

Catholic Worker Ideas On Hospitality

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1940, 10.

Summary: Defends against the charge that they do more harm than good in providing hospitality to the undeserving. Asserts that doing the Works of Mercy is following Christ and a revolutionary technique. Points to the monastic tradition of indiscriminate hospitality. Other keywords: Communism, hospices, social order. (DDLW #358).

Many times we have borne the charge that Houses of Hospitality, this “new wrinkle,” do more harm than good. It is said that they perpetuate chronic laziness and drunkenness. Communists ask us, “How can you say you’re against capitalism when you keep it alive by feeding the poor the crumbs of the rich?” We are told to discriminate on the side of the “deserving poor.”

The “new wrinkle” was old long before we appeared on the scene. Christ once told his disciples, “I was hungry and you gave me to eat,” etc. Since that day, all over the world, pilgrims to holy places, weary travelers, the hungry and thirsty, saint and sinner have been succored in the name of Christ. Hospices, centuries ago, were under the supervision of the Bishops. They were set up in lonely and hostile regions. Lepers by the thousands were helped in the many hospices scattered all over France. The monks of St. Bernard are famous for their hospitality. The work of these monks was started back in 962.

The early monasteries founded by Benedict of Nursia designated monks as hospitallers and almoners. The former welcomed guests while the latter fed, clothed, and gave shelter to the needy.

“Chronics”

There is no record in the history of hospices and hospitality of discrimination. Those who disapprove feeding the “burdens of society” might look to the work of the nuns and priests laboring among the lepers. To bring it nearer, there is Father Dempsey of hallowed memory, who could see through a man’s drunkenness and evaluate him, liken him to you and me, as another very precious entity, a creature of body and soul.

Christ exercised His good works among those who today would be lumped with “chronics.” Hospitable in His heart, He took in the sinning woman and the thief beside Him on the Cross.

As for perpetuating the social order, we consider the spiritual and corporal Works of Mercy and the following of Christ to be the best revolutionary technique and a means of changing

the social order rather than perpetuating it. Did not the thousands of monasteries, with their hospitality change the entire social pattern of their day? They did not wait for a paternal state to step in nor did they stand by to see destitution precipitate bloody revolt.

Louis B. Ward, in *BACK TO BENEDICT*, says, “The poor did not have to sit as they do today for endless hours on the benches of some welfare agency to be subjected to a third degree on their personal lives, treated as crooks and investigated to the point of criminal persecution.” We have often deplored this treatment of our poor and advocated means grounded on the seven ways in which Christ was treated by His disciples. Not bound by vows and being weak in ourselves, we try, stumblingly, to do our little bit to express faith in the hospitable tradition.