

## AN EXPERIMENT IN PERSONALIST POLITICS: THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT AND NONVIOLENT ACTION

*by Patrick G. Coy*

The Catholic Worker movement, co-founded by Dorothy Day in 1933, is well known for its hospitality work with the urban poor. Less examined is the Worker movement's steadfast commitment to nonviolent action as its primary means of political engagement. How has the movement managed to sustain this often costly commitment for nearly seventy years? The answer lies in an analysis of five aspects of Catholic Worker life and thought: Biblical earnestness, personalism, solidarity with the poor through hospitality, living in community, and membership turnover.

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In the fall of 1983, I joined the St. Louis Catholic Worker community at Karen House and lived there in community for seven years.<sup>1</sup> In those days the community of Workers gathered together Wednesday nights in an apartment near the hospitality house (shelter for the homeless) that we ran. There was a meal and socializing, some prayer, and something called "tradition," where one member of the community would lead a discussion or make a short presentation on some aspect of Catholic Worker life and thought. There was also the weekly business to discuss: the guests and their various struggles, their status in the house, the maintenance needs of the old, inner-city convent that served as our hospitality house, and our shared economics. Since everything was done by consensus, and since this was a group of Catholic Workers, the three-hour meetings often went considerably past their time limit.

But the second weekly meeting I attended finished right on schedule at 9 P.M. so that the community could adjourn to the downtown bus station. The Greyhound Bus drivers were on strike, and they were maintaining a twenty-four-hour picket line in front of the station. This was still in the early years of the so-called Reagan revolution, in the days before deregulation gave Greyhound the green light to drive all of its competition out of the national market. A strike by drivers back then meant not just a temporary loss of riders to Greyhound but potentially lasting losses if riders switched permanently to competing bus lines. So the strike was a nonviolent tactic of considerably

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more import for the drivers union than it is in these post-regulation days where competition in interstate bus travel is more the exception than the rule.

When the Catholic Worker community's weekly meeting adjourned, the members gathered up thermoses of coffee and hot chocolate, a large sack of sandwiches, and some picket signs made up earlier that day. Unannounced, the Worker community went down to the bus station to stand vigil with the picketing drivers, pouring coffee and hot chocolate and passing out sandwiches to the cold and hungry strikers.

Although it was far from a commonplace event, this simple act of solidarity was still not a dramatic form of nonviolent action. All it involved was walking a picket line and serving some food and drink to the strikers. Aside from some interesting political discussions with the drivers, I remember it as a rather uneventful action. Nevertheless, it somehow made a deeper and much more lasting impression than any of the many nonviolent actions taken by this group and its members during my seven years with the St. Louis Catholic Worker community. Had I been on my own, I am quite sure that I would not have ventured to an otherwise deserted street corner in downtown St. Louis to stand with and serve food to the striking Greyhound drivers on a weeknight. But then, as a member of this Catholic Worker community, it seemed like a natural, even ordinary thing to do.

The naturalness of it can be made more specific. Walking the picket line seemed directly tied to the community business meeting that had adjourned moments before. Pouring coffee and standing vigil looked quite a lot like an extension of the community's prayer at the meeting. Serving sandwiches and hot chocolate passed quite nicely for the final course in the community's meal, even while it also complemented the hospitality work done at the Worker house during the day with the homeless, including the neighborhood soup line. And finally, the whole experience felt like a living embodiment of the "tradition" component of the community's meeting. It was something like putting flesh on the bone of Catholic Worker theory.

## NONVIOLENT ACTION AND THE CATHOLIC WORKER

The Worker movement's philosophical foundations are found in its annual statement, "The Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker Movement," which clearly enunciates a commitment to nonviolent action. In fact, the movement says it is called:

to fight against violence with the spiritual weapons of prayer, fasting and noncooperation with evil. Refusal to pay taxes for war, to register

for conscription, to comply with any unjust legislation; participation in nonviolent strikes and boycotts, protests or vigils; withdrawal of support for dominant systems, corporate funding or usurious practices are all excellent means to establish peace.<sup>2</sup>

Catholic Worker communities employ all of these nonviolent tactics, and many others. Most house newsletters regularly carry articles about that community's involvement in various nonviolent direct action campaigns regarding war, homelessness, capital punishment, labor issues, or, to a lesser extent, abortion.<sup>3</sup> The whole of Catholic Worker history reveals that the tactics of nonviolent action give both form and substance to the outward expression of the Workers' personalist politics.<sup>4</sup> For example, most Worker communities do little to no traditional lobbying of elected representatives, no matter the social issue or political problem involved. We are more likely to find a Catholic Worker carrying a sign at a demonstration or sitting-in at a congressional office than picking up the phone and calling his or her congressperson. This rejection of politics in traditional, institutionalized forms is a current that runs strong and deep through the Worker movement. The relatively well-known aversion of the movement's anarchistic co-founder, Dorothy Day, to voting in elections is something that many contemporary Workers also share, and it is another expression of the movement's alternative approach to political action.

Depending upon the community, the context, and the calendar, Catholic Worker nonviolent action takes many forms and even meanings. For some communities, political protest and nonviolent direct action are a significant part of the community's collective identity, as important in their own way as the work of providing hospitality for the hungry and the homeless. In a few Worker communities, resistance in the form of nonviolent action has supplanted hospitality as the primary charism, and nonviolent action comes to define the community's orientation to personalist politics more than do soup lines and shelters.

The Catholic Worker movement's commitment to nonviolent action includes the outwardly political sphere whenever and wherever the Worker movement intersects with the public commonweal. But it is also important to understand that this holds true in equal proportion within the movement's many houses of hospitality. Although not the focus here, this commitment to nonviolence in the houses is also worthy of note and study. Nonviolence is used with mixed results in the often crisis-ridden and occasionally contentious interactions between community members and resident guests, between volunteers and soup line guests, and among the guests themselves.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I will offer some answers to the following two closely related questions: What contributes to the Catholic Worker movement's commitment to nonviolent direct action? What makes it possible for these followers of Dorothy Day continually to embrace and endure the many demands and varied costs of nonviolence? Before moving on to analyze these factors in more detail, a caveat regarding generalizations about the Catholic Worker movement is in order. Like its members, the more than 100 particular communities and houses that make up the Catholic Worker movement are idiosyncratic. There are no party lines in the movement, and there is no individual or movement structure capable of enforcing a party line should some individual, group, or community decide to try and put one forward.

During much of the 1990s, for example, the Unity Kitchen Catholic Worker community in Syracuse, New York, has tried to define in a theologically conservative and narrow way what they call the principles of "Catholic Worker orthodoxy." Unity Kitchen claims that Worker communities that do not adhere to this orthodoxy should not be allowed to call themselves Catholic Workers.<sup>6</sup> The problem with this approach is it runs directly afoul of the genius of the radically decentralized Catholic Worker movement: the fact that nobody ever had to get permission from anybody else to open up a Catholic Worker house. By the same token, no one has the authority to close down someone else's house or to deny him or her the use of the Catholic Worker name. There simply is no structural basis for decision making of this sort, to say nothing of actual enforcement mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

The idiosyncratic nature of the houses and the intentional lack of a movement-wide structure put even the nuanced generalizations of social scientists and historians on some thin ice.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, while there is no party line in the movement, there are some general principles that are widely, if not universally, subscribed to. Moreover, there are some characteristic patterns to Catholic Worker life and thought that those who are familiar with the movement can readily recognize as valid. It is those general principles and characteristic patterns that I hope to engage in what follows. One basis for generalizing, therefore, is the degree to which the basic principles and patterns that I describe are recognizable and meaningful to those who are familiar with particular Worker communities.

Five discrete aspects of Catholic Worker life and thought contribute to and sustain the movement's commitment to nonviolent action: Biblical earnestness, personalism, solidarity with the poor through hospitality, living in community, and membership turnover. A discussion of each of these factors follows.

### *1. Biblical Earnestness*

Whatever else it is, the Catholic Worker movement is a lay, pacifist, and religious movement, whose members tend to take the religious dimensions of life extraordinarily seriously. For example, house newsletters frequently carry columns written by recent arrivals to the community. They may be likened to a religious coming-out column where new Workers openly discuss their reasons for joining the movement. A search for spiritual growth and meaning often figures prominently in their motivations. Moreover, many come to the Worker to live out the demands of the Christian gospels in what they hope will be less morally compromising ways. But many of these new Workers are also in the throes of having their idealized bubbles burst all around them as they confront the contradictions of community life and the realities of the soup line. The newsletter editors apparently recognize good material when they see it, for these social dynamics make interesting newsletter columns. The new arrivals frequently confess to arriving with a shockingly romanticized notion of life at a Worker house. For the reader, what is equally striking (and occasionally inspiring) is the religious meaning that these new Workers invariably mine from these deep discrepancies between their dashed expectations and the reality of life at a Worker shelter for the homeless.

At the center of Catholic Worker life are the scriptures, most especially the Christian gospels. The scriptures have always been studied, discussed, and prayed in the Catholic Worker movement to a degree that, at least until very recently, was far above the norm for Catholic lay people. Long before the reforms of Vatican II in the 1960s encouraged other lay Catholics to read and study the Bible on their own, Catholic Workers were doing so in hospitality houses all across the country. Although neither fundamentalist nor literalist in its approach to scripture, the search for religious meaning that characterizes many movement members revolves around trying to transfer gospel principles to daily life in a sustained and uncommonly direct manner. The importance of this point can scarcely be overestimated in understanding this distinctively religious social movement.

Quaker artist Fritz Eichenberg's wood engravings of the "Christ of the Breadlines," where Jesus is depicted as a lonely figure standing in a breadline, and his "The Lord's Supper," where those gathered around the table are the homeless and the hungry, are very popular and frequently reproduced in movement newsletters.<sup>9</sup> They symbolize the movement's effort to take the ethical demands of the Christian gospel seriously in ordinary, daily life: e.g., if Jesus said feed my neighbor, then that is what one must do. But it would be

a misreading of the Worker movement to equate this stance with Biblical literalism. It is not so much literalism as plain earnestness.

There are many other manifestations of the movement's earnest approach to the scriptures. They include the Biblical exegesis frequently published in house newsletters, and the popularity of Matthew 25, the story of the Last Judgment, where Christ concludes his lesson with the words, "Whatever you do for the least of these you do for me." The Mystical Body of Christ doctrine, rooted in Pauline theology, has also been a central notion in Catholic Worker theology and reinforces the gospel idea that all are linked together as sister and brother in Christ.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the ultimate Biblical foundation of Catholic Worker life is found in the nonviolent love ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, which the Worker movement has often and tellingly referred to as its "Manifesto," providing the scriptural roots to the movement's pacifism.<sup>11</sup>

The gospels' prescription to serve, protect, and act for justice on behalf of the disadvantaged is one of the more clear and uncontested injunctions in the Christian scriptures. It animates and serves as a primary motivator for Catholic Worker action, including a variety of forms of nonviolent action.

## *2. Personalist Politics*

The philosophy of personalism was first brought to the Worker by its co-founder, Peter Maurin.<sup>12</sup> Personalism was originally fashioned in France as a religious but nevertheless politically engaged alternative to both existentialism and Marxism. Maurin and Dorothy Day embraced the central tenets of personalism, and they and their movement eventually fashioned a version that is distinctively American and stamped with the Catholic Worker imprint. The end result is the fact that there is abroad in the Catholic Worker movement a remarkably defined sense that each person must become concretely involved and take personal responsibility to do three things: (1) to come to the direct aid and service of those in need; (2) to work to change the social and political conditions that are creating the problems in the first place; and (3) to resist openly and confront current conditions by fashioning viable alternatives. This is the heart of the Catholic Worker movement's version of personalist philosophy.

One of the hallmarks of personalist politics is its unabashed affirmation of the dignity of each and every human being. No person is expendable; indeed, no one is taken for granted. Personalism avoids putting a price tag on any human life, to say nothing of tagging one life as more valuable than another. The differential valuing of one human life over another is, of course, standard operating procedure not only in various forms of authoritarianism but in the negotiated compromises that define representative democracy. Yet the

distinctive nature of the personalist approach to politics taken by the Catholic Worker movement is even more striking on the level of human action.

So much of what makes up mainstream approaches to political action is wedded to particular notions of practicality and effectiveness. The value of individual human action on behalf of others is easily discounted in favor of building coalitions that can get the message out, get the job done, get the bill passed, or get the bacon delivered to the home district. Never mind that these coalitions may not run any deeper than the topsoil on a dust bowl farm. Never mind also that the required compromises include violations of fundamental principles all around, from the largest coalition partner to the smallest and least powerful. Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, the weak must compromise more than the strong. While the personalist approach of the Catholic Worker does not completely abandon the politics of compromise or the need for coalitions, there remains a decided bias toward individual action and the presumed morally superior character of that action, especially when it is taken on behalf of others. The Worker movement's statement of "Aims and Means" reflects this approach: "We move away from a self-centered individualism toward the good of the other. This is to be done by taking personal responsibility for changing conditions, rather than looking to the state or to other institutions to provide impersonal charity."<sup>13</sup>

The Worker movement's commitment to personalism serves as a conceptual springboard for engaging in nonviolent action. If we look closely enough inside Worker personalism, we find there a bias toward taking direct, personal action. Just as there is a *spiritual immediacy* in the Worker movement arising from its earnest approach to the gospels (e.g., the poor are Christ, and therefore I simply can not turn away from them), there is also a *political directness* arising from its personalist philosophy (e.g., I must take action to right the wrong, not wait and hope someone else will, including my congressperson or the state). Worker personalism and the directness it so values result in a pronounced tendency to favor extra-institutional forms of politics. We might, with equal accuracy, call it direct action politics, or even nonviolent action politics. In any case, it can be recognized by two defining characteristics: (1) it is direct and unmediated; and (2) it relies primarily upon Gene Sharp's grand triumvirate of nonviolent tactics: protest, noncooperation, and intervention.<sup>14</sup>

For these reasons, to cite but one among many possible examples, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign of the 1980s was not a political vehicle that caught the Catholic Worker fancy. There simply was no bandwagon effect in the Worker movement toward the Freeze campaign, as there was in so many other sectors of the liberal or even progressive U.S. left. Catholic Workers were just as upset about the Reagan administration's massive arms

buildup as anyone else, perhaps more so given their daily work with its victims, but the Worker's personalist philosophy led most of its members to reject the Freeze campaign as too reformist and too institutionalized to merit sustained political energy.

### *3. Solidarity with the Poor through Hospitality*

A third source of Catholic Worker nonviolent activism is the experience of daily living and working with the poor and homeless. By far the most significant aspect of that experience is the sense of solidarity with the poor that it encourages in the Workers. Providing hospitality is a central aspect of Catholic Worker life, and its influence on why and how the Worker movement engages the outward political sphere is profound. The centrality of hospitality and its effects on the Worker's emphasis on nonviolent action are widespread across the bulk of Worker communities, both in the present and in the past. Put another way, here the ice is probably thick enough for historians and social scientists to make less-nuanced generalizations.

House newsletters regularly carry accounts of the trials of various community members arrested for civil disobedience or for other forms of nonviolent direct action. Many include all or part of the formal statements that the members made in court justifying their actions. We find in these statements a recurring theme: workers repeatedly explain their nonviolent activism as directly related to their hospitality work. Workers write, sometimes eloquently, about acting on behalf of their homeless guests, about not being able to ignore social problems, political policies, and economic systems precisely because they live with and serve those who are hurt or victimized by those same systems and policies. In other words, nonviolent direct action becomes the political expression of the gospel injunction to love thy neighbor. These comments by Mary West of the Detroit house reflect this approach: "We really struggle in our hearts and in our own minds to make the connection between the work that we do at the soup kitchen and at the house, and the work that we do in jail. In some respects we are going to jail to protest the way that poor people are treated. All these resources go into armaments and so there is nothing, or next to nothing, going for poor people."<sup>15</sup>

Because Biblical earnestness and personalism lead to a very concrete and direct involvement in the works of mercy, the unmediated nature of those works leads in turn to doing politics in the direct, unmediated fashion of nonviolent action. Many Catholic Workers take to the streets as quickly and as easily as they take to serving the soup. Consider this explanation from Char Madigan of St. Joseph's house in Minneapolis as she talks about the



relationship between hospitality and a nonviolent action campaign directed at Honeywell for its weapons programs.

It's a systemic thing. And so a lot of my work is not just standing at Honeywell but talking in the churches. I only talk if they let me talk about St. Joe's [House of Hospitality] *and* the Honeywell project, and [make] the connection. But your question about why we keep doing it: perhaps we are using energy senselessly. We had hoped eight years ago that we would grow to be thousands and thousands resisting Honeywell, and we haven't. And yet many other peace movements have broken off from the Honeywell Project.

We really are mosquitoes on an elephant. It's how you spend your energy. Is this band-aid at St. Joe's a good way to spend your energy? Is nonviolent resistance at Honeywell?<sup>16</sup>

Here we see the close connection between hospitality and resistance that is so common in the Worker movement. This member will not speak in churches about the movement's hospitality work unless she can also speak about the nonviolent direct action campaign at Honeywell headquarters in the Twin Cities. They are so connected in her view as to be compromised if one is presented (or done) without the other. One project leads to and informs the other. Madigan sees the problems as systemic, meaning that the entire system must be engaged. She concludes, therefore, that the direct, unmediated way that she and the Worker movement respond to the problems of homelessness (soup lines and shelters) and massive military budgets (nonviolent action) are also closely related. She tags them both as a band-aid approach, and implicitly criticizes them as little more than "mosquitoes on an elephant." But she does not discount the ultimate meaning of personal hospitality or nonviolent direct action, primarily because they are personal and direct. Nor does this long-time member of the movement abandon it or its methods. More important for our purposes is the fact that the personal, direct, and unmediated nature of Worker hospitality leads to and informs a sustained, direct, and unmediated nonviolent engagement with the weapons industry in the form of the Honeywell project. The Catholic Worker does politics in the same extra-institutional manner as it does hospitality.

A popular conception of nonviolent action is that it has to do with "speaking truth to power." Although a phrase originally made popular in the United States by the American Friends Service Committee in the mid-1950s when it published an influential booklet by that name, it is also much used

within the Worker movement, especially in regard to explaining the movement's focus on nonviolent action.<sup>17</sup> There is a dual presumption in the phrase that may be profitably examined as it applies to Catholic Worker nonviolent action.

The phrase first presumes that the nonviolent actionist actually does know the truth, and second, that the person has somehow been empowered to speak it. While those kinds of presumptions have always made many people uncomfortable, in today's deconstructed and postmodern world that is even more the case. The questions are by now familiar: How am I to know a truth, and who am I to do this speaking of it anyway? Yet these sorts of hesitations are much less common within the Worker movement. A close analysis suggests that the reason has quite a lot to do with the solidarity Worker members experience while doing hospitality work.

The experience of living in a Catholic Worker hospitality house in solidarity with the poor softens the aversions many people have to presuming to know a "truth" and to speaking that truth to the world through nonviolent action. The first-hand experience Workers obtain regarding the effects of public policies on the poor shapes—and in at least some cases sharpens—their political analysis of those policies (discerning the truth). It also emboldens them to act on that analysis (speaking the truth) through public, dramatic nonviolent action, which is a form of political action that is decidedly not postmodern as it is often designed to paint stark contrasts and create crises of moral choice.

In short, the Catholic Worker house of hospitality is a source of political knowledge leading to nonviolent action. We might usefully see hospitality and the solidarity it engenders as the grounding of a Catholic Worker epistemology. Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian of the first half of the twentieth century, said that one should regularly read the Bible with the newspaper in the other hand. Catholic Workers extend Barth's insight by asking, if the newspaper illuminates the Bible, what will illuminate the newspaper? The history of Catholic Worker nonviolent activism suggests that part of the answer is a soup kitchen. The daily newspaper's accounts of public events and political policies take on new meanings given the radical consciousness formed by the soup line experience, leading to different kinds of nonviolent political engagement by Catholic Workers.

#### *4. Living in Community*

Living in community at a Catholic Worker house engenders nonviolent action in many ways, and this factor is also hard to overestimate even if it

is less easy to pin down. We can begin with the power of tradition. The traditions of a community make claims on human action, and members find that they want to enact, pass on, and honor the traditions of the community to which they belong. Beginning in 1939 with the ill-fated "Non-participation League," which was partly organized by the Worker to boycott World War II-related products and jobs, there is a very well-established tradition within the movement of engagement in nonviolent activism and resistance. Put plainly, nonviolent activism is part of the air members breathe in a Catholic Worker community. The St. Louis Worker community served the sandwiches and walked the picket line with the striking Greyhound drivers in 1983 partly because members knew of the long history of Catholic Worker support for union struggles and they wanted to live out that part of their tradition just as they were trying to live out other parts of it.

Another way to approach the relationship between community life and nonviolent action is to recognize that people gain various benefits from small-group membership, especially from their membership in intentional and intensive communities like the Catholic Worker. The benefits may be easily broken down in to two kinds: affirmations and challenges.

Relative to affirmations, life in community brings the individual strength and safety in numbers, including a sense of affinity in holding unpopular political positions or spiritual values. Members gain affirmation for their views coupled with refuge from their doubts, which is a rather powerful elixir. They also develop a personal identity that is rooted partly in their group membership, which is of course tied to the collective identity of the group.<sup>18</sup>

For relatively marginalized communities such as the Catholic Worker, these benefits and affirmations arising from community membership can be quite important. This is even more so in the realm of nonviolent direct action, which tends to have the effect of setting its participants apart from the mainstream.<sup>19</sup> Nonviolent action is for most citizens of the United States far enough apart from their own political experiences that it may easily serve to highlight differences between them and the nonviolent actionist. The common result is a form of social isolation that is borne largely by the practitioner of nonviolence. The proclivities of an independent rebel such as Ammon Hennacy notwithstanding, most people appreciate acting in the context of a community of nonviolent activism and resistance. Relatively few, including most Catholic Workers, are going to embark on lengthy public fasts or sustained pickets and campaigns completely apart from a community context. Nonviolent action is not only politically but also socially taxing, and membership in a Catholic Worker community reduces those many costs while adding various benefits and affirmations into the mix.

More practically, life in a Catholic Worker community may free the individual from all or part of the need to support himself or herself financially, opening the way for nonviolent actions that involve considerable planning, implementation, or even jail time.<sup>20</sup> This is true for two reasons peculiar to the Worker: the shared economics of many communities, and the ethic of voluntary poverty and simple living that marks the movement. Dorothy Day once explained the peculiar attraction jail seems to have for her and the Catholic Workers:

Certainly the first time I went to jail—when I was eighteen—I felt a great sense of desolation, a great identification with all the hopeless people around me. I didn't have the faith. I spent a couple of days weeping and I just went into a state of melancholy. I never feel unsure in prison anymore. I feel it's a good place to be. You know, a lot of the Catholic Workers go up in the world. And a lot of them go down in the world—to jail. I must say I have much more esteem for those who keep trying to get lower. . . . We must continue to fill up the jails. Breaking the law is the only way of really testing it. . . . There is an old saying, "You cut off the head of one tyrant and three others come to take their place." There's a constant influx of people in a movement of this kind. And when someone is taken off to jail, somebody else has to go ahead and assume responsibility and do things they never thought themselves capable of doing . . . to keep things going.<sup>21</sup>

The challenges that come with living in a Worker community also affect the doing of politics primarily through nonviolent direct action. Life in community means that the movement's members regularly participate in discussions about the meanings of nonviolent action and the wisdom of engaging in it relative to a particular issue. In Worker communities, these discussions occur informally, over a cup of coffee in the kitchen or a bottle of beer in the community quarters, and more formally, during community business meetings or in roundtable discussions open to the public. People with open minds and hearts can expect to be challenged in such discussions, and perhaps changed in one way or another. This social process was, after all, the purpose behind Peter Maurin's idea of "roundtable discussions for clarification of thought."

People with open minds and hearts can expect to be challenged not only by words but also by deeds, especially by the activities of those fellow community members whom they know and respect. One of the most often researched and widely established theses in social movement research is that

recruitment into social movements occurs primarily through pre-existing networks and along lines of social relationships.<sup>22</sup> In other words, friends influence and recruit their friends to social movement organizations and activities, just as business people recruit their business associates to join the organizations to which they belong. People are most influenced by those whom they already know and have a relationship with. Furthermore, there is a culture of engaging in nonviolent political action in Catholic Worker communities, and, like any culture, it is made manifest through the words, deeds, and values of its individual members. All of this influences members, and if it was characterized as a mix of loving challenges and simple peer pressure, we would not be very far from the truth.

This reflection from a Detroit Worker best illuminates both the preceding discussion and the reality of human relationships in a Worker community. Here we see that the affirmations and the challenges that come with living in community are bundled up together. "Our house has been real blessed inasmuch as it's always had people who have expected going to jail as both necessary and desirable. No one has ever been forced to do civil disobedience if they were in the house, and yet it's been kind of a common understanding that it was desirable and that there would be openness to people going to jail and taking time away from the house. So that's supported, and when people come into the house, they implicitly agree to shouldering the extra work if someone goes away."<sup>23</sup>

### *5. Membership Turnover*

The final contributor to the Worker's long-standing and absolutist commitment to nonviolent action is the fact that the formal membership of a Catholic Worker community turns over relatively frequently. Many Workers come to the movement when they are young and leave after five years or less. Others come somewhat later in life, but seldom stay much longer. It is the exception for a member to live in a Worker community for more than ten years. Many move on to raise families in what are considered "healthier" environs than a homeless shelter, and many also develop career goals that provide little room for community life and the requirements of hospitality houses. Some leave because their views and values have changed and they no longer embrace key aspects of the Catholic Worker idea. Others leave because they are burned out, tired of the mandates of hospitality or the costs of nonviolent action.

Community turnover is a fact of life at the Worker. In some ways this turnover no doubt inhibits and hinders nonviolent action because of its

disruption of the social processes and community dynamics discussed above. But in other ways it probably contributes to the Worker movement's sustained use of nonviolent action in the political arena for over sixty-five years. There are always fresh recruits arriving who are willing and able to bear the costs and to take up where others have left off.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, these five factors provide more than a congenial climate for Catholic Worker nonviolent action. They reinforce each other so that Catholic Workers primarily engage in political action in the same noninstitutionalized and unmediated way that they work with the hungry and homeless. In this way Catholic Worker communities large and small have developed an uncommonly integrated approach to doing politics and pursuing Christian faithfulness. By marrying spirituality to both direct human service and unmediated political action, the movement has prepared a fertile seedbed for an ongoing experiment in personalist politics and nonviolent action.

## NOTES

1. Karin Tanquist, Mark Scheu, Harry Murray, and Jay Kelly provided good advice and helpful comments on this paper, which I gratefully acknowledge.

2. "The Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker," *The Catholic Worker*, May 1999, 5.

3. Nancy Roberts provides a valuable treatment of the role that house newspapers play in the Catholic Worker movement, and a useful content analysis of the articles appearing in the New York paper, in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

4. For analysis of the Worker movement's peace witness, see Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 189–239; Patricia McNeal, *Harder than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth Century America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 1–104; Eileen Egan, "Dorothy Day: Pilgrim of Peace," in *A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker*, ed. Patrick G. Coy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 69–114; and Patrick G. Coy, "Conscription and the Catholic Conscience in World War II," in *American Catholic Pacifism: The Influence of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*, ed. Anne Klejment and Nancy Roberts (New York: Praeger, 1996), 47–63.

5. Many movement members find the practice of nonviolence within the hospitality house even more challenging and personally demanding than its use in the

public, political sphere. Still, the movement's commitment to nonviolence means that Worker houses have themselves been a daily, living laboratory of experiments in nonviolence for sixty-five years. Unfortunately the insights and lessons have seldom been identified and reflected upon, either by Workers or historians. This rich and important history is waiting to be written. For one attempt see Angie O'Gorman and Patrick G. Coy, "Houses of Hospitality: A Pilgrimage into Nonviolence," in *Revolution of the Heart*, ed. Patrick G. Coy, 239–71.

6. Unity Kitchen, *Christian Personalism: A Manifesto of Unity Kitchen Community of the Catholic Worker* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Unity Kitchen Community, 1995).

7. This held true even when Dorothy Day was alive and leading the movement, with only one or two exceptions over forty-plus years. See Piehl, *Breaking Bread*, 196–97; William D. Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 168–74; and William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 484–86. The lack of enforcement mechanisms in this decentralized, lay movement was striking in 1988. Some members of the New York Worker community were upset about the fact that the Milwaukee Worker community was allowing women, laymen, and non-Catholics to preside at the weekly "liturgies." After an exchange of letters failed to bring the results desired by some in the New York Worker, a few publicly prominent "fellow travellers" of the Catholic Worker, most notably Eileen Egan and Gordon Zahn, became involved. The problem, however, was not just with the liturgies, but the fact that there were no institutionalized structures or mechanisms for Egan and Zahn to use to pressure the Milwaukee house. Zahn eventually wrote an article publicly exposing and criticizing the Milwaukee Workers in the lay Catholic periodical *Commonweal*, whose managing editor was a former Catholic Worker. See Gordon Zahn, "Change from Within," *Commonweal*, September 1988, 461.

8. There has been only one serious comparative study of individual houses published to date, Harry Murray's useful and insightful participant-observation research on three houses that focuses on their varying approaches to hospitality. See Harry Murray, *Do Not Neglect Hospitality: The Catholic Worker and the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), especially chapters 3–6.

9. Master wood engraver Fritz Eichenberg graced the pages of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper with his artwork on a regular basis for decades. Orbis Books has published Eichenberg's Catholic Worker-related artwork in a beautiful collection. See Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Fritz Eichenberg: Works of Mercy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).

10. For the role the Mystical Body of Christ doctrine played in the spirituality of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, see Patrick G. Coy, "The Incarnational Spirituality of Dorothy Day," *Spirituality Today* 39 (Summer 1987): 114–25.

11. See for example the editorials, "Our Country Passes from Undeclared to Declared War," *Catholic Worker*, January 1942, 1, and "Fools for Christ," *Catholic Worker*, October 1939, 4. It is also instructive to note that Ammon Hennacy, a central figure in the movement in the middle part of the twentieth century, often referred to himself simply as a "Sermon on the Mount Christian." For a discussion of what this self-definition meant in terms of his commitment to nonviolent action and his influence on the Worker movement, see Patrick G. Coy, "The One-Person Revolution of Ammon Hennacy," in *Revolution of the Heart*, ed. Patrick G. Coy, 134–73.

12. The European personalist movement that so heavily influenced Maurin had its heyday in France in the 1930s, and was closely associated with Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit*. See Emmanuel Mounier, *A Personalist Manifesto* (London: Longmans, 1938). For a good secondary account of Mounier's influence in the broader personalist movement and on the Catholic left in particular, see John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

13. "The Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker," *The Catholic Worker*, May 1999, 5.

14. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).

15. Quoted in Rosalie Riegler Troester, ed., *Voices from the Catholic Worker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 195.

16. Quoted in Troester, ed., *Voices*, 194–95.

17. American Friends Service Committee, "Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence" (Philadelphia: AFSC, 1955).

18. Collective identity is best defined as "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity." See Verta Taylor and Nancy E. Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 104–30. For an analysis of collective identity issues in religious peace movement organizations other than the Catholic Worker movement, see Patrick G. Coy and Lynne Woehrle, "Constructing Identity and Oppositional Knowledge: The Framing Practices of Peace Movement Organizations during the Persian Gulf War," *Sociological Spectrum* 16, no. 3 (1996), 287–327.

19. For an insightful analysis of this dynamic as it pertained to the movement against nuclear power, see Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991). Also useful for its personal and experientially based reflection on the tensions between community life and nonviolent resistance is Phillip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister, *The Times Discipline: The Beatitudes and Nuclear Resistance* (Baltimore: Fortkamp, 1989).



20. Doug McAdam has analyzed how this same variable of economic independence influenced participation patterns in the potentially risky Freedom Summer campaign in Mississippi; see Doug McAdam, "Recruitment to High Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology* 92 (July 1986): 64–90. Aldon Morris has shown how, at an earlier stage of the civil rights movement, African American pastors were able to lead local civil rights campaigns since they were among the few upper-status African Americans who were relatively shielded from the economic influence of the white majority because they were wholly supported by African American congregations. See Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

21. Quoted in Paul Elie, "The Patron of Paradox," *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, November 8, 1998, 14.

22. Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 1988); Sydney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 124.

23. Mary West, as quoted in Troester, ed., *Voices*, 195.