

Cult, Culture, and Cultivation

Once we have gotten to the point of discussing our lives with friends, we have entered the logic of what Peter Maurin called: “Cult, Culture, and Cultivation.” This is his way of articulating how it is that Christian life was meant to form one whole. Cult, today, is sometimes used to describe crazy sectarian groups, but the original meaning of the word, the way Peter used it, simply refers to an organized system of *worship*. Peter was talking about the Mass, which leads to Christian *culture*, and then, to sustain the life of the culture, to the *cultivation* of the land. Cult, culture, and cultivation.

Peter lived in a time like ours when, he saw, we will have to start remaking our lives, remaking, in other words, Christian culture, from more or less the ground up. And that ground is the Mass – just like the early Christians did with their feast. Besides meals, what else does this look like? One way to put it is that all of our lives should be, in one way or another, literally built *around* the Mass. It’s the summit of all of life, because it is what we are made for: giving thanks to God – it’s “the Great Thanksgiving,” as you might translate “Eucharist.” From there we work outwards in concentric circles. Those circles are our lives. How does this look? A million different ways, but here’s some basics.

Once the Gospel has come to a particular place, and the *cult* of the Eucharist has been established, the very first point of Christian *culture* might be to build a little chapel, or even simply to prepare a little corner of a room set aside for the cult. Then we will want, of course, a supply of bread and wine, not for sustaining our bodies – that’s not the *primary* use of food. The primary use of food is worshipping God. And so we will plant and tend and harvest and care for the area around the chapel. To do this we’ll have to live nearby, and so we will build houses, and these are now not just houses that are useful for living in, but that take at least some part of their rationale from being dedicated to God – close to cult, and cultivation. But then of course, again not for their own sakes, but because they are made for worship, we will want to sustain our material bodies, and so we will cultivate food for eating. But, yet again because it is close to the Eucharist, Christian eating is never just eating; it is, at one remove or another, feasting. And so houses and food and rooms and gardens and friendship, and even the work and labor it takes to sustain life, is all brought into the orbit of the Mass. This was what St. Benedict was up to when he coined the famous phrase *ora et labora*, prayer and work.

“Cult, culture and cultivation” captures some of the genius of St Benedict precisely because it envisions all of life as one extended liturgy. Building a Christian culture is about always being able to answer the question, “What are you doing?”, with “Building a chapel.” And so at this point we see how the Eucharist produces another key aspect of culture: work. Work is not just any activity whatever, any motion of the body, or anything that earns a wage. Work is that which allows us to prepare for the highest or *best* activity of all: the Mass. So this most central part of culture now becomes indexed to liturgy in a new way: *good* work is work that contributes most directly to the *best* work, worship. Literally building a chapel or growing bread or grapes for the Mass will therefore be the most obviously good kinds of work. Other work can then be evaluated by its distance from this center.

This evaluation will be more or less complex in different cases, but it won’t take us long to realize that, wherever we start, most of the work we do today doesn’t show very well in this light. Sitting on the computer all day with our heads in the virtual clouds, usually getting paid for

helping others walk further down the path of disembodiment, distraction, and isolation, while ourselves producing all those things in no obvious relation to the Mass other than the fact that the wage we earn indirectly supports our bodies, is, while understandable, definitely not ideal. Many other jobs fare just as poorly, as Dorothy and Peter often lamented. This being the case, coupled with the fact that the sustaining of our bodies and the growing of food for liturgy and feast are particularly intimate with the Mass, it is no wonder that Peter put such a stress on the goodness of manual labor and farming in particular in our age. “Cultivation” is not a quaint idyllic addition to his system, but internal to both culture and cult itself.

This is the context, then, in which we have to see the Catholic Worker’s involvement in the labor issues of their day, and why Catholics today should be concerned about the kind of work we do, and are forced to do, as well. Our jobs are not an indifferent or simply neutral fact of our lives. Nor were Dorothy and Peter’s concern about work any liberal preoccupation with “justice” or abstract “rights”. The work that predominates in any society is one of the greatest measures of its spiritual state. Our jobs are always brimming with moral, religious, and social meaning. They make us who we are, and they are directly related to Christian culture and to the Mass.

After the feast, then, shared, good work is central to the Catholic Worker vision. Dorothy Day in particular spoke of how difficult a calling finding good work “out there” in the world is. So this is yet another place that we will have to re-craft life in small Catholic centers, “building a new society within the shell of the old, a society where it is easier to be good.” Dorothy always said very clearly that it’s not fair to blame the workers for taking the only jobs they can find. But at the same time she emphasized the abundance of good work that we *can* find to do together *now*. In fact, there is no shortage of it, though it is often unpaid.

The Works of Mercy, in particular, appear to be more practicable and urgent than ever, just to the extent that traditional forms of good work, become hard to find. So Peter suggested farming, but also feeding of the hungry and sheltering the homeless, as both obviously congruent with the Mass and abundantly available. There’s never a shortage of people to care for, and so, Peter hoped, people might seriously consider giving up their degrading jobs in factories or cubicles and try to start houses financed by the charity of others. This, Peter knew, was an admittedly radical solution, but it was precisely part of the hope of the gospel to make the impossible possible. The saints have done it, why can’t we be saints? The Great Depression had produced poverty on an unprecedented scale, and this was a deeply Catholic response to it. It is hard to see that things have changed too much today.

Whether or not we take such a radical step, what remains true is that finding shared work, even between a couple of families banded together to pray and feast, is an important part of enacting the Mass in our lives. And there *is* shared work that we can all begin to introduce into our lives, now, bit by bit. Preparing for prayer and for meals takes work. Perhaps you are welcoming the poor, or your neighbors: hospitality is good work. If you have a family, you are certainly welcoming your children, to the feast, and to life. From here, finding ways to support one another in real, practical tasks – yard work, gardening, house work, repairs, bringing up children, educating them, making ends meet – precisely because of what we share at the Mass, just *is* the project of working out cult, culture and cultivation. There is no one model for it, and it is precisely this built-in creativity that makes it a life so utterly different from the usual button-

pushing monotony. Such “projects”, as I have used the term above, make people what they are, and Christian projects make Christian people.