

The Catholic Radical

—A Catholic Newspaper for a Divided Age—

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YA'LL GOT ANY ROOM TO SPARE?

By Tyler Hambley

“Politics is a practice of the imagination. Sometimes politics is the ‘art of the possible,’ but it is always an art, and engages the imagination just as art does. We are often fooled by the seeming solidity of the materials of politics, its armies and offices, into forgetting that these materials are marshalled by acts of the imagination”—so says William T. Cavanaugh in his book *Theopolitical Imagination*. This refreshing statement challenges our usual tendency to view “politics” as something large, unwieldy and *out there*—something beyond our daily, personal reach. But what Cavanaugh wants to bring us back to, and what this issue humbly hopes to highlight, is the simple, child-like way our imaginations can and do deploy our bodies (that is, our actions) in powerful ways. The good news here is that when we consider what might be politically “possible”—or even

what might count as “political”—we are limited by nothing more than our own imaginations. There’s



always room to *make room* for the Christ Child among us even when we think it’s not “possible.”

Unfortunately, our imaginations—and therefore our bodies—are all too often held captive by practices we haven’t the slightest urge or inkling to challenge. And so when our Lord *does* come to us

in the face of the poor, the sick, or the unborn, rather than responding imaginatively through the stories, liturgies, and communal practices of the Church through the ages, we instead respond narrowly through the practices of consumption and convenience that bloat our lives. But even if our bodies *haven’t* blithely overindulged like the gentlemen in this Fritz Eichenberg woodcut (mine certainly has), our overstuffed schedules and screen-warped minds practically force us into inhospitable dispositions.

Is it any wonder, then, that we’re so often tempted to process our neighbor solely through the bloated abstractions of our stuffy institutions? “Poverty”? “Healthcare”? “Choice/Life”? But abstractions make for flimsy rooms. Surly we can find more *solid material* in the Inns of our daily lives. Heck, our own bodies might even thank us for having a little more imagination.+

NO ROOM OR NO GENEROSITY?

By Malcolm Schluenderfritz

In most translations of St. Luke’s Gospel, we are told that Jesus was placed in a manger because there was no room at the inn. Some have argued that this is a mistranslation and that the “inn” referred to was more likely the guest room of a relative’s house. In this case, what Luke really meant is that the area generally used for keeping animals was the only place in the crowded house with enough space and privacy for Christ’s birth. This is quite possible, for all I know; though if anyone uses this exegetical argument to claim that Jesus and his family weren’t poor, I must say that a woman having to give birth in a relative’s barn sounds suspiciously like poverty to me.

In any case, the important point remains; due to a lack of room, Jesus Christ was born in an inferior location. (The text clearly indicates that the “manger” was only used for lack of access to something better; and if Palestinian babies at the time of Christ were typically placed in mangers, the angel wouldn’t have bothered mentioning this detail to the shepherds.) Obviously, there was no lack of room in an absolute sense; there was a room, or rooms—but they were full. Room could have been made, but nobody took the trouble to make it. That is a useful consideration for our reflection this Christmas.

We need to make room in our hearts for Jesus; but that also involves making room in our lives for

the poor, since Jesus has identified himself with them. Very often, our ability to aid the poor is a matter of our worldview rather than our material wealth. How much we can give depends in part on how much we feel that we can afford.

In *Happy Are You Poor*, Fr. Dubay tells a story about a couple who decide that they can afford to give an extra \$30 to a missionary appeal. Most people, Fr. Dubay says, would consider such a couple to be generous. The problem, however, is that when people use the expression “what we could afford”, what they generally mean is “what we could afford without significantly changing our lifestyles”. They generally do not mean “what we could afford if we stopped eating out or sold our sports cars or stopped buying new clothes or taking vacations.” To truly make room for Christ’s poor, we’ve generally got to get rid of something else that is currently taking up the available “space” in our budgets.

And of course, this goes far beyond donations of money. In fact, donating money is sometimes easier than allowing the needs of those around us to impinge on the way we live our lives. An obvious way of “making room” for Christ is through the ancient tradition of the “Christ Room”; making room within our homes for the homeless and the stranger. While Catholic Worker Houses provide a radical model of such hospitality, there are many

ways to bring others into our lives. Maybe we could offer space in our homes to a retired parishioner on a fixed income, or invite somebody who lives alone to join us for meals, or even just make the time for somebody who needs to talk.

In particular, we should try to make room for the chronically ill and disabled. Participating in social events is more difficult for them, and so they gradually fall through the cracks and become socially invisible. All too often, Christians are living out of a subconscious assumption that everyone is healthy and strong. Instead, those who are healthy should take the sick into account. Who are they? What might they need? How can our communities help them to better participate in our social and religious life?

This Christmas, let’s be truly generous. Let us commit ourselves to making room for Jesus in our hearts and in our world—and in our minds. If our worldviews and habits of thought are keeping Christ out in the cold, let us “destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive” so that we can “be transformed by the renewal of our minds, becoming one body in Christ, and sharing with the Lord’s people who are in need.” (cf 2 Cor. 10:4-5 and Rom 12:2-13) +

HOUSES OF HOSPITALITY Peter Maurin (1933)

1. Today we need houses of hospitality as much as they needed it then if not more so.
2. We have Parish Houses for the priests. Parish Houses for education purposes. Parish Houses for recreational purposes but no parish Houses of hospitality.
3. Bossuet says that the poor are the first children of the Church so the poor should come first.
4. People with homes should have a room of hospitality so as to give shelter to the needy members of the parish.
5. The remaining needy members of the parish should be given shelter in a Parish Home.
6. Furniture, clothing and food should be sent to the needy members of the parish at the Parish House of Hospitality.
7. We need Parish Homes as well as Parish Domes.
8. In the new cathedral of Liverpool there will be a Home as well as a Dome.

By Dorothy Day

The love of the humanity of our Lord is the love of our brother. The only way we have to show our love for God is by the love we have for our brother. Love of brother means voluntary poverty, stripping one's self, putting off the old man, denying one's self, etc. It also means nonparticipation in those comforts and luxuries which have been manufactured by the exploitation of others. While our brothers suffer, we must compassionate them, suffer with them. While our brothers suffer from lack of necessities, we will refuse to enjoy comforts. These resolutions, no matter how hard they are to live up to, no matter how often we fail and have to begin over again, are part of the vision and the long-range view which Peter Maurin has been trying to give us these past years. Like perfection. We are ordered to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, and we aim at it, in our intention, though in our execution we may fall short of the mark over and over. St. Paul says, it is by little and by little that we proceed.

If these jobs do not contribute to the common good, we pray God for the grace to give them up. Have they to do with shelter, food, clothing? Have they to do with the works of mercy? Everyone should be able to place his job in the category of the works of mercy. This would exclude jobs in advertising, which only increases people's useless desires. In insurance companies and banks, which are known to ex-

plot the poor of this country and of others. If we examine our conscience in this way, we would soon be driven into manual labor, into humble work, and so would become more like our Lord and our Blessed Mother.

Poverty means nonparticipation. It means what Peter calls regional living. This means fasting from tea, coffee, cocoa, grapefruit, pineapple, etc., from things not grown in the region in which one lives. One day last winter we bought broccoli which had the label on it of a corporation farm in Arizona or Texas, where we had seen men, women, and children working at two o'clock in the morning with miners' lamps on their foreheads, in order to avoid the terrible heat of the day, which often reached 125 degrees. Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Fields*, which you can get at any library, tells of the conditions of these workers. For these there is "no room at the inn." We ought not to eat food produced under such conditions.

Poverty means having a bare minimum in the way of clothes and seeing to it that these are made under decent working conditions, proper wages and hours, etc. We should read Eric Gill, A. J. Penty, and Father Vincent McNabb on the machine. Poverty means not riding on rubber while horrible working conditions prevail in the rubber industry. Read Vicki Baum's *Weeping Wood* and André Gide's *Congo Journey*. Poverty means not riding

on rails while bad conditions exist in the coal mines and steel mills. Railroads have been built on robbery and exploitation. But pilgrims used to walk, and so did the saints. They walked from one end of Europe and Russia to the other. We need saints. Of course, we are not all given the grace to do such things. But it is good to call to mind the vision. It is true, indeed, that until we begin to develop a few apostles along these lines, we will have no mass conversions, no social justice, no peace. We need saints. God, give us saints!

How far we all are from it! We do not even see our infirmities. Common sense tells us, "Why live in a slum? It is actually cheaper to live in a model housing project, have heat and hot water, a mauve or pink bath and toilet, etc. We can manage better; we have more time to pray, to meditate, study. We would have more money to give to the poor." Yes, this is true according to the candlelight of common sense, but not according to the flaming heat of the Sun of justice. Yes, we will have more time with modern conveniences, but we will not have more love. We need to be fools for Christ. Let us squander money, let us rejoice in poverty, because Christ was poor. Let us love to live with the poor, because they are specially loved by Christ.

When we are weary of manual labor and think, "What foolishness to shovel out ashes, build fires, when we can have steam heat! Why

sew when it can be better done on a machine? Why laboriously bake bread when we can buy so cheaply?" Such thoughts have deprived us of good manual labor in our city slums and have substituted shoddy store-bought goods, clothes, and bread. Poverty and manual labor — they go together. We must believe in poverty and manual labor for love of Christ and for love of the poor. It is not true love if we do not know them, and we can only know them by living with them, and if we love with knowledge we will love with faith, hope, and charity.

(Excerpts from *On Pilgrimage*, 1948, <https://catholicworker.org/486.html/>)

ROOM COULD BE FOUND

By Peter Maurin (1936)

1. There is too much wheat in the United States.
2. There is too much cattle in Argentina.
3. There are too many sheep in Australia
4. There are too many Germans in Germany, too many Italians in Italy, too many Japanese in Japan.
5. Room could be found in the United States for the Germans, in Argentina for the Italians, in Australia for the Japanese.
6. To make room for the Germans, Italians, and Japanese is a better way to establish peace than to build more battleships, more submarines and more aeroplanes.

NON-PARTICIPATION

By the Maurin House

One of the purposes of *The Catholic Radical* is to explore the thought of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. So far, we have written much about hospitality, the poor, voluntary poverty, the liturgy as the center of our lives, and at least a little about work and community. One aspect we have not touched on is their resistance to what is often called the "systemic" evils in our society: consumerism, waste, oppressive distributions of wealth and power, exploitation and unjust remuneration of workers, militarism, and the like. One of the reasons it is difficult to write about such things today is our sharply divided political climate, which would force us to choose one whole set of "issues" to support, to the exclusion of another whole set. So, because Catholics are against abortion and communism, it is often assumed that we are for the "conservative" vision of life, including the industrial capitalist status quo. Isn't it just liberals and woke socialists who worry about that other stuff?

Dorothy didn't think so. In her "December" piece, reprinted above, she makes the issue much simpler: a Catholic can never blithely participate in evil of any kind. And the same totalizing economy that today kills unborn babies and restricts personal subsistence for the sake of profit and convenience, for those same ends and in the same breath, also creates a permanent underclass of degrading employment, destroys

communities, and provokes military conflicts around the world.

So, Dorothy suggests, Catholics have to take a close and critical look at how each part of our lives affect other people and the creation, and respond accordingly. Her essay catalogues some of what this meant for her own life: all of the material realities that touched her were for her also *moral responsibilities*. What are the realities, she is provoking us to ask, that stand behind our coffee, our tea, our broccoli, our jobs, the way we heat our homes, the people who work at the places we shop and the materials that make our cars go? We don't often ask these questions, especially because most of our world comes to us as if out of nowhere, pre-packaged, with the real costs often hidden from us. I just go to Home Depot, and there's my wood. I just go to the cafeteria, and there's my chicken. I just click, "Buy Now," and my package appears.

Yet notice how she defines the Catholic task. Our priority is not to analyze the whole of society and fix it through any kind of direct action, either from above, or from below. We should not make Catholicism into activism. Our job is to make our own lives, from top to bottom, conform as nearly as possible with the justice and charity of Jesus Christ. It's a matter of *personal* responsibility. We will all, she is very clear, fall way short in doing this—there is no getting

off the grid, there is no totally clean conscience in these matters. Yet there are things we can do. And notice, too, what they amount to: in the face of the many failings of our social status quo she prescribes, not socialism, nor a reformed capitalism, but voluntary poverty, self-denial, the works of mercy, and non-participation. Her economic alternative, in other words, is simply and powerfully *the practice of our Faith*. A full-fledged Catholic economics may involve wider social implications, but not any less.

What our non-participation looks like will vary by circumstance. It will require that we make prudential judgements, based on a well-formed conscience, about the world. But this requires that we make an effort to see that world, compare it with standards of the Gospel, and struggle to live accordingly. Read books, watch documentaries, learn where your food comes from, go to the poor side of town (which, like Thomas Merton says, is the necessary underbelly to the rich part of town), ride the bus. What we cannot do is claim that our moral duties do not extend to the whole of our lives, despondently throw up our hands that "this is just the way the world is", or sit back and imagine that our lifestyles have nothing to do with making someone homeless. "Forgive me," Dorothy would say to the men in the Catholic Worker breadline, "let us forgive one another."

It's worth noting, finally, the way that Dorothy's wholistic vision of Catholicism reveals once more the defectiveness of the old-fashioned division between the natural and the supernatural realms. For it is too often those of us most concerned about being in good supernatural standing that make the worst use of the natural world. Even if we do not *think* about it this way, we still *live* as though we were free to use and abuse our fellow man and God's creation for our own comfort and pleasure, as long as we have our "religious" duties in order. But Dorothy would have us remember that there is no "natural" order of our lives that the supernatural does not touch. The natural is not the *neutral*, but rather, as St. Thomas teaches, every human act is a moral act. Or, conversely, as Chesterton puts it, tongue-in-cheek, "There is no supernatural." There is only, in other words, one reality, and Dorothy is reminding us of ways we can love God in all of it.+

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