

The Catholic Radical

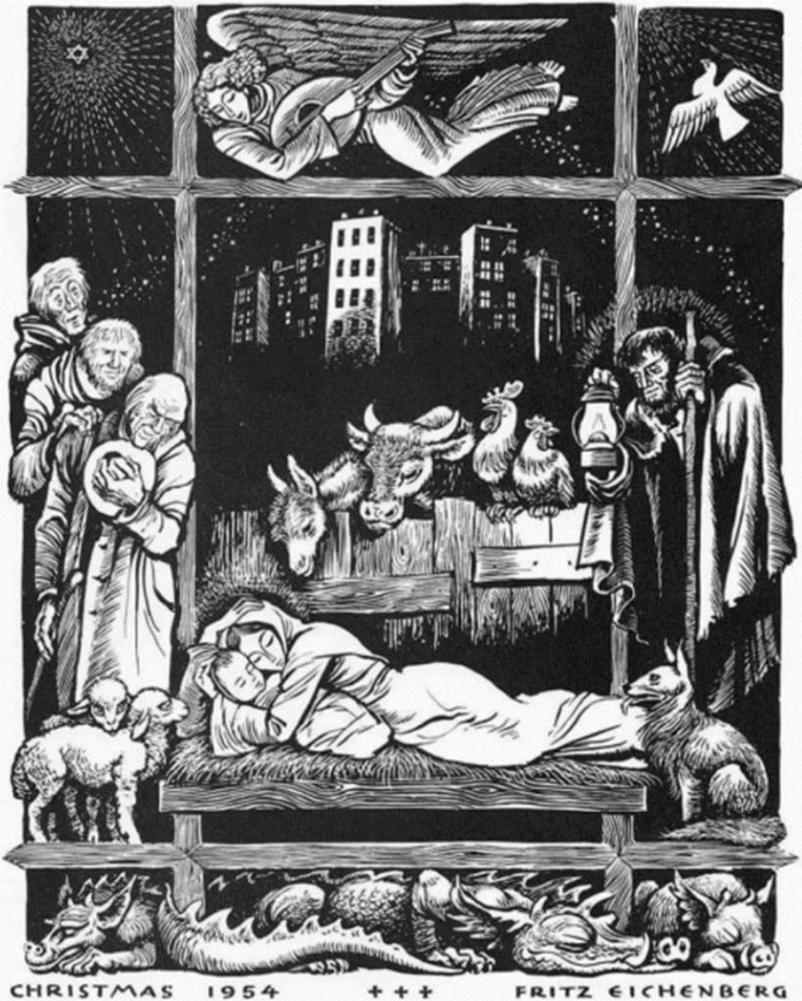
—A Catholic Newspaper for a Divided Age—

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ROOM AT THE INN

By the Editors



Perhaps we're just suckers for a good line that preaches well, but the "no room at the inn" theme, often appearing in Catholic Worker publications around this time of year, is near the heart of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin's vision of hospitality. The idea is that just as at that first Christmas in Bethlehem, when the Holy Family came knocking on the inn door, we have the opportunity to receive Christ, God in the flesh, in any stranger we welcome.

The duty of hospitality, as Maurin says in his Easy Essay in this edition, was for so long part of the very fabric of what it was to be a Christian, that not to practice it was to omit something essential. At Christmas we celebrate God in the flesh in a little boy. We receive that God, that same little boy, in the flesh in bread and wine. And we also receive him, in a different way, but still in the flesh, when we receive the one who, as Christ, has no place to lay his head. So essential is

this practice that one Doctor of the Church, St John Chrysostom, when (what we would call) homeless shelters started popping up around his town of Constantinople, begged his congregation *not* to help with them, and not to send the poor to them. This, he foresaw, would mean that Christians would lose the habit of keeping a "Christ room"—a bed and some bread for the poor—and so would miss out on one of the primary approaches they could make to Christ himself.

We are all well aware of the objections that arise to this notion, not least in our modern age of social engineering. And so what a wonderful gift that the Church's tradition of unconditional hospitality can liberate us from these. How freeing it is to simply be able to receive our neighbor, to encounter him, as he is, one-on-one, with all his surprises. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see! Hail, the Incarnate Deity!+

SILENT NIGHT

By Leigh Miller

"For while all things were in quiet silence, and night was in the midst of her course, Thy almighty Word leapt down from heaven from Thy royal throne." (Wis 18:14-15)

The Word came to be born but, when the hour came, found no room in the inn. The King of kings instead found His welcome not among human company, the common gossip, those about the business of room and board, and the cares of those at the work of economy and government, but in the darkness and the quiet silence of the stable. This cave, like the Mother it received, had no other business more important to attend to, nothing else occupying its space and time; it was, in this respect, silent. It was thus ready, like Mary and then Joseph, to receive God Himself in its midst.

But, truth be told, there is little that defines a modern person more than the discomfort, the disregard and even the anger that we hold for this stillness called silence.

We know loneliness and isolation are at an all-time high, made physically possible by the saturation of our landscape with screens, internet, cars, and delivery services. People are bored, anxious, depressed, despairing and angry at alarming rates. We should not assume however, that in our loneliness we are necessarily practicing, or even capable of practicing, silence. Instead, the constant noise of our lives—the sound of the televi-

sion, the scrolling of the personal device, the constancy of the radio or the podcast, the exhausted immersion in video—is both the means and the result of the isolation. Yet, I propose, to welcome the Christ this Christmas we must enter, each of us, into the silence that has been definitively rejected by the world.

What is traditionally meant by silence is not confined to the auricular level. Silence, in the Catholic spiritual tradition, takes on a note of stillness, calm, and emptiness applied to all aspects of the Christian's life—the sensory, social, intellectual, and emotional. Noise comes in multiple modes.

First, there is external noise: the on-the-go nature of our lives, reflected in the sensory stimulation that inundates us in the forms of billboards, machines, muzak and media. We are generally so constantly engaged, even if just by the 24-hour news, that we have almost no experience of real personal solitude. However, I contend, we actually clamor after this exterior noise because its job is precisely to cover up another type of noise, the interior—our own boredom, worry, restlessness. Our consumption of media, addiction to screens, endless to-dos and meticulously over-packed days, are like a white noise machine used to cover this interior din.

Yet the Church has always had names for the din. *Acedia*, usually translated "boredom", is the vice of

needing to be constantly distracted, to find some new thing, something exciting, because we are perpetually dissatisfied with where we are, what we have, and what we are thinking about. It is closely related to the vice of *curiositas*: a state of mind that shallowly skips from one piece of information, one spectacle, one image, not for the sake of sharing the world with others or knowing God, but simply for ourselves. It is the vice of "entertainment." To confront this interior unrest is, I confess, a formidable task, but the Church also gives us an antidote: the age-old practice of asceticism.

We need today, as much as ever, the asceticism of mind as well as body. We must take up disciplines that get us in the habit of doing, saying, hearing, seeing, ruminating, less. Shut down your phone. Turn off the TV and the podcast. Tear up your to-do list. Let the news and blogs go unread. Practice letting the interior conversations drift by. Talk to your family. Eat dinner with friends. Look in each others' eyes. Only such asceticism will allow us to receive each other in all our marvelous, fleshly particularity. Only then can we give them the possibility of *surprising* us. Only then can they, and all of Creation, be a *gift*.

Real silence, as we learned that night in Bethlehem, is the requisite to being able to truly receive the neighbor, the alien, the friend and, even, the Christ—not as we expect Him, but as he comes: in the quiet

and the night of our lives, in the measure to which we choose to abandon our attachments, that is, our anxieties, in all their forms.

Our God is a lover and, like any true lover, He does not force Himself on us. Christmas is about the world being unprepared to receive the God of the Universe, not for stubborn inertia but precisely through the idleness of distracted industry. Yet the truth remains: He constantly knocks, but enters only where space is made. May Our Lady give us the courage to make it.+

AT A SACRIFICE

By Peter Maurin (May 1936)

1. In the first centuries of Christianity the hungry were fed at a personal sacrifice, the naked were clothed at a personal sacrifice, the homeless were sheltered at personal sacrifice.
2. And because the poor were fed, clothed and sheltered at a personal sacrifice, the pagans used to say about the Christians, "See how they love each other."
3. In our own day the poor are no longer fed, clothed, sheltered at a personal sacrifice, but at the expense of the taxpayers.
4. And because the poor are no longer fed, clothed and sheltered the pagans say about the Christians, "See how they pass the buck."

HOUSING THE HOMELESS

Excerpts from a sermon by St. John Chrysostom

How many of our brethren are homeless? Let the church be a space for them. You sit before the doors, receive those who come yourselves. And then, though you may not wish to take them into your homes, at any rate in some other way receive them, by supplying their wants. “Why,” you say, “has not the Church money for this?” She does, but what is that to you? Can it benefit you if they are fed by the common funds of the Church? If another prays, does it follow that you are not bound to pray? I mean, you don’t say, “Don’t the priests pray? Then why should I pray?”

You don’t want to give, fine. Make a tiny homeless shelter out of one room in your house: set up there a bed, a table, and a candlestick. Have a room, to which Christ

may come. Say, this area is set apart for him. Even your unfinished basement—he’ll take it. Naked and a stranger, Christ goes about, it is but shelter he wants. Don’t be heartless or inhuman! Bring in the injured, the beggars, the homeless. For you ought indeed to receive them into your own living rooms; but if you will not do this, then at least the basement, or your garage, or spare bedroom: there receive Christ. No, not this either? Not even this? Do it some other way. As it is, you’ve got a room for your car (*Greek: chariot*), and even straw for your animals, but not one place for Christ.

“But so many are dishonest and thieving and greedy,” you say. And for this your reward will be greater, when you receive them for the sake of Christ’s name. For if you know

indeed that they are dangerous, don’t take them into your house: but if you don’t, why are you so judgmental? “So I send them to the homeless shelter,” you say. But what is your excuse, when you don’t know them, or even receive the ones you do know, and shut your doors on everybody?

Let our homes be Christ’s homeless shelter, and let’s charge them, not money, but only that they make our house Christ’s abode. Let us run about everywhere, let us drag them in, let us get what’s ours! Greater are the benefits we receive than what we confer.

Whatever you do, don’t make this your excuse, “The Church has charities, they have rooms available. I’ll throw my money at that, and then I have received Christ.”+

THE LAST GOSPEL

(Portions of John 1, traditionally recited at the end of each Mass)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it...

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

But as many as received him, he gave them power to be sons of God, to them that believe in his name. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we saw His glory, the glory as it were of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

EXCERPTS FROM HOMILIES AT MIDNIGHT MASS

by Pope Benedict XVI

This was the moment that Israel had been awaiting for centuries, through many dark hours...when God would take care of us, when he would step outside his concealment, when the world would be saved and God would renew all things...Yet there is no room at the inn. In some way, mankind was awaiting God, waiting for him to draw near. But when the moment comes, there is no room for him. Man is so preoccupied with himself, he has such urgent need of all the space and all

the time for his own things, that nothing remains for others—for his neighbour, for the poor, for God. And the richer men become, the more they fill up all the space by themselves. And the less room there is for others. (2007)

Inevitably the question arises, what would happen if Mary and Joseph were to knock at my door. Would there be room for them? ... The great moral question of our attitude towards the homeless, towards refu-

gees and migrants, takes on a deeper dimension: do we really have room for God when he seeks to enter under our roof? Do we have time and space for him? Do we not actually turn away God himself? We begin to do so when we have no time for God. The faster we can move, the more efficient our time-saving appliances become, the less time we have. And God? The question of God never seems urgent. Our time is already completely full. (2012)



THE POOR ARE FAMILIES’ RESPONSIBILITY

By Tyler Hambley

What are we to make of paragraph 2208 in the Catechism of the Catholic Church? It reads like this: *The family should live in such a way that its members learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor. There are many families who are at times incapable of providing this help. It devolves then on other persons, other families, and, in a subsidiary way, society to provide for their needs: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”*

I ran across this paragraph while wrestling with the inherent tension in Catholicism between the universal call to holiness and traditionally bifurcated roles like married and religious life. What is universally obligatory for all of us, regardless of our state in life, and what is only for the chosen few? Care and responsibility for the poor is often filed under the evangelical counsel of poverty and therefore relegated to our spiritual special forces in priesthood or the religious life, or, even more likely, to charitable institutions, and especially the state. Laity, families in particular, we usually think, have no real, and certainly no hands-on, duty in this regard, except perhaps to give to the charities and of course to pay taxes. After all, children must be protect-

ed. Fathers must be free to make money, earn a living, provide. Mothers must produce a safe, nurturing environment. All this, we think, is at odds with an in-the-flesh approach to the poor. At most caring for them might be an occasional, opt-in possibility, like serving at a soup kitchen, when families have all their ducks in a row.

But if paragraph 2208 is to be taken seriously, then care and responsibility for the poor cannot be neatly tucked away under the mantle of an evangelical “counsel” that just ends up inoculating families from such concerns. Rather, responsibility for the poor is inseparable from the universal call to holiness. Any definition of familial safety, security, and sustenance apart from care and responsibility for the poor, cannot be a Catholic definition. In other words, when we move out of middle-class, bourgeois assumptions, and into the world the Scriptures and the Tradition give us, the world where God is especially present to the least of these, where comfort and mammon are routinely warned against, and where the best insurance you can buy comes from giving alms even out of your lack and from welcoming Christ even in the stranger, what is “safe”, “secure”, “responsible” or “prudent” is turned upside down. Of course, we are called to be guardians of our families. And granted, paragraph

2208 allows that “many families” (and many does not mean most) will “at times” not be capable of providing this help. But the prudential burden now rests on justifying the opting out. Care and responsibility for the poor is normative Catholic behavior, full stop! To not do this work is, on occasion, allowable, but only in such a case does it then devolve “on other persons, other families, and, in a subsidiary way, society to provide for their needs.” That such care might “devolve” to celibate religious orders or, in a subsidiary way to social institutions is the exception, but even then it’s still expected that other families step up.

Nor is this teaching of the *Catechism* out of keeping with ancient Catholic tradition. In the middle ages a threefold hierarchy was developed in which the highest level, the monks, were especially to focus on praying, the middle level, the clergy, were to focus on the spiritual works of mercy, and the third level, the laity, including families, were to focus on the corporeal works of mercy, including feeding and sheltering the poor. It is ironic that today we think of such hospitality as something families in particular do not do, when historically it was exactly what they did do.

Finally, there is a formational dimension to paragraph 2208. The family is where children “learn to care and take responsibility” for the

least of these as part of their learning to be Christian. If this is not being provided, any degree of liturgical education, indulgences pursued, or prayers memorized will remain stunted and deficient, for “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). Clearly, God’s plan for the poor begins with the family home; the safety of our children and their salvation demands nothing less!+

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