

Blowing the Dynamite of the Church

There is no shortage of proposals among Catholics aimed at “taking back America for God”, or “Christianizing our nation”, returning to family values, or conservative culture. This, judging by the bookshelves and the pulpits and the blogs, is the issue of the day. But here, as in other things, Peter is different, and this difference has to do with the centrality of the *Church* in his vision. He wrote that, “If the Catholic Church is not today the dominant social dynamic force, it is because Catholic scholars have failed to blow the dynamite of the Church. Catholic scholars have taken the dynamite of the Church, have wrapped it up in nice phraseology, placed it in an hermetic container and sat on the lid. It is about time to blow the lid off so the Catholic Church may again become the dominant social dynamic force.” For Peter what’s missing from the modern world is not traditional values, a sense of the transcendent, religion, or even “God”, but the social reality of the *Church* as a distinctive people. His approach to Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes the Visible Body of Christ, and this makes his approach to it unique. This chapter will say a bit about why this is so.

In the first place, you will simply, absolutely, almost 100%, misunderstand what Peter Maurin was about if you miss that for him, the Church is simply meant to be the heart of life. It’s God’s Intervention into a world gone mad, pulling them out of it, transforming it, precisely by being a place in which people could live differently now. And the Church, the Catholic Worker assumes, for all its warts, is filled with divine power. The Catholic Worker is entirely dependent upon the grace and truth of the Catholic Faith, and, though it takes the name of a “movement”, it is really nothing more than the Church at work. So it’s impossible to understand Peter or Dorothy without seeing that they were simply Catholics, who bought the Church’s teaching, hook, line and sinker, and spent hours each day on their knees.

But rather than picturing the Church as an institution, or as a collection of doctrines, or as a place individuals go to pray, without denying any of these aspects, for the Catholic Worker the Church is, as the Scriptures say, “a peculiar people.” It is a people with its own customs, practices, language, ethics, and even material culture – it’s God’s new way of life. Scripture calls it a divine “city”, or even a “tribe.” In other words, it’s a “kingdom” which “the gates of hell will not prevail against.” So in this way you might say that the Church doesn’t so much *have* a politics (conservative or liberal or whatever), as it *is* a politics – it’s an alternative way of being human. And the main thing the city of God does – what *makes* it the city of God – is to worship the true God truly, and from this its whole way of life flows, which makes it different from other tribes of the world. We are strangers and pilgrims in a land that is not our own. So the Church is both *peculiar* – set apart and distinct – and it is a *people* – not just a collection of religious individuals, but a community defined by its peculiar shared life *together*.

This leads to a related point. As a peculiar people the Church’s task is to be *faithful to* its divine way of life, not to worry about being *effective* in changing the world. Or rather, as we’ll see below, the way that it is effective in changing the world is by being faithful. This is exactly what Peter had in mind about blowing the dynamite of the Church. So it’s very important to see that, despite popular portrayal, Dorothy and Peter were not activists or reformers. They were simply Catholics, who saw that being faithful to the Church’s long tradition committed them to certain forms of life, and meant refusing others. We said above that the Worker is known for caring about everything, from the poor to conscientious objection to voluntary poverty to dining

by candlelight to working on the land. And it cares about those things because the *Church* cares about those things, as their newspaper continuously documented from official sources.

This emphasis on faithfulness, rather than effectiveness, takes a lot of pressure off. Today, many share with the Worker similar critiques of society. Many, environmentalists, for instance, or social justice warriors, or pro-life activists, would see the importance of its practices. But many also get discouraged exactly at this point: what's the use? It's one, or at most a few, against the whole world. Isn't it hopeless? Many burn themselves out in a thousand civil causes, rightly seeing many problems, but seeing only political or secular solutions. Setting for themselves the task of reforming the world, many quickly end in despair at the hopelessly large task. And it *is* hopeless, by simply natural calculations. But the Catholic Worker is simply part of the Divine Project called Church, and is happy to go on with apparent failure and futility, as did Christ, knowing that it is just playing one part in an orchestra it is not conducting.

Another way of saying this is that the Catholic Worker's identity is Church-centered, not nation-centered. You might think this should be obvious. But in America, ironically, Christian identity has often been more closely tied to America than to the Church. Tons of Catholics want to talk about how *America* has lost its Christian identity, and want to Christianize American culture, or what have you. Whether the vision is some throwback to the Middle Ages, a Jeffersonian libertarian frontier dream, or simply nostalgia for the 1950s, the point is the same. It is assumed that the primary "we" is not the Church, but the nation.

This is because in many ways America itself has been a *religious* movement. We have all learned in history class how many of its settlers thought of it as a new Promised Land for a new Chosen People. America was the New Israel, which had the "manifest destiny" of bringing in an unprecedented reign of peace and prosperity. This might sound silly to us, yet it is striking how often, even today, both liberal and conservative, Catholics and Protestants, act like the nation, rather than the Church, is the Kingdom of God. We talk as if America is what unites us, not the Gospel. What is undeniable, historically speaking, as Peter liked to point out, is that at the time of the Protestant Reformation the concern for the purity of the *Church* was slowly transferred to a concern for the purity of the *state*. In that case the intense feelings of loyalty that many Catholics have towards our *nation* are not surprising, because the nation has been invested with the importance Christianity once carried. Our national feelings are *religious* feelings. So the Catholic Worker has sometimes been felt to be almost a little treasonous, precisely because she sits loose to this national identity, and tight to the identity of the Church.

This means that the Catholic Worker's *ethics* are Church-centered, rather than nation-centered. When we're trying to figure out how Christians should live, the first question is not, "What do we have to do to make America great (or more traditional, or more inclusive, or most just), the first question is, "What does being the Church mean for me?" And the Worker's answer is just what you find the Church has always said: the Mass, prayers in common, voluntary poverty, hospitality, forgiveness, non-violence, and the rest. In other words, each one of us is called to embody all the highest ideals of the Gospel, one way or another, in all our lives. Christians are idealists, and the Catholic Worker challenges our middle-class embarrassment about that. We are all, not just priests and monks, Dorothy often said, called to be saints. Like other reform movements in the Church, the Catholic Worker is a call for a return to actually

trying to live out the Sermon on the Mount. In this way, it contributed to the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the *universal* call to holiness.

This is the dynamite that Peter was talking about. But what has happened, in various ways, is that Christians have not asked what the Gospel requires, but, along with those about America, questions of a lower order: "How can I be financially secure?," "What's best for the economy?," "What's the best way to succeed?," "How can I be comfortable and avoid suffering?," "What should I do to be safe?," "How can we manage the future?" It's not just that these questions are merely allowed, or tolerated in the Church today – as a concession to our weakness. That would not be a Christian position either, but it would be understandable. Rather, with rare exceptions, implicitly and even explicitly, these are the only questions the Church encourages anyone to ask at all. And these are the questions, of course, that become natural when you're trying to make the best of the status quo. They became natural in the Church because for the longest time it was in *charge* of the status quo – the Church was an imperial power. They are the questions of those in control. And the answers are predictable enough: "Protect your country and your interests," "Be as rich as you can," "Get as much as you can, for as little as you can," "Demand your rights," "Never stop working," "Take care of your own," "Build up your military."

The problem of course is that these are not Christian answers. For those you have to turn to the teachings of the Church: "Turn the other cheek," "Blessed are the poor," "No only 'do not kill', but do not even be angry," "Give to all who beg," "Sell what you have and give to the poor," "Blessed are the peacemakers," "Blessed are those who mourn," "Do not worry about tomorrow," "Receive the homeless into your home." In other words: "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." But this – and this is absolutely essential – this logic of the cross is also the logic of resurrection: true life only comes out of faithfulness, and usually apparent foolishness and failure. Even in our daily lives it is only these sort of sacrificial practices that bring life and joy. But, just to the extent that they are consistently put into practice, they also bring a complete revolution of life and priorities. And they bring it to the homes and communities and cities and lands that practice them. This logic of the cross and resurrection is the dynamite at the center of the Church.

In the first ages this dynamite brought much of the Roman world into the Christian fold. But then the Church got distracted ruling the world rather than converting and serving it. And, obviously, if you want to rule on the world's terms, those Christian answers are going to seem silly. So theologians spent immense amounts of time and energy putting down in big books with big words how it was, more or less, that Christ's ethics were not actually the Church's ethics. They were only meant for some Christians, but not for families or businessmen or soldiers. Or maybe they were meant for all, but only in private parts of their lives, not in public things like politics or economics. For those things, they said, you had to use reason, rather than faith, and consult human nature, rather than the Gospel. And so they created these fine distinctions that eventually came to be accepted without challenge, taught in the seminaries, preached from pulpit and confessional, and made their way into the common-sense of your average Catholic. This in spite of the fact that they have no foundation either in Scripture or in the official teaching of the Catholic Church.

Part of Maurin's genius was to be on the front lines of a movement in the Church – a return to the Scriptures and the Fathers – that refused these distinctions: there are not two ways that humans should act, one in private and one in public; one to the ordained and another to the laity. Christ gave one set of principles, and said to go and teach all nations to follow these. And this means that, at the end of the day, Maurin's vision for bringing the social order to Christ is the same as that of the early Christians: not a tweak of the Roman bureaucracy here and there, not an attempt to make the Empire a little more just, but a thoroughgoing *conversion* of every individual. Real social change can only happen, as Dorothy said, by a revolution of the heart, and that means each heart. The Worker has no other vision for society than simply for Catholics to be Catholics, to invite others to be Catholics, and so to create a Catholic social order. Its vision for society is for it to be the Church.

So for Peter Christianity is not primarily an intellectual, much less sentimental, affair, but a practical one. This makes him unique too. Catholics in different quarters sometimes give the impression that the problem with our world is that people have ceased to *think* a particular way, or have lost a *sense* of the transcendent. In other words, they have somehow gotten their philosophy wrong. So, if we could just correct that philosophy, or convince people to *think* differently, or (worse) legislate them into outward conformity, all would be well. But for Maurin *the* problem with the modern world is that Catholics have tried everything they could to be Catholics without *acting* like Catholics. And here he was just repeating what the Popes had long said: the problem with the world today is simply that the Church has ceased to be the Church. If it would do that again, even in little ways, it would blow the whole world out the water.

Peter's crazy idea was that this little way of the Church had the most radical social and political significance. It is sometimes suggested that this view of the Church as faithful rather than effective is too insular, that it's an abandonment of the world, encouraging Christians to escape and guard their purity. But this is a puzzling worry, because over and over again we find among Catholic Workers, not withdrawal from society, but something deeply relevant and engaged. Not just with the poor, but with all sorts of non-Christians: agrarian movements; issues of war and peace (including the establishment of camps for Conscientious Objectors in cooperation with the US Government); harboring political refugees; advocacy for the rights of laborers (Dorothy marched with Caesar Chavez); and the rights of migrants; protests against both abortion and the death penalty, and about as many other "secular" causes as you can imagine. Their communities tend to be filled with minorities as well as non-Catholics, and often become the center of their neighborhoods. It is anything but a retreat.

And so, ironically, if you're really concerned about America, the best way to remake American culture, restore traditional values, and all that, is to stop worrying about America. That does a disservice to both America and the Church. Trying to make a society good, much less Christian, by purely human means, is like trying to quarry granite with razor blades. Call all the meetings you like, raise grassroots movements, make laws, pass resolutions – all understandable attempts at making a degenerate culture a little better. Great ideas. The only problem is that they will not work, for they are not the Divine Idea. For, just like people, there are only two ways societies can go and only two ways they can get there. They can be raised to divine life by being part of the one Divine Society, or they can slide into barbarism and chaos outside of it. Man

cannot live on the human level, he must live either above or below it. And we've been told what living above it looks like.

Peter liked to quote Chesterton that "the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it's been found difficult and left untried." And so practical people, Peter said, have tried everything except Christianity. But trying things over and over again that don't work is not practical. The dynamite of the Church, the radical message of Jesus, losing your life to save it, the call to give up all and follow him, has been accommodated to ruling the world on the world's terms. It has then fit the Gospel in around the edges. It has called the former nature, and the latter, super-nature, and insisted that nature was enough. And it has produced the most complex theology, educational arrangements, and finally a whole Church culture, justifying this arrangement. It has "wrapped the Church's dynamite up in nice phraseology, placed it in a hermetic container and sat on the lid." It is Peter's great gift to show us how to "blow the lid off so the Catholic Church may again become the dominant social dynamic force."