

### **Not Liberal nor Conservative - Catholic**

In 2016 I was received into the Catholic Church, having previously been a priest in the Episcopal Church. My reasons for conversion were both practical and intellectual. As an Episcopal priest I had been in charge of a hospitality house where we had tried, and to a large extent succeeded, in following the way of life we found so compellingly embodied in Dorothy and Peter. Upon conversion, I knew very well that the Catholic Church was not perfect, but I was convinced that the Church which, officially at least, taught the things we had learned from Dorothy and Peter, must be the true one.

It shouldn't have surprised me, but, once a Catholic, it wasn't long before I got the sense that my new coreligionists were retrying to figure out what kind of Catholic I was. It became clear that Catholics defined themselves as *not* being a particular kind of Catholic as much as Episcopalians defined themselves as not being Baptist or Evangelical or, for that matter, Catholic. This was wearisome to me because I didn't want to be a traditional Catholic or a liberal Catholic. As a Protestant you always have to *choose* what sort of Christian you are, in part at least by making enemies of the kind you aren't. I had been a Catholic-leaning Episcopalian, but now I just wanted to be a Catholic Catholic. My argument in closing is that being a Catholic Worker (or something like it) is a wonderful way (perhaps the only way) to be just this.

Let me begin by saying, again, that I have found sincere, real, devoted, loyal Catholics on both sides of the liberal-conservative spectrum (and everywhere in between). I have also found that both left and right have certain practices on which they pride themselves, because, in their minds, they make them "really" Catholic. Things that, in other words, give them their Catholic identity. For instance, a liturgy that is austere and reverent, or, on the other side, casual and inviting, maybe in Latin, or, for others, in plain English; a firmness and passion for certain dogmas and rituals, or, on the other hand, a flexibility and gentleness with such formalities; a rigidness about traditional morals in the Church and society, or a concern for the Church to speak to those on the margins of these morals; worries about our society's marginalizing of the traditional family, or worries about its marginalization of the poor; or, worst but not least, a conviction that being Catholic should make you a democrat, or, alternatively, a republican. We all know these people. We all are, in one way or another, these people.

Having something that makes you, in your own mind, a serious Catholic is entirely understandable, even necessary, not least because it is admitted on all sides that there is so much that is compromised and uninspiring in the Church. Many devoted Catholics rightly see such complicity and apathy and say, "I don't want to be that." And so, almost unavoidably, we reach for something like the above identity markers to enable us to make sense to ourselves as a people for whom the Faith matters. And so we read or write blogs or start programs or become activists and get on our soapbox with our friends about how bad all the rest of the Church is because they don't puff out their chest about what we puff out ours about.

But I hope to have said enough in the previous pages for us to begin to see that there is an alternative way to feel like your Faith matters. Dorothy and Peter and friends model a kind of Catholic Christianity – and you don't have to be a Catholic or a Catholic Worker in any official sense to be this kind – that is different enough from everything else in the world to sustain its own identity. It has, as I put it above, its own *Catholic* difference. At baptism we don't renounce the left or the right, or other kinds of Christians, we renounce *the world*. That should be enough

difference for anyone. And I have argued above that that this difference *just is* traditional Catholicism, consistently lived: prayer, poverty, sacraments, adventure, hospitality and community. No chest puffing necessary.

In other words, if you are a Catholic, you have all you need to stop defining yourself on the left-right spectrum. Was Dorothy Day a liberal or a conservative Catholic? When she first sought baptism, she chose the pre-Vatican II, Latin, strict, insular, traditional Catholic Church. Does this make her a conservative? Well, she was also a fiercely outspoken woman who traveled the country talking about the Church's complicity with wealth and privilege. Does this make her a liberal? She was invited once to speak to a group at a South Dakota college about women's rights, including the right to choose an abortion. To everyone's surprise, she launched into a pro-life diatribe, condemning the right to choose. Does this make her conservative? She was repeatedly arrested during the 1950's for her refusal to participate in mandatory nuclear defense drills. Does this make her a liberal? After Vatican II, when a priest would come to St. Joseph House in ordinary clothes to say Mass, she would turn them away unless they wore vestments. Does this make her conservative? In any of these issues was she doing anything other than simply following plain well-known Catholic teaching and discipline? She was neither a conservative, nor a liberal, she was a Catholic.

She made this identity as clear as anyone could want in the headline of one of her own short articles, much to the chagrin of liberals and conservatives: "We are Un-American, We are Catholics." Of course, Dorothy did not mean to disown her country. She was saying (as the article bears out) that if forced to choose between the claims of the Church and a citizenship, left or right, that compromised any of those claims, she was firmly with the Church. And my final suggestion is that such loyalty to both the Church's traditional teachings and her unconventional way of life, including the sort of lived solidarity with the poor we have seen them model, is something that *both* traditionalists and liberals, on their own terms, should would. Liberals should want orthodoxy and conservatives should want solidarity because only with orthodoxy and solidarity do either liberals or conservatives really get what they puff out their chests about in the first place.

Liberals concerned with the injustices of our world are sometimes dismissive of a rigorous adherence to the doctrine and morals of the Church. In a world with starvation, child-soldiers, and nuclear weapons, I think the suggestion is, having your Trinitarian theology all lined up or worrying about what other people do in their bedrooms seems pretty trite. Didn't Jesus talk about feeding the hungry and loving people without judgement? This is the "bigger fish to fry" attitude, and it is certainly understandable. And yet, if the liberal is concerned to show compassion and dignity to all, her case would be made much stronger, not by sidelining traditional doctrines, but by embracing them, as Dorothy and Peter did. I once had the director of an inner city day shelter – a wonderful Catholic woman who loved deeply the poor in the best "being with" sort of way – tell me that Jesus didn't want us to worship him but to follow him in how he treated others. A very common sentiment – the idea being that too much of that religious stuff takes us away from the real work that Jesus calls us to do. Get out of Church and into the world.

Yet thinking that Jesus really is to be worshiped because he is God – maybe even "consubstantial with the Father" – one of those abstract dogmas sometimes dismissed as

irrelevant – makes all the difference in our approach to the poor. For what did Jesus say? “You did it to me.” In other words, when Christians have served the poor, they have done so because in them they have found Jesus, who is God himself. What higher dignity and urgency could there be for the cause of the oppressed? If you love the underdog and the little man, why would you not want to believe – and rejoice – in all the Church’s theological affirmations about Jesus (and Mary for that matter) – for they all only serve root the best humanitarian instincts in Divine Revelation. Play loose with them, and you will ultimately sever God from humanity all together. And this is true, not just at the level of theory (I’ll spare you that exposition), but most strikingly as a matter of practice or experience. If we looked at history I think we would see that those with the most skin in the game on behalf of the poor have overwhelmingly (but of course not exclusively) been dogmatically orthodox, and that those who have not been have tended more and more to deal, not with people, but with bureaucracies that push people around. Those like Dorothy and Peter who give their lives, livelihoods and reputations for the poor and become poor themselves don’t do it because they are more compassionate or empathetic than the rest of us. They do it because they have no doubt that their lives stand on truths more important than any material advantage. They find these dogmas mirrored back to them in what they do. Liberals should want orthodoxy.

And conservatives should want solidarity. John Henry Newman, one of Dorothy’s favorite writers, noted that our faith comes alive – we become really convicted – only when we are regularly surrounded by images and symbols that vividly and tangibly impress the Faith on us. This is one reason why churches are decorated with icons and art, and why beautiful, reverent worship is so important. A Solemn High Mass with Gregorian Chant can sometimes keep my fires burning from one Sunday all the way to the next. But this is also what living the Sermon on the Mount, or life in a hospitality house, does. It is hard to doubt the claims of the Church when you have those truths playing out right in front of you. Here is Christ himself – Slim, Mac, Danny – sitting right across from you; Christ himself, telling a joke, drinking coffee, or throwing up. You can touch him, hear him, smell him. Arguments are less important when you are living among the facts. Dorothy and Peter’s lives go a long way to making the truths of the Gospel empirically verifiable.

And this, of course, is something we could all use a little more of. For it’s obviously true what everyone says, that the Church today has lost credibility. Which is a fancy way of saying most churches are just hard to take very seriously – for the average American, but also, to varying extents, for each one of us. And this is not because we don’t have the arguments to make the Faith persuasive, or because it’s been discredited by science, or because it’s no longer the religion of the rich and respectable. It’s because we don’t live among the facts of the Gospel. Judging by what they see, seekers and skeptics (both Catholic and not) understandably conclude that Catholicism consists of an hour on Sunday, with other comfortable people, being made to feel as comfortable as possible, some sentimental music, and some sappy words that barely skim across the surface of reality. *This* is the image that most people have of the Church, and this is a big reason why so many people have left it. Not because they disagree with it, but because it is so boring that there is nothing to disagree *with*. The Church’s primary witness is what it *does* for all the world to see, and what it is currently doing is convincing no one.

To become credible, we'll have change the image that comes to mind when people think of the Church. And that will mean having what you might call a more persuasive "material rhetoric." What do we say, not with our lips, but with the very circumstances of our lives – where we stand around and who we do it with? It will have to be something that, at the very least, gets your attention. The early Church, with its martyrs, its poverty, its sacrifice, and its joy, had this material rhetoric in spades. So did the monastics, and later the Franciscans; giving up everything, and attracting people in droves. So, a century ago, did Dorothy and Peter:

To come to the Worker house of hospitality is a bewildering experience...for once inside it was like stepping over twenty centuries and landing in the time of the apostles. For here was a group of people living as the early Christians of Jerusalem had lived, becoming poor themselves and living among the poor in fidelity to the Gospel. The Catholic Workers were making an effort to live Christianity, not just talk about it.<sup>1</sup>

Do we want to be credible, to unite a divided Church, to interest the youth, to silence the scoffers, to arouse the apathetic, to draw back the lapsed, to entice the seeker? Eventually we'll have to put away the programs, the shiny websites, the nifty arguments, the surveys and the sociological studies, the endless talk of relevancy, or any of the other ingenious ways we have devised to make it possible to continue to have Christianity without having Christians. We'll have to just be Christians and let the chips fall where they may.

And so I'll end this little book with a little wager. Peter's idea was that each parish should have a hospitality house. I bet that in many places this could be done for a fraction of the cost of current programming. I bet people would flock to it; that it would be the image we need; that it could be a place of formation, sacrifice, adventure, community. It would be risky; there would be lots of liability issues; it would not be safe. But people would notice. The young would be intrigued; the comfortable would be roused; it would create opposition; but it would create, surely, as much more common ground. Countless other ministries could be built around it; it could take participation at all sorts of levels from all kind of parishioners. I bet it could make the parish, once again, the center real – not just a spiritual, but a *social* body.

But, alas, I also bet that this won't ever happen. It's no one's fault in particular, but it just is the case that our parishes and (also, let me emphasize, through no fault of their own) our priests, are, almost by necessity today, so chained to a whole range of institutional, financial, and legal strictures, as to make the practice of the Gospel *as* a parish close to impossible. And so, when it becomes clear that, perhaps especially, our Church insurance policies effectively prohibit a persuasive display of the Faith, the Church will once again have to take unconventional shapes, as it has over and over again throughout the centuries.

That time has now come. Parishes may continue for a time to be, as they already are, sacramental hubs, but the maintenance of Catholic *life* will fall to the laity. We must take up this role humbly, quietly, without anger or guile, without drawing attention to ourselves, and with all the deference we owe our bishops and priests. But we should also do it confidently, for it is not as though something in the divine plan has gone wrong. The Maurin Mandate is not God's Plan B any more now than it was in the time of the Apostles. Rather, it is so important because it unearths authentic and essential Christian practices that have gotten buried under the muck and

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<sup>1</sup> William O'Connor, *Ecclesiastical Review*, 1935, 93.

mire of our bourgeois complacency, anxiety and despair. In the face of that World, joy and hope become arguments in themselves, and the fact that we can today live lives full of them is itself the good news. That is what Peter holds out to us. And yet, in another way, there really is no other choice. For our bet is that Catholic Worker life is the path to the future because it is simply the path of the Church.