structures will become, sooner or later, corrupt, oppressive, and ineffectual. (no. 189)

In the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, a habit is a stable quality or disposition in an acting subject.⁵ We might ask then what the habits of solidarity look like in practice. In the famous photograph of Day's last

⁵ *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 49, a. 2.

arrest, taken at a United Farm Workers picket in 1973, Day sits with her knees crossed and hands folded. She is wearing sensible shoes, dark stockings, and a plain dress. Her face is lined under her sunhat, and her mouth is set and firm. This image of physical frailty and spiritual vigor is effective on its own, but this photograph is particularly instructive because it also confronts the viewer with the horizon of risk strikers faced that day; the elderly Day is framed by two large, male police officers with a gun and a billy-club prominently displayed on each hip.

Thanks to the ubiquity of cell phone cameras, during the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 millions of people around the world saw a nearly identical version of this confrontation play out on the streets of Buffalo, New York, when seventy-five-year-old Martin Gugino was knocked unconscious by police officers in riot gear. In the video, Gugino approaches a line of heavily armed police officers and engages two of them in a brief conversation. He gestures with his cell phone, and suddenly the officers he is speaking with reach out and shove him backwards. Gugino stumbles, but is unable to catch himself, and his body crumples to the ground with the force of the police officer's violent thrust. The video cuts away as blood pools around Gugino's head and police prevent other protestors from rushing to his aid. A member of our Catholic Worker community told me that as soon as she saw the video, she recognized the man whose skull hit the concrete with a sickening thud as a fellow Worker.

There is a particular gait she recognized, embodied language in Gugino's open shoulders, visible but lowered hands, emphatic, understated gestures, and purposeful eye contact. To the careful observer, these are the trained, bodily disciplines of de-escalation, practiced to the point of connaturalization and habituation. Within the context of the United Farmworkers' strike and the Black Lives Matter protests, the physical stance taken by Day and Gugino is one of solidarity. Day and Gugino are both white, well-educated, and Catholic, members of a previously-minoritized Christian denomination that by the 1970's had clawed its way to respectability. Both possessed privileges they could have used to insulate themselves from the injustices experienced by the poor and especially by people of color; however, recognition of their shared membership in the Body of Christ with those facing oppression compelled them to take up these struggles for justice as their own, putting their bodies on the line in confrontation with the State. For people of privilege, solidarity involves taking up responsibility and willingly taking on a portion of the danger and risk that those lacking privilege live with under duress.

Solidarity is a duty and responsibility, but in our experience at St. Peter Claver house, it is also a joy, even in the moments when it demands sacrifice and willing acceptance of risk. "It is a wonderful thing to be God's faithful people. We achieve fulfilment when we break

down walls and our heart is filled with faces and names!” writes Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (no. 274). In this exhortation, Francis emphasizes the role of solidarity in the spaces of urban encounter where the Catholic Worker movement is most deeply rooted. While far too many of our neighbors experience the city as a site of racism, violence, and exclusion, the city also is a model through which the Christian imagination understands the fulfillment of God’s kingdom.

Cities are places of conflict as well as communion; as Francis writes,

The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness. (no. 88)

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the affective and interpersonal dimensions of solidarity are most fully developed. The experiences of “close and continuous” interaction with others in the defining moments of their lives creates in us the desire to commit ourselves to the flourishing of particular individuals and communities and from there, to that of the human family and all of creation. These opportunities for encounter, reflection, and action occur in a continuing spiral when we accept what Francis calls “the social aspect of the Gospel” (no. 88); lay movements such as the Catholic Worker can provide students and practitioners of the Catholic social tradition space and conversation partners with whom to deepen their understanding of the spiritual dimension and significance of these encounters.

Solidarity, the option for the poor, and the dignity of the human person are all intellectual and moral commitments, but the fullest understanding of these principles requires an embodied stance. Learning to take up a stance of responsibility, becoming capable of the type of witness Day and Gugino offer takes practice. What the Catholic Worker and communities like it can offer to students of the Catholic social tradition is an opportunity to become literate in the bodily and emotional disciplines enabling us to affirm the commitments of CST with our whole lives. This type of practice literally shapes the way we move in the world. In the video from the Black Lives Matter protests, it is clear that these bodily disciplines are not legible to the police officers Gugino engages; however, reflecting from the perspective of the Catholic social tradition, they are a form of embodied speech. I have seen members of my own Catholic Worker community, men and women starting in their late teens and early twenties, use these same bodily disciplines of engagement and nonviolent de-escalation to calm

agitated guests at our drop-in center or break up physical altercations in our parking lot. My friends practice a creative *askesis* of nonviolence to de-escalate these tense situations, injecting humor and warmth where there is anger and hostility. This *askesis* mirrors the humanity of both aggressor and victim and presents a reimagined relationship to violent control.

John Paul II writes:

In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimension of total gratuity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. One's neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit." (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 39)

As Catholic Workers, my neighbors put their bodies between people who mean violence and those upon whom they would inflict it. They are habituated to solidarity; this virtue has become part of who they are and how they move through the world. The capacity to stand unarmed before a line of police officers in riot gear is seeded and grown at the soup kitchen, in the daily tasks of offering hospitality.

Solidarity as articulated and practiced at the Catholic Worker is a stance capable of encompassing both dramatic clashes with state-sanctioned violence and everyday interpersonal interactions, each one an opportunity to treat the other as a holy being. Francis writes,

If we are to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our giving ... because they are God's handiwork, his creation. God created that person in his image, and he or she reflects something of God's glory. Every human being is the object of God's infinite tenderness, and he himself is present in their lives. Jesus offered his precious blood on the cross for that person. Appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love. (no. 274)

The crises of racism, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic have in recent years revealed the fragility and inadequacy of institutional safety nets and in many communities have reignited interest in the disciplines of solidarity: protest, mutual aid, and creative re-envisioning of a just and holy social order. This is the work of bringing about God's kingdom. Study and conversation, as they take place during community "clarifications of thought," can join with these practical disciplines to refine and deepen Christian social praxis.

A lay movement like the Catholic Worker can perhaps push magisterial Catholic social teaching further and enrich our theoretical and lived understanding of solidarity by providing a "learning laboratory"

of sorts: multigenerational and cross-class communities in which students can enact, reflect on, and further challenge what the popes have taught in the texts of the Catholic social tradition. The holiness of the Catholic Worker ethos is the practice of treating every individual as a holy being. John Paul II's call for radical awareness of the sanctity and dignity of each human person likewise states,

Solidarity helps us to see the “other”—whether a person, people, or nation—not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our “neighbor,” a “helper” (cf. Gen 2:18–20), to be made a sharer, on par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God. Hence the importance of reawakening the religious awareness of individuals and peoples. (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 39)

Solidarity, as John Paul II describes it, is the fruit of praxis, in which careful reflection and discernment informed by practical experience enable the practitioner to fully realize and embody this posture of attentiveness to God's presence and action. At the Catholic Worker, my hope is that students—and every one of us—will take advantage of the many opportunities for encounters with neighbors, helpers, and other holy beings to sharpen their vision and integrate into their daily consciousness this “religious awareness” of the image of God in everyone they meet. **M**

Casey Mullaney is a summer 2022 graduate of the doctoral program in moral theology at the University of Notre Dame. Her research uses ethnographic methods to pose theological questions about embodiment, labor, and ritual formation. She is also a member of the St. Peter Claver Catholic Worker community in South Bend, Indiana, where she cooks, cares for neighbors, and organizes youth and student programming.