

## The Poor

The Little Way is central to what the Catholic Worker is perhaps best known for, the works of mercy, and in particular hospitality to the poor in the form of food and shelter. That these small actions have cosmic significance is of course underwritten by the famous saying of Jesus himself that whenever you did these things, “you did it to me.” Receiving the poor, then, throughout Christian history has had almost a sacramental significance to it because, just like in the Eucharist, when you touch the poor you are touching Jesus, and so God himself. Peter Maurin did not want to start houses of hospitality because the Church could help fill various “needs” in society, but because in the poor you had the chance to meet “the ambassadors of God.”

And in fact “the duty of hospitality” as Peter called it, illustrates well how flimsy are the basic presumptions of our World, and how easily the Little way can overturn them. Many times throughout its history the Worker has not only been praised, but also gently (and sometimes not so gently) chided for its custom of unconditional hospitality. For it has been a hallmark of the Worker to refuse the distinction, so basic to capitalist society, between the worthy and the unworthy poor. Everyone was to be received, as the Gospel said, simply because they were human beings, and regardless of their intentions to reform their ways or make a better life for themselves.

Already you can hear the objections from the World. For our society demands, as we have noted, in some instances, rigorous discipline: industry and self-motivation are key virtues if your goal is amass comfort and wealth, which, we are told, is what everyone’s goal should be. And so, at the base of the history, and not just the theory, of a market society is the demand that the poor be threatened with starvation and learn to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This is one of the fundamental disciplines of our society. And so, for instance, repealing the “poor laws” in England, which gave assistance to everyone who needed it, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a key part of speeding industrial society on its way. “Tough love” is basic to the American attitude.

But such free charity as the Worker provides is often unpopular not only in capitalist but also socialist quarters. For it has been taken to follow from Marx’s dictums that such free handouts merely prolong the unjust society that makes them necessary. Every act of compassion would be better turned to reforming the state apparatus and doing away with the need for charity all together. For Marxism, charity and capitalism are bedfellows.

Everyone seems to think, in one way or another, that houses of hospitality, and charity in general, are perhaps necessary but still lamentable bandaids. They don’t go to the core of the unjust or broken system that makes them necessary – they only treat the symptoms but not the disease. Peter Maurin, however, disagrees, and this is yet another place where his thought is entirely off the current political grid. For he is not a reformer: he does not think that rearranging things within industrial society is ever going to solve the poverty problem. But neither is he a revolutionary: he does not advocate the wholesale overthrow, but either violent or non-violent means, of the status quo and its replacement with another form of government. Nor does he think all government is bad. Rather, for Peter the works of mercy are themselves a key part, given in the Gospel, of solving the problem of poverty at its deepest level.

And that deepest level is the human heart that has to be transformed. The deepest level is not the “structures” of society; *they* are the band aid, not the works of mercy. For there will never

be a just society if there are not just *people*, and if there *are* just people, then even if we have the worst structures imaginable, people will refuse to be unjust to each other. The problem is not technical or sociological organization, the problem is sin. So, as Dorothy said, the most pressing question today is how to bring about a revolution of the heart. Once again, Dorothy and Peter are not social critics or political activists, taking up a stand somewhere on the current spectrum, but Catholics. And for Catholics, one of the time-honored ways of letting God remake your heart is by the practice of the works of mercy. And this is exactly what hospitality houses are good for.

Our society generates so many destitute people with nowhere to go but the street or the municipal shelter in part because we insist on government, institutions, and organizations taking care of the poor for us. Most of us don't get involved with the poor, and the poor are often too proud to ask. Again, we all prefer the impersonal, the mechanical. The opposite of this is what Peter advocated as the Christian alternative: personal responsibility at a personal sacrifice. As he put it: "the first Christians housed and fed the poor at a personal sacrifice, and the pagans said 'see how they love each other.' Today, Christians want the poor housed and fed at the taxpayers' expense, and so the pagans say, 'see how they pass the buck.'" That's not a "systematic problem", that's a problem with the habits of our heart. We have become the isolated, lone individuals we practice to be every day. It's summed up nicely by the well-intentioned woman, commenting on the city of Minneapolis' failure to provide adequately for one of our local large homeless tent cities: "We are happy to help, but we shouldn't have to. It's not our problem".

Another way of putting this is that homelessness is Catholics' fault. There are 300 people outside on the streets of the city of St. Paul on any given night these days (and that's in the winter, with all the shelters full). I hear all the time about the herculean measures that are being taken by city and state officials to find these folks a place to go. But it need not be so hard. There are about 900,000 Catholics in the Archdiocese, and a lot more than 300 of them live in St Paul. If even a sliver of us took Jesus' words seriously – that in housing our brethren we house *him*, and (it might be worth mentioning) in some way our salvation depends on it – and took in, not many, but *one* homeless person, we would do away with homelessness in St Paul in one day. The reason we don't do so is not because we can't, but because we won't. And this is a problem of the heart; it's a moral and religious issue. Because of *this* problem, we need a big band aid – all of the municipal shelters and state and city intervention. Homelessness is not a technical or political fault, it's due to our own disobedience. If we simply did what the Son of God explicitly told us, there would be no "problems." It's Catholics' fault. We need a revolution of the heart.

So the little way, again, is not the sour grapes of those of us who have to make due in the world while others in power make a new one. It *is* the way to make a new one. Yet this can give the impression that the point of the daily practice of the works of mercy is to "meet needs" or to "do our part" to "end" poverty, suffering, or whatever. Yet this is not the way the Catholic Worker approaches the matter. It's much more personal than that. If you read some histories of the beginning of hospitality houses, it is almost always a matter of people simply responding to the poor they happen to find around them, when they walked home from work, or went to church, or pulled off the interstate. *This* person whom you happen upon on Thursday afternoon, or Sunday night, and start talking to, becomes your guest, not because you have planned a social program or an outreach center and are "ready for him", but because you are a Christian, and you know that this man or woman is the Son of God himself.

Engagement with the poor is not social work, but part of the Divine Liturgy come into real life. This is what Peter called, in contrast to the sterile handouts of institutions, *personalism*. It is rooted in the doctrine that every person bears the image of the Trinity on his body and soul, and so every one should be treated, not just with dignity and respect, but as an utterly unique enfleshment expressing the Creator. Each person is an *encounter*, as Pope Francis says, with Something utterly beyond ourselves, and the poor in particular, are to be received, as St Benedict said, not *as if* they were Christ, but *as Christ*; because they really are.

So what we sometimes call “serving” the poor is not a matter of mechanics, but *devotion*. We might better speak of *reverencing* them. “Serving” today is too close to “providing services”, and we do not service the poor; we service our cars. One of my old Catholic Worker friends, now a priest, used to be asked by the poor if we were “feeding” today. “You ain’t cattle”, he’d say in his Georgia accent, “y’all come in and make yourselves at home.” This is how to reverence the poor: knowing they are Christ, and at the same time treating them as *people*.

Devotion is one reason that *sharing life* with the poor has always been somewhere near the heart of the Christian tradition. Jesus says both “I am the poor”, and “you will always have the poor *with you*.” Contact with the poor is not something, it seems, that *some* Christians do, super-disciples, saints, or those who “have a heart” for them. Encounter with them is not optional, but at the very heart of the Gospel. And this is why the Catholic Worker, and Peter in particular, was adamant that hospitality houses not *distract* from the duty of every Christian, to respond to the poor around us. He reminded us of the early Church’s practice of each household keeping a Christ-room: one room set aside to receive Christ in the poor. In a sermon on this topic, St. John Chrysostom in the fourth century warned his congregation about the lure of the (then) newly established municipal shelter for the homeless. God has sent the poor here for *you*, he cried. Don’t give up your Christ-room! In Peter’s vision, then, hospitality houses are not replacements for having the poor in our homes, they simply are that.

Once we get it through our heads that God has not asked us to fix society’s problems, but rather simply to be *with us* in the poor, our whole view of the thing shifts. First of all, it takes a whole lot of pressure off. You don’t have to be a social worker, or an economist, be rich, or have any kind strategy or facilities. The focus shifts, you might say, from a posture of *working for* the poor to a posture of *being with* them. *Working for* the poor is a major (and lucrative) industry, and it’s what just about everybody these days has in mind when you mention the poor. You know the script: find the “needs” and find a way to fill them. *Working for* organizes and engineers, it develops goals, and it *fits the poor* to those goals. *Being with* the poor though, simply takes a person as a person, without having to figure out what her problems are, much less fix them. It’s the possibility of friendship, and presumes that the opportunity to work for, when it arises, arises out of a previous commitment to be with. And it grounds this posture of being with on the Gospel itself. Because there is nothing more basic to Christianity than God’s desire to *be with us*. In being with the poor we are doing what the Son of God did at Christmas: the Word become flesh and dwelled *with us*. He did this so he could eternally be *with us*. And perhaps even more importantly, being with the poor is yet one more way that this miracle reaches out and touches *us*.

At the same time, friendship with the poor is not to be sentimentalized. It is not about having a heart to heart, being affectionate, or sharing deep thoughts. It is not about becoming

anyone's therapist. It is simply the affirmation that our humanity means that we belong together. Or, as a homeless man once said to me as he gave some money to a panhandler out the car window, "you get a chance to look out for somebody you do it, every chance you get." Friendship with the poor is about looking out for our neighbor, and neighbor means "the one we are neigh-to": the one we are *near*. We are not near to everybody, and everybody is not our responsibility, because if we make everybody our responsibility, then no one will be our responsibility. Friendship with the poor is about "looking out for" whomever we physically come near to, wherever that is. In other words, once we get it through our heads that part of the Christian deal is that we will always have the poor with us, and that our house and food is as much theirs as ours, and set up our Christ-room, and we've decided to treat them as normal human beings, and as Christ, *this just is* what friendship with the poor looks like. Sometimes there's a lot to talk about, an easy rapport, and laughter, sometimes there's not.

Still, after you get all this straight, you might realize that the exchange is uneven. There will always be benefactors and guests, in some sense. There *is* dependency. There is material *inequality*. And this is part of the point. In the Gospel a new world can come into being where rich and poor need not melt into identical cogs in the engine of society. We only have to do that if the goal is eventually to become independent of one another, if we are looking for a time when we won't have the poor with us. But at the same time the exchange is often uneven in another way: it is the constant experience of the Catholic Worker that the poor often give to the rich much more in non-material gifts than they ever receive. We come to live with the poor and we end up being transformed by them. The poor are not there to be helped by us; they will eventually find anything that they need, one way or another. We are not their saviors. The poor are there for *us*, they have been sent to remake us. We are the desperate and needy, we are shackled to our need to control things, addicted to our comforts, high on our own autonomy, drunk on our judgment of others, and literally all drugged up in our own isolation. The poor are sent here for our salvation, because they are Jesus Christ.