

The Maurin Mandate

When Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day¹ founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933, Peter's vision was for hospitality houses, cooperative farming, and dinnertime discussions for the clarification of thought on social and religious matters. These did have the "objectives" of giving the poor food and shelter, sustaining themselves on the land, and teaching about the faith. But just as important as these, they created a new sort of community "in which it is easier to be good." People joined the movement in droves, because they found there a compelling way of life with other people, different from the rest of the world. There were likeminded, and sometimes not so likeminded, people to befriend, meals to serve, prayers to say, Mass to go to, dishes to do, gardens to plant, alms to give, rides to give, doctor visits to accompany, errands to run, and hilarious stories to tell and retell. It gave you a purpose, a community, an identity, in a world increasingly without any of that. And, perhaps most compellingly, as one of my Catholic Worker friends aptly put it, it's just so much damn fun. This inner life of the community was part of Peter's genius, often missed. It was simple, and anyone could do it. The Catholic Worker didn't have to be a huge project, and you didn't need anyone's approval. You could start it right now. It didn't have to be wild and crazy. It could simply be a small group of friends, or even a couple families with children, with a place to pray, a pot of coffee, and some chicken soup. This was the way that, as Maurin said, we could start right now to "build a new society within the shell of the old."

This, Maurin knew, was not the first time that Christians had done something like this. In the third and fourth centuries, many had found that they could not live out the Gospel from within the normal confines of life in Roman cities. They saw that many other Christians, though they may have gone to church, no longer looked any different from the pagans. Small alternative communities began to spring up, largely out in the desert. We usually call these the first "monastics" or "monks", but I raise them precisely because they were anything but overly pious, sentimental, or what we think of today as "monkish." They were Catholic lay people who, like St. Benedict, found normal life in the Empire degrading and lonely, and normal parish life not offering them anything better. So the lay people took the initiative, and founded simple communities based on the prayers of the Church, fellowship, and hospitality. Far from a retreat from the world, these communities became so attractive to rich and poor alike that they became the centers of what would become European civilization. But they began as simple groups of Catholic friendship. Still, I'm not sure I'd call Peter's vision a "new monasticism", because that might imply it's not for everyone. But ordinary everyones like you and I are exactly who it's for: a lay movement of families and singles responding in faith to the challenges of our own age. And Maurin is more relevant today than he's ever been, because we live in times just as, if not more, inhospitable to the Faith as the Roman Empire. Then as now, the Church sojourns in a culture, as Peter might say, where it is difficult to be good.

And so we are faced with what Catholic Worker Larry Chapp has dubbed the Maurin Mandate. We simply must find new ways of embedding the Gospel in, or rather, of allowing the Gospel to *be*, the social fabric, of real local communities, or face the real possibility of not being

¹ Throughout the next I often refer to these two simply as Peter and Dorothy.

able to practice the Faith at all. This is why it's a mandate and not an option. Below I want to lay out as plainly as I can why I think this is the case.

I should say from the outset that I'm not saying that everyone has to start a Catholic Worker house. There is no one way that this is going to look. I have no cookie cutter program, no absolute prescriptions. Indeed, that is part of the point: we are in uncharted waters, and Christianity is an *adventure*. We get to creatively live out the light of the Gospel in dark times. We'll have to risk a lot; we may fail: so did Christ, or so did it appear. But if Christ is for us, who can be against us? None of this is a counsel of despair, or of resignation. It's living with the wildest hope, the fool's hope that can only come from the security of Christ's resurrection. To put everything on the line for the Gospel, isn't that what living is about? What else do we have to do before we die?

So, there are no prefab models, but still I call it the Maurin Mandate. This is because, I'll suggest, for all the variation that is possible, I think that, after trial and error, faithful Catholics today will find *something like* Peter's program to be the path they end up walking. In other words, the Gospel being what it is, and our society being what it is, intentional Catholic living will tend to take similar forms. Most will involve central aspects of Peter's program: liturgy, lay leadership, small community, local living, hospitality, simplicity, friendship with the poor, and a critical, Catholic analysis of our culture.

So it's the *Maurin Mandate* because in the last hundred years no one else in the American Church has articulated this ancient vision as comprehensively as Peter, much less realized it in practice. But it's the *Maurin Mandate* because, Peter's claim is, if you are serious about your faith you should be serious about this. Our souls, and even our salvation, are at stake.

Now I've got to tell you why.