

### **Epilogue: How (Not) To Choose a Community**

So let's say you're convinced. What, then, you might ask, should you do? The difficulties and challenges are real in this regard, and so I thought I should append a section indicating in a very preliminary way how one might think about moving from our relatively isolated existences, into something more like we have been describing. Making this move is especially hard because the Catholic Worker Movement itself is in many places in pretty bad shape, having drifted away from the orthodox Catholicism of its founders and into concerns with various political platforms. So if there is not a Catholic Worker community, or not one you care to identify with, or even any sort of Christian intentional community anywhere nearby you, what are your options? Should you move across town, or even across the country? Should you consider *starting* a community? Or maybe there *are* options in your area, but you feel like there are too many of them. How to choose? What to look for? Let me simply give a few principles to guide our ponderings.

Whatever our situation, it will be important to put first things first and second things second – to major in the majors and minor in the minors. So the first principle is that these are all ultimately matters of Christian prudence – you'll have to make your own, context-specific judgments, and go with those, and see where they lead. No one can provide a blueprint or answer all the questions involved in such a complex matter ahead of time. And, as we have said all along, the whole point is that this is an adventure that is worth risking it all just like the Apostles did. Journeys take on a life of their own as you get into them, and what you imagine you'd do and say in a given situation will often be different once our journey actually takes us there. Action involves all of ourselves, and there are no cookie-cutter solutions, no safe promises about where you'll end up. As my wife says, “We'll just have to put on our big kid underpants go and do it.”

A second principle is to look for Catholic identity. This is not to say that there cannot be strong Protestant or secular communities committed to the same sorts of goals, but just that the whole point of the Catholic Worker Movement was to be the embodiment of the teaching of the Church. Markers of such an identity include a regular routine of liturgical prayer in common, especially the Mass, close and amicable relationships with surrounding parishes, and the local diocese in general, and supportive attitudes towards the Church's tradition and leadership, including the pope. It is a further sign of such healthy Church-relationships if local priests are somehow involved in the community. All these ties help assure that the movement does not become a sect or a personality cult, but, as Peter envisioned, is simply *part of* the Church. It is fine to challenge the larger Church with our actions and words, but we always want to do so in a spirit of humility, knowing that the Church is our Mother. There should be a spirit of trust that gently discourages criticism and cynical gossip about the Church's teachings and leadership. I'm not talking at all, of course, about stifling honest questions, seekers, and genuine discussion. I'm saying there should not be a general posture of antagonism to the Church among community members. This helps relationships *within* the community remain healthy as well.

A third principle is what you might call “stability”, a virtue known from the Benedictines. This is “staying-put-ness”. Benedictine monks take a vow of stability, which means they promise

to stay in the community they choose for the rest of their life. We aren't monks, and we shouldn't take vows unless the Church has sanctioned them (another path into trouble), but we can and should still strive for stability. For us this means a sort of resolve not to leave the place we are easily. All other things being equal, in other words, it's good not to jump from place to place. This can be especially hard in community, and especially hard in our day. It's hard in community, because you *always* find sin and frustration, because you're dealing with people. And it's especially hard in our day, because everything about our culture encourages superficial commitment, the guarding of independence, and perpetual transition. There is a certain anxiety in human nature, only heightened by our screens and money, that if only we were not *here*, things would be better. And then, when that next community disappoints us as well, to look for the next one, or to give up on other people altogether. Stability is the commitment to stay in one place with one group of people, not in *spite* of their sins, but *because of* their sins and yours, in the conviction that you can only really root them out together. Stability is the rejection of our economy's perpetual drive for novelty. And, finally, of course, stability, like all these principles, must be governed by prudence. There are especially unhealthy communities, or those that just don't fit you for whatever reason, or those that only fit you for a season. The former are best avoided, and the latter might require you to say goodbye at some point. So stability, like all these principles, is a guideline, not an enteral rule. There should be both initial and ongoing discernment – not of what is easiest for you, but for what is *best* for you. And stability is a part of that. It's the resolve to be content.

A fourth principle I'll call personalism. This is the commitment to treat other people as gifts from God, right in front of you, and – this is the hard part – to let them make claims upon you. As we've seen, because every duty in our world tends to be defined by a formal contract, we tend to think we have no “real” duties to fellow human beings except legal ones – that we are free unless coerced. This attitude, of course more an unconscious disposition than a philosophy any of us would explicitly ascribe to, is what we have to combat. In the story of the Good Samaritan, that Samaritan, who represents Jesus, had no cultural obligation to care at all about that man in the ditch. But he let himself be claimed by him. We have to let others have claims upon us who get in our way when we don't expect it. So too with the people, including the poor, in our communities.

And there are varieties of personalism. There is the short-term sense of it, that includes what you might call obedience to the present moment: *this* person, *this* situation which I have just stumbled into, I can choose to let make a difference in my day, and in my entire life. Christian life is made up, in a way, *simply* of this duty to be faithful to what, in the plan of God, has appeared before me. Those who are faithful in little things, will be set over greater things. And there is also the long-term sense of personalism. We all have at least some idea, even today, that our blood relatives have some sort of abiding claim on us. The early Church was something of a scandal to the customs of the time, because they extended to other Christians the same right to claim them as they did their blood relatives – and even more so. What would it be like to do this today with those, especially the poor, we happen to find ourselves with? Again our instinct is

to hang loose to commitment. But the thing about the Church, radical then as now, is it bids us commit to those we don't have to commit to. And this includes allowing our lives to be judged and changed by them. It cannot be an agreement to be claimed as long as it is convenient or it feels good. Being judged, in the good sense of having accountability for our actions, but also in the good sense of having regular feedback, formal and informal, about how our Christian life is going, just is *part of* being a Christian. It's also part of what most of us lack and, to be honest, usually bristle at in practice if not in theory. But all this is personalism, and all this is just part of the Gospel. Without it, choosing a community will be difficult, because we'll never see what God has put right in front of us. And it's almost always more than meets the eye.

Another principle I'll call realism. When you start becoming involved in a community, be realistic about what you can do, and, when appropriate, try to be clear about your expectations, and others' expectations of you. Start small and work up. In other words, while everything that I've said so far is true about letting yourself be claimed and not moving easily and being committed, there is nothing magic about this, and if you jump in too fast and too deep, you can burn out. If there are unstated and then unmet expectations on any sides, frustration and misunderstanding can arise. In both cases, people and relationships, including you, suffer. Living with other people, as I've said, is hard. And for all of the wonder of it, and for as much as we need it, anyone who has done it will tell you that it reveals to us our own and other's brokenness. So expect that. Even when it's not sin or anything serious, getting along with all the people we live close to is difficult, even for the most well-adjusted. So expect *that*. It's easy to be easygoing with people that never impinge on your desires. But the people in your household and the people you see most days *often* impinge on them. That's the point. Be realistic, then, with the realities. Don't add unnecessary difficulty to a divine but already difficult task.

The extreme form of this "being clear" about expectations takes the form of being vowed to a "rule of life" – that's how monks do it. That, as I've said, is not for most of us. And most of the time, Catholic Workers go to the other extreme and pride ourselves on being anarchic and laid back, without setting any expectations. This can be a good thing as far as it's true that there *aren't* any expectations, but there almost always are. So getting as much clarity and communication about these can make all the difference. If you like serving the poor but are not interested in the prayers, tactfully mentioning that early on might save you some headaches later. Or, as you're building a community, if there's an expectation that, say, people who live in a hospitality house come to Morning Prayer everyday, it's best to say that. Or again, if you are new, you might just want to state clearly about how often you think you'll be around, again with an eye to what is good and possible for you. Sometimes these communities have informal, temporary "rules of life" – short lists of activities everyone commits to – a weekly meal, or daily prayer. That can sometimes be useful as well.

The final principle is joy. Joy names a sort of family of characteristics it's important the community have: a deep sense of humor, fun, cheerfulness, ready forgiveness, lightheartedness, and not taking itself too seriously. As someone said, angels fly because they take themselves so lightly. I've mentioned some of this before, but there's a morbidly humorous story that illustrates

it well. Long-time New York City Catholic Worker Stanley Vishnewski had given his life to the movement and lived in their hospitality house for years. He was especially known as the cook who made, day after day for years on end, the big pots of soup. No one could have been more deeply committed to the movement, and no one can be as committed as his life was without being deeply serious about what the movement represents. Then one day in the kitchen Stanley started feeling pain in his left arm and tightness in his chest: it was the onset of the heart attack that would do him in. As he was stricken with pain, and aware of what was happening, he could say only, “It was the soup!”

It seems to me this sense of humor even in the most trying and serious sometimes physically painful times is characteristic of the Catholic Worker, and any community, at its best. This “joy” is the one thing that can make otherwise difficult, painful, and even sometimes sinful situations seem like no problem. And without it – if the atmosphere is judgmental, sullen, anxious, sad or unwelcoming – even situations that look perfect on paper can be unbearable. And joy, of course, takes some effort sometimes – some days we have to choose it. And this is more than just choosing to be in a good mood. One of my favorite Easter hymns says “Easter triumph, Easter joy, these alone do sin destroy.” To choose humor and lightness and cheerfulness and mercy is not just strategically good for the community, it is to live the life of Christ. And we do so because of Easter – because we know that, at the end of the day, joy and life win because Christ is *alive* among us *now*. And so we have, as Dorothy said, the *duty* of delight. Yet it is delightful just the same. If you don’t want to live with joy, or if your community doesn’t, go home; it’s not worth it, because it’s not the Gospel.

And so now you can perhaps see now why the title of this epilogue is How (*Not*) to Choose a Community. These principles imply that it is best not to choose but to find yourself already chosen, and yet that there is a sense in which choice is inescapable. Today we even have to make a conscious choice to allow ourselves to be chosen. That’s just the world we live in, lament it as we may.

And so that is the final question we may want to ask ourselves: where have we been chosen, how have we already been claimed, even before we were looking out for it? There may be people or places who claim you, or just parts of your heart and mind claimed by what we have said, likely because they were so claimed before we said it. If then there is nothing accidental in the Christian life, these claims can be good starting points for next steps. We are called, as I have said, to the adventure of the Gospel. But every adventure begins by putting one foot in front of another.