

What Dream Did They Dream? Utopia or Suffering?

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Summary: A self-critical appraisal of the Catholic Worker movement's first fifteen years. Readily accepts criticism of their ideals of voluntary poverty and pacifism, failure to implement Peter Maurin's vision, of rigorous and demanding retreats, of internal dissent, and of their approach to helping the poor. Says they have not been good servants nor recognized the failure of the cross and the need to die to self. Says they are in a time of transition with only ten houses remaining. (DDLW #456).

On the Feast of Sts. Cyril and Methodius

As I read the story of these two brothers Cyril and Methodius there falls out of my missal a memorial card for "Rev. William Francis Roach, pastor of St. Mary's Church, Texas City, Texas, who died a heroic death April 16, administering to the injured and dying during the Texas City holocaust."

A seminarian from Texas gave me the card and I wish I had 100 more of them to send around to the retreatants who came to us over Labor Day, 1940, all of whom met Father Roach and his twin brother at that retreat. Here were two brothers, both priests, laboring for the faith in the Southwest in an era of black paganism, as Pope Pius XI called it. And here one of them in the midst of his labors had laid down his life for his brothers. Knowing that another explosion was imminent, Fr. Roach went among the injured wearing his cassock, not a customary thing. He knew, his brother said afterwards, that he was going to die. "For the love of God," and for love of his brothers, facing death joyfully and fearlessly. I wish we all had his card, so that we would be remembering to pray daily for such love, and so too that we can overcome the fears of our cringing flesh, so that we too will never hesitate to go into danger if the time comes for us. I always remember two stories of fear, **The Red Badge of Courage** and **Lord Jim** and the horrible failure of Lord Jim in the face of an emergency. God deliver us from such treason.

Yes, the two Roach brothers, not long priests, were with us for that long weekend retreat, a memorable one in more ways than one. I have often wanted to write the story of that retreat but it would almost take a book to do it justice. There were five priests there, and 125 lay people. And our accommodations were the most primitive.

It was before we entered the war, so some of the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality had cars, and brought carloads of retreatants and food. We had about thirty houses at that time, and all the Eastern houses sent representatives, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, Cleveland, Toledo, Pittsburgh, Rochester, Harrisburg, Boston, Worcester, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, not to speak of the crowd from New York. It was the last great get-together the Catholic Workers had before we were separated by war, our workers dispersed to the far ends of the earth, in the service, in jails and conscientious objector camps, the houses closed. There are ten houses still but they are neither as they were before in the depths of depression and with the energy of emergency and crisis upon them and the new found joy of a fellowship in the lay apostolate; nor are they centers of Catholic Action as Peter Maurin envisaged them. We are in a transition stage and we need to do a great deal of writing and talking to work out programs of action and a *modus vivendi*.

Here after the manner of a communion breakfast speaker, I will insert a joke. Several communists in an outer office to Stalin's own sanctum heard roarings and shoutings from within. They cowered in their chairs, or exulted in the discomfiture of another as their temperaments reacted. The shoutings went on for fifteen minutes, and then the door opened and Stalin came out and passed through the office. Peering in, his underlings found that there was no one in the inner office.

"Oh," one sighed in relief. "It is just his daily fifteen minutes of self criticism."

This is one of the old communist jokes, but emphasizing one of the more human and appealing communist trends at the time.

LEADERS

When one is leader of a movement there is plenty of criticism from all sides as we all know. For fifteen years there has been plenty of it from within and without and in order not to be discouraged one needs much self confidence, as well as confidence in God. When there happens to be two leaders, a man and a woman, the criticism is intensified. No matter how harmoniously those two work together over a long period of years, there are always factions. "I follow Peter," "I follow Paul." It has been so since early apostolic times. This means that few obstructionists ever leave the **movement** which has a dangerous fascination for the anarchist and individualist. They can always say—I follow this one or that one. Peter used to say sadly, "No need ever to eliminate people, they

eliminate themselves.” But on the other hand, Ray Scott, head of the former Alcuin Community, said brightly, “The Catholic Worker movement performs a great function; the gold is eliminated, the dross remains.” This quotation has gone down in the history of the movement, and everyone who tries to stick by and continue the work, ruefully admits that there is some truth in it.

Last year in our September issue there was a long article on **The Church and Work** which was a criticism of a tendency in the Jociste movement, in the union movement in the Church, which brought a storm of protest from all over the country. I still contend that there is not enough **vision** of a society as it could be, and too much of an acceptance of the machine, the factory system, the status quo, an acceptance that is so dangerous that in the immediate and in the long run, it results in the disregard of the family, of the family’s needs in the way of property—that it indeed caters to man’s concupiscence and neglects such vital and fundamental teaching as to man’s real needs, and emphasizes instead his luxury needs. We have been saying these things for fourteen years in our discussions as to work and voluntary poverty, war and voluntary poverty, spirituality and voluntary poverty. But, as Pope Pius said when he cried out against increased armaments, urging the press and pulpit also to do so, “our voice has not been heard.”

Other Groups

It is interesting to read of other communities which have endeavored to build up a better life here and now without waiting for pie in the sky. One such community, New Llano, in Louisiana, suffered for the twenty years of its existence with a group of obstructionists who called themselves, I believe, the brushfire group. They wore a bit of brush in their buttonholes and maintained a society constantly augmented by new members, and it seemed their whole joy was in being contrary, even to the extreme of setting fire to a building which they in their voting had not agreed was necessary.

We have had three attempts here in the past to wreck the Catholic Worker movement, or to carry it along another course. During the first, Peter Maurin expressed the opinion that it would be better to walk out and leave the work to the dissenters rather than continue the argument, which was over the relative importance of the works of mercy and indoctrination. Peter held for the former, of course (though all who know him realize the importance he laid on “indoctrination”). He never ceased to reiterate that the way to reach the people was by the works of mercy carried on at a personal sacrifice. And he never ceased to hold forth against social worker schools, and techniques. Pope Pius XII (thank God for our saintly popes!) said recently:

“In times during which it is the object of the world’s hatred, Christianity is not a matter of persuasive words, but of greatness.” (See July issue of *The Catholic Mind*.)

And how to be great except by being little, by being poor, by being the servant of all, by doing everything whether we eat or whether we drink, for the love of God, and not for love of ourselves! Oh, we have not yet begun, I realize that over and over again, we have not yet begun to be holy, and there are too many of us settled smugly in our ruts, content with what we are doing, and looking back to “the good old days” when there were 125 at a retreat and a good time was had by all.

“He who says he has done enough has already perished,” says St. Augustine, or words to that effect. When we quote, we are often accused of taking words, quotations out of their context, from the Popes of the present to the Fathers of the Church. Sometimes in regard to pacifism, and sometimes in regard to labor. And as for spirituality, God forbid that I should set myself up as a theologian, and I pray that I will always remember with St. Teresa of Avila, that I am but a woman.

And before I go any further with this article, I might as well quote her on the subject of such writings as this (since I consider this an important article):

“If our Lord should give me grace to say anything that is good, the approval of grave and learned persons will be sufficient; and should there be anything useful, it will be God’s, not mine; for I have no learning, nor goodness . . . I write also as if by stealth and with trouble because thereby I am kept from spinning; and I live in a poor house and have a great deal of business. If our Lord had given me better abilities and a more retentive memory I might then have profited by what I heard or read, and so, if I should say anything good our Lord will it for some good; and whatever is useless or bad, that will be mine . . . in other things, my being a woman is sufficient to account for my stupidity.”

Past Leaders

In the June issue of the Historical Review printed by St. Louis University there appeared an article by Donald Gallagher, professor in the philosophy department of Marquette University, and formerly one of the first heads of the St. Louis House of Hospitality. He was there while he was going to school, with Cy Echele he headed the St. Louis Catholic Workers which were made up of three groups, one might say—those who wished to help the poor in that unemployed era; those who were especially interested in the liturgy, and those who were interested in studying the social order and formed themselves later into the Catholic Radical Alliance. The meetings at the house were large and well attended. There were many people interested actively in the work and keeping a center going. Herb Welsh carried on wonderfully for a while, carrying on especially the first of the listed activities, with an active and ardent love for running the house and working with the poor. Now many of these young people are married, have children, have jobs—have the full life which keeps them from other activities. Some are teachers, some edit **The Living Parish**; all of them indeed were touched by, influenced

by the movement. They are even in some way a part of the movement still, in that we are all working as members of Christ's Mystical Body of which we are the members.

I liked the article of Don Gallagher very much but some of the newer members of the New York group who feel an intense loyalty to the movement felt that he spoke too much of the movement in terms of the past.

It is true that the movement is a living vital thing—the ideas which animate it are as vital and important as they were when restated by Peter Maurin. As I pointed out in an article in **Integrity**, he never claimed so much to be an original thinker but called himself an agitator, an integrator, a maker of a synthesis, and above all, he called for a synthesis to be made by others.

THE POOR

To me also it is true that the movement is still one of the most important in the country today, in that it points to a problem which has not been met except with words. That is **the problem of the poor**. Too many other movements have gone out with words, with agitation, with study and indoctrination, with efforts towards organization and legislation. There is too much tackling of the problem from above. There are too few who will consider themselves servants, who will give up their lives to serving others, who will sow the things of this world, the things of the mind, and of the soul in order to “put on Christ”—to “be Christ” to those around us. In other words, to answer in the words of a priest who was praised for his charitable work, “I have not yet shed my blood for them, my brothers.”

There is too much talk of the raising up of **leaders**, and too little of the raising up of servants; or rather, just too much talk, and too little **being** what we are talking about.

We may think that we are humble, that we wish to be ignored, spat upon, criticized, verbally buffeted (there are few of us who have had the privilege of being actually buffeted, though there are already, thank God, martyrs among our friends who have shed some blood for their brothers) but I am thinking that much of the criticism we get, we deserve, if not for the particular point on which we are criticized, then for something else.

As my mother used to say, “you never get a lick amiss.” So if priests and layfolk we encounter say scornfully that we are wasting time and intelligence and money on derelicts, the scum of the earth, the submerged tenth, we should accept the criticism at not having done better at the job, at not having progressed much in sanctity ourselves, nor developed much sanctity in others around us. Our fever has not been catching!

If our pacifism has not convinced, has not brought about converts, then we should acknowledge that there is an element of heresy in our pacifism that has

not been burned out—that it is hard for Bishops and priests to find the gold in the dross that is within us. Fr. McSorley said once, “Come a war, you will find yourselves in very strange company,” and I often thought of that as I met long-haired pacifist, vegetarian pacifist, Lemurian pacifist, anarchist pacifist, including many other varieties not to speak of Friends, Brethren, Hutterites, Doukhobors, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses who were not pacifists but just refused to fight in this war. This is true of some of our Coughlinite pacifists who are now only too anxious for a holy war against Russia.

I have loved our strange associates during these war years. Peter Maurin himself is remembered more often among the bourgeois because he is a ragged, foreign-speaking soapboxer of a peasant agitator than for what he says. The very tales, legends, traditions that are built up about him, true and untrue, are proof of this. Through our peace movement in this country perhaps we are reminding some of our twenty five million Catholics, that there are men of God, pilgrims on this earth, people content to be despised and rejected, like those of old Russia that Maria entertained in **War and Peace**. (I wonder if there are any such pilgrims in Holy Russia today.)

We can be critical because of lack of cooperation on the part of clergy and laity, and there were bitter years during the depression when no parish or diocesan Houses of Hospitality were opened, though many a homeless one had to sleep in jails and empty buildings. We may be critical remembering how there were empty buildings available owned by diocesan authorities, and not made available to the poor. The Law enters in of course, insurance, multiple-dwelling laws, the enormous cost of converting old buildings so that all the rigmarole of the state is complied with, fire retardant halls, fire escapes, sprinkler systems, etc., but it seems to me a time comes when it is necessary to disregard the law. When Men and when families are homeless and hungry, when there are sick to be cared for, one must go ahead and house people and disregard the law. But then one can get **no insurance!** God will have to take care of it. He has certainly rescued us on many occasions.

Divine Providence has kept our houses going, and our poor fed, and we have done it badly because there were so many of them. It was not right nor fair that we should bear so large a burden; that we should face long lines of hungry, sick and aged people in the morning and the evening. It could well have been distributed through the parishes, the parish halls, the parish properties, the parish societies; and if the old societies are too stodgy to take care of these new needs in a changing world, then new societies like the Samaritans in Montreal, like Fr. Meenan’s mothers group in Pittsburgh, should be formed. Why should appeals for help come to us from England, Ottawa, St. Louis and points west in one short week? Why should a priest in Brooklyn call us at ten o’clock at night to ask us to take in a girl who would probably shudder at the sight of Mott Street at that hour? Where are the **parish** groups for emergencies? The State would be able to organize them in war, famine or flood. Why not the parish? The poor we always have with us, and the need is always there for caring for

those in trouble.

CRITICISM

Of course we deserve criticism in that we have done our job badly, and so discouraged well wishers and volunteers and those who could only go part way in immolating themselves for love of God and their neighbor. We have had literally so many calls on us that it seems nothing is done well. But the dross who remained to do the work did not stop doing it because they had to do so bad a job. “The best is the enemy of the good,” an old Italian proverb runs.

Yes, I see excuses for ourselves, in the depression, and the blindness of others around us to the problem. But I see also how often it has been our own fault that we failed. We have fallen short of the “greatness” the Holy Father calls for. In embracing the poor, we have too often shared the vices of the poor, and by that I mean all the little luxuries and indulgences of self which made us “**so human!**” (Fr. Hugo said once that we could go to hell imitating the failings of the saints.)

We have become too often luxurious in our poverty, as Bernanos has pointed that out in his **Diary of a Country Priest**. “God save us from being your pious kind,” we said smugly, little wotting that we were guilty of a more subtle hypocrisy, that of the bourgeois.

The best disintegrates, degenerates; we must always be returning to first principles, to early fervor, to the first moods of our conversion.

We need to stop and reflect on the mystery of suffering, and the fact that God’s ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts. We need to recognize the immensity of God’s majesty, the need to worship the craving of our nature (recalling Kafka’s novels) to reach the **Castle**, our incompatibility with the **Village**, since we have received this call, since we are sons of God. We need to know ourselves in order to know God. “There is more difference between God and man than between us and a worm,” Fr. Roy once said, and yet we have been made sons of God, we have been divinized by Him, He has put on our flesh, God became man that man might become God. And these are truths which we do not think of too often, and we do not like to meditate on what they mean, what they cost us. We do not like to think of the death of the cross, the dark night of the senses and the soul which all must go through. “Christianity,” Kierkegaard said, “is the greatest wound inflicted upon man . . . Christianity is an offense.” In other words, an effort must be made, we must bestir ourselves, go on the offensive.

THE RETREAT

One might say that the retreat given at the farm at Easton these last three years, and now is given at Newburgh, New York, is a basic retreat in that it makes man realize and face even with despair the work that is before him, the death to self, the chasm he must bridge, to reach God. We must begin sometime to aim at sanctity. The tragedy, Newman said, is never to begin. Or having put one's hand to the plough, to turn back. To become a tired radical. To settle down to relish comfortably past performances of self sacrifice and self denial. It is not enough, St. Ambrose remarks, to leave all our possessions, we must also follow Him, and that means to the Cross, the Gethsemane and Calvary, before one can share in the Resurrection and Ascension.

"I die daily," St. Paul said, and I've often thought it was not the big struggles, the great deaths we have to undergo that are so hard, as the daily torture of denying oneself, mortifying, putting to death the old man in us. Thank God a good part is done **for us**.

Yes—that was a great retreat, seven years ago, at Easton, Pa. How many were there how many houses were represented! It was a funny retreat too. There was a retreat within a retreat. One priest gave a retreat, and because he did not insist upon silence, Fr. Roy, who had just become acquainted with the movement, gave conferences on the love of God between conferences. He shook his head over the lack of silence, over the money spent on cigarettes—"Is it for the love of God you smoke or for the love of self?" and the furore caused by this innocent remark on cigarettes does not cease to reverberate to this day. It is a more delicate point with us than the war. What a fool for Christ this priest who lays so much emphasis on cigarettes! So small a point! In the midst of so grave problems which we are undertaking to solve! But why the furore over so small a point, except that it is a symptom of our self indulgence. Dostoevsky called attention to the luxury of the day and pointed out that a man would sell his comrade for a cigaret. And there is a foolish slogan today, "send a package of cigarettes and save a baby in Poland." "We can pay our rent with one pack of cigarettes a month." "We purchased enough wood to keep us warm for the winter with the cigarettes which came in a CARE package." These were lines from letters we received.

That retreat marked the beginning of one of the wars in our midst. That priest! That rigorist! That Jansenist! It is amazing how many lay people have become theologians in justifying their habits.

The young Fathers Roach, in the midst of a summer downpour which lasted off and on for several days, laughed their way through it all.

"God love you," they kept saying, "this is a wonderful retreat!" Though one of them got pneumonia as a result of it. I got a cold and a stiff neck so that I could hardly move my head, and Madame de Bethune, who arrived the last day to pick up her daughter, massaged my neck with analgesic baume. Father Roach, one

of them, brought me a little bottle of whiskey and said with a twinkle, "Drink it for the love of God, and get rid of your cold." Controversies started at that retreat over pacifism and leadership and the use of spiritual weapons, on liturgy, and on "emphasis on self"—a telling phrase used to combat what looked to be a new heresy in the movement. "But God love you, I don't agree," Fr. Roach would say, and whether it was one point or another he was talking about, I do not know.

There was another priest at the retreat, a Fr. Egan from Baltimore, who died a few years after from a blood clot or high blood pressure, or some such sudden call. His death was blamed on the "new retreat," emphasis placed too much on penance. "It unhinged him," the comment was made.

SEVEN YEARS

Seven years have passed since that retreat, that beginning of the basic retreat, the Pauline retreat, the Thomistic retreat in our midst, and we have died many deaths, and many sorrows have entered our lives. Not only the tragedy of a great war, a cataclysm that brought with it the atom bomb and an apocalyptic attitude toward life, but also all the small tragedies which make up our lives.

"Everyone's tragedy is no one's tragedy," is another Italian proverb quoted by Silone in **Bread and Wine**, and I thought of it during Mississippi floods when I talked with Arkansas sharecroppers who told me what a good time they had being cared for on the levee, their needs supplied by the Government and the Red Cross—never had such solicitude been shown them before. War has its compensations too, though I may be excoriated for saying so. Those who come back may say so, but not an editorial writer.

But the daily tragedies of life, of poverty, and loss of love, and sickness and death, striking in our midst; these are the sorrows and pain incident to dying daily, to putting off the old man and putting on Christ. Dying is not pleasant. Dying is painful. We have to accept the Cross, take up our Cross, and die to rise again. It is growth, normal growth, and if the egg does not proceed in due course to become a chick and put on wings, it becomes a rotten egg.

And most of us fight every inch of the way, hold back, withdraw, become embittered at chastisements that are preparations, instead of throwing ourselves into the arms of this mighty lover. Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard what He hath prepared for them that love him! A hundred fold, and in this life too. No, we wallow in our pottage, instead of flinging ourselves under the torrent of His pleasures.

We are creatures of sense, and our loves are sense loves, whether exterior or interior. Every mother knows the death she must undergo for her love; the dark night of the senses that is part of raising a family; yes, even the killing of natural love in order to attain to the supernatural. The poor know these things,

a mother knows these things, a lover knows these things. Knows the blackness of the seeking of self in sex which makes pleasure an end, knows that certain dark fascination of the sense life that brings death with it.

Those who try to save their lives, their pleasures and lose them, lose them forever, and with discouragement comes loss of love and divorce and remarriage and the same sad cycle of natural love and hate and the beginning again—instead of the courageous going on through the Calvary every love goes through to be divinized. Every Catholic wife and mother has a grim endurance of this, and oh, if they were only taught these things instead of being offered “all this and heaven too,” if they were taught the meaning of their pain it would be easier to endure, and they would find even a happiness in suffering.

Claudél Says

Youth demands the heroic, Claudél says, and the heroic is the tragic, and the glorious, the laying down one’s life for one’s brother, the losing it to save it, the following of Christ, not just the giving up of possessions (which one soon begins to collect again after an initial noble gesture).

Youth in this era has begun to know about what the heroic is, and has through war and revolution endured sacrifice, poverty, cold and hunger, grim pain and imprisonment, loss of all worldly goods. We cannot deny the heroism of the world, of countless thousands of those who took part in the last gigantic slaughter, of men and women who laid down their lives, “who gave their all.” And despite the exalted mouthings of hired writers for the government, we know with that we would be happy if we were as sure of our courage as the unknown and unsung heroes throughout the world that have risen up in this day.

But we know too, that heroism can go much farther, that there is a martyrdom of the inner senses, the understanding and the will; that until we see the kenotic aspects of Christ’s life, the humiliations of his manhood, the scorn heaped upon him; until we understand how little he thought of *worldly* honor and prudence, we have not yet begun to “put on Christ.”

Obedient Unto Death

Because of the first man’s disobedience, Christ was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. And how we Americans hate this word *obedient*. He stripped himself and came in the likeness of a *servant* and how we hate the word servant. We want to be recognized, as important, as successful; we are always justifying ourselves for our failures; we have not begun to recognize the failure of the Cross.

Catholic Action

Certainly the Catholic Worker has failed—both in establishing Houses of Hospitality as Peter envisioned them, or Farming Communes. We have succeeded in many small ways, hidden ways, and influenced the lives, we well know, of countless thousands and by the paper and by **all efforts which have failed**. We have sowed in tears, and others will reap in joy. “Have you aimed at failure?” someone asked once. No, we have seen no reason why these ideas expressed by Peter and others in **The Catholic Worker** should not work out to build up a new society within the shell of the old. God did not mean that life should be so difficult. He has provided enough for all, and man in his greed has made a mess of things. I’m firmly convinced that we should keep the vision Peter has held up to us, work towards it, recognizing with humility our mistakes and the gains of others, and appreciating all the means the Church has held out to us—the cell techniques of Catholic Action for instance, work in the Legion of Mary in performing the spiritual works of mercy, and other groups furthering the lay apostolate.

Of necessity we will often not be accepted by other groups because of the radical nature of our work. The disease of Statism is too wide spread. Our emphasis on personal responsibility on the part of Catholics, whether individual or group is astonishingly radical to a world committed to State aid, more terrified of poverty than of any other evil. Our writings on war and peace, and even, strangely enough, on **property**, seem astoundingly radical. (One of our friends who was trying to acquire by purchase or gift, a bit of land from an order which owned thousands of acres, was interpreted as showing a communist trend, the desire to deprive the Church of its property!)

We have a tremendous work before us—to live and to die in love of Christ. So let us all begin again, our readers, our fellow workers, and pray that God will raise up more apostles for the vineyard who will follow in the footsteps of the “humiliated Christ,” responding to the call for **greatness** of Pius XII.