

Service and Social Change

Catholic Worker Perspectives on Bridging the Gap

Dan McKanan

As an undergraduate, I worked in a small, student-sponsored homeless shelter. On our campus, about thirty volunteer groups worked under a common organizational umbrella, and occasionally we had retreats together. Inevitably, the retreat organizers would classify us into «service» groups, like my own, and «social change» groups, like the folks who were helping to organize the clerical workers on campus. I always chafed under this classification. In the context of the housing crisis of the 1980s, it seemed obvious to me that homeless shelters were changing society. We were building relationships between privileged college students and folks experiencing mental illness, alcoholism, and post-traumatic stress-groups that wouldn't otherwise have encountered one another. More fundamentally, homeless shelters were rapidly replacing federal projects and single room occupancy hotels as the standard housing option for the very poor. I didn't think this sort of «social change» was a good thing, but I couldn't deny its reality.

For the past seventy years - come this May 1 - the Catholic Worker movement has struggled to overcome the alienation between service and social change that I experienced at those volunteer retreats. Catholic Workers commit themselves to both «hospitality» and «resistance»-to offering food, shelter, and clothing to people experiencing homelessness, and to taking direct action against war, economic exploitation, and institutionalized violence. Though Catholic Workers sometimes think about hospitality and resistance in ways that reinforce the alienation between service and social change, at their best they offer fruitful opportunities for mutual critique between the two activities and for deeper self-awareness on the part of the person who does both hospitality and resistance.

Why are service and social change so often kept separate in our culture? Part of the problem is attitudinal: individuals who commit themselves primarily to one or the other may distrust folks on the «other side.» As a young radical, Dorothy Day herself felt the sort of disdain that social change activists often have for people who disseminate service or «charity.» «Our hearts,» Day recalled of her early years, «burned with the desire for justice and were revolted at the idea of doled out charity. The word charity had become something to gag over.» The problem with charity, from this perspective, was that it gave people the necessities of life while denying their inherent right to those necessities. Indeed, the dispensers of charity were sometimes the same people who denied their employees a living wage! On the other hand, people who give their whole lives

to serving their neighbors sometimes gag over the «radicalism» of social change activists who have all of society's ills diagnosed, but don't lift a finger to make things better.

The alienation between service and social change goes deeper than such one-sided attitudes, however. A variety of institutional constraints keep the two activities separate, at least in the United States. Much service work is performed by registered nonprofit organizations, which receive tax benefits in exchange for their agreement not to engage in political lobbying or direct challenges to the government. Churches and other religious communities are deeply committed to service, but when they bridge out into social change they face criticism for «mixing religion and politics.» More recently, the Americorps program offers generous educational benefits to young people involved in service-but again at the price of foregoing social change activities. Such policies have created real dilemmas for volunteer placement organizations, like the Jesuit and Lutheran Volunteer Corps, that have historically blended service and social change.

The alienation between service and social change carries a heavy price. Insofar as the separation of the two activities makes it harder for practitioners to address the larger context of their activity, it breeds *inattentiveness* on the part of service workers and *irresponsibility* on the part of social change activists. And insofar as the separation makes practitioners less aware of their personal relation to the work, it creates *unconscious* service workers and *self-righteous* social change activists. I will describe each of these problems in more detail.

Service work that is isolated from social change can breed *inattentiveness* to the indirect consequences of one's service. Those who focus entirely on feeding the hungry, for example, may not ask whether the food is healthy, whether it was produced in a sustainable manner, or whether it violates people's dignity to give them food without asking them to help in preparing it. This problem goes deeper than the usual critique that «band-aid» solutions fail to address underlying social problems. Sometimes they actually *perpetuate* the problems they seek to solve. When the US sends massive grain shipments to countries experiencing famine, for example, we may undercut local grain prices, putting farmers out of business and causing more long-term food shortages. Similarly, adoption programs originally designed to help orphans may further stigmatize poor unwed mothers, who may feel they are being selfish if they do not hand over their babies to wealthy couples who promise them a better life in America or in the suburbs.

Service workers who are inattentive to indirect consequences may also be *unconscious* of their own hidden motives. Is our service truly for the good of the other, or does it secretly feed our own sense of power and goodness? One Catholic Worker interviewed in Rosalie Troester's oral history states the dilemma well: «All of us want to 'fix it.' We want to straighten out the world, rehabilitate all these alcoholics, take the people off the streets. We've all got the characteristics of codependency. You become so involved with the task to be completed that nothing else is in sight (Dennis Coday, cited in Troester, 178). When service programs are underfunded, this problem is exacerbated. Confronted with face after hungry face, can we afford the luxury of introspection? But without it, we run the risk of exploiting the poor to feed our own hungers.

Meanwhile, social change activists who do not participate in service face their own characteristic challenges. One of these is *irresponsibility*. Once they have identified the problem and condemned the institutions that perpetuate it, activists may feel that their work is done. If they aren't in face-to-face relationship with the victims, they don't have to face the tough questions: did your activism really change the policies? Why didn't all that sign waving put any more food on my plate? Activists do not often enough have the experience of Mike Miles, a long-time antiwar activist in the Catholic Worker tradition who spent Christmas of 1991 in prison, protesting the first Gulf War. When he was released, his children were devastated. «We thought you were going to stop the war!» they told him (Miles, 2000). That forced him to rethink so his assumption that faithfulness is always more important than effectiveness.



Jared Radermacher

Social change activists are also especially vulnerable to *self-righteousness*. Typically, they have a powerful vision of a transformed society, and spend a lot of time with other activists who share that vision. This can breed a disdain for people with different visions. Self-righteousness is exacerbated when activists don't interact daily with the intended beneficiaries of their work. If I am handing out soup to the hungry, I will often be chastened by those who don't care for my cooking. Without such chastening, activists, may exaggerate the vulnerability of the victims, the viciousness of the oppressors, and their own heroism. As Catholic Worker Jane Sammon explained to Rosalie Troester, «We can become very aware of our own need to protest a certain situation, become filled with that and maybe objectify the people who might be ... [working] in [a weapons] plant ... [or] in the IRS building» Jane Sammon, cited in Troester, 190).

The Catholic Worker movement seeks to overcome all of these challenges by coordinating the tasks of hospitality and resistance. This is a long-standing tradition for the movement. In her book *Loaves and Fishes*, Dorothy Day described the work of the Catholic Worker newspaper staff: «Since the Catholic Worker is also a movement, our editors and writers cook, clean, and wash dishes. They tend the sick, chauffeur the ailing to hospitals, and clean out vermin-ridden apartments; sometimes they decorate, carve, paint, play the guitar, and all of them join together in singing compline, the evening prayer of the Church, which brings the day to a close» (Day, 135). From the beginning, this integrated lifestyle drew criticism from folks on both sides who felt one task could be performed more effectively without the other. «There were some,» New York Worker Stanley Vishnewski recalled, «who wanted to throw out the bums, the deadbeats, the derelicts, the freeloaders, and just use the Catholic Worker as a pure propaganda cell» (cited in Miller, 106). Others complained that the Worker could have built a larger and more effective social service movement if it hadn't alienated potential supporters with its pacifist stance during World War II.

Against such critics, Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and later generations of Workers insisted that the gospel calls Christians to both hospitality and resistance. Bridging medieval Catholic piety and the «direct action» tactics of twentieth century radicals, Maurin liked to point out that «the works of mercy are the most

direct form of action there is» (Day, xvii). Years later, Jane Sammon of the New York house explained that underlying spiritual motives united the diverse activities of Catholic Workers: «Dorothy always emphasized that what we were supposed to be doing first and foremost were the corporal works of mercy. And out of that other things might come. It wouldn't be like one as opposed to the other. ... It wasn't going to become specialized. We're not just a soup kitchen. Or not just a resistance community. There's always the primacy of the spiritual and that's what motivates the life here» (cited in Troester, 190). Similarly, Jim Forest insists that «the Catholic Worker movement centers its radicalism in care for people. It constantly makes everything accountable to that experience - to what is happening to people» (cited in Troester, 37).

Catholic Workers also draw more concrete connections between hospitality and resistance. Many point out that hospitality provides a motive for resisting government policies. When one has seen first hand the ravages of federal housing cuts, it is only natural to protest increases in military spending. Thus, Catholic Worker Paul Magno says that he participated in Plowshares actions, directly dismantling weapons systems, because «I watch the consequence of that every day at the soup kitchen» (cited in Troester, 208). Char Madigan says that she accepts invitations to speak at churches only if they allow her to talk about both her work at Saint Joseph's house of hospitality and her protests at local defense contractors (cited in Troester, 194). When Catholic Workers take the stand in civil disobedience trials, they often begin by talking about their hospitality work, explaining how it inspires their commitment to social change. At one trespassing trial, for example, a «pompous» prosecutor asked Saint Louis Worker Virginia Druhe, «What would you do if someone just came into your living room one day and sat down and wouldn't leave?» «I laughed,» Druhe recalls. «I said, 'That happens pretty often, really. We talk to them. We wait. Find out what they want and explain to them what we have'» (cited in Troester, 163).

Catholic Workers also point out that hospitality work helps them build a larger community of people committed to resistance. «The charitable work we do - the Christmas party or taking in homeless folks - that's popular work,» Hartford Catholic Worker Chris Allen-Doucot told me. «People can wrap their minds around that And that's given us the opportunity to develop relationships with middle America. They get to know us. And we're not freaks. We're folks that people tend to like. They see that we live here, we do this work, and that gives us a sense of integrity. It gives us, I think, the moral authority, now that we have this relationship, to discuss deeper issues of injustice, structural problems and problems of violence» (Allen-Doucot, 2002). Though few of these people will go to prison for Plowshares actions, many will call Congress, attend a vigil, or invite Chris to give a presentation on Iraq at their church.

Less publicly, a few Catholic Workers will talk about their personal trajectory from resistance to hospitality - a trajectory that mirrors Dorothy Day's own life story. Mike Sersch of Winona and Joel Kilgour of Duluth, for example, both came to the Worker as student activists in the anti-war and animal rights movements. Mike talks of being humbled by his encounters with homeless men, with «these incredible experiences in their life,» who «look at me as just a hippy college student» (Sersch, 2002). Joel acknowledges that although he «was passionate about» resistance, he «came into this house with a lot of prejudices about people who were homeless and alcoholic and mentally ill.» As he shed those prejudices, he learned that hospitality can ground resistance work and instill a deeper awareness of the complexity of human experience. Helping a man who got gangrene because he refused treatment for a minor infection, for example, has forced him to expand Jesus' teaching about love of enemies. How, he asks, do you love «those who love you but do stupid things?» (Kilgour, 2002).

The juxtaposition of hospitality and resistance, in other words, can have powerfully transformative effects. But it can also exacerbate some of the challenges I identified earlier. To talk about «hospitality and resistance» implies that these are two distinct things - that one can «do» hospitality in the morning and then «do» resistance in the afternoon. Such dichotomous thinking increases the danger of inattentiveness, irresponsibility, self-righteousness, and unconsciousness. I may be doubly inattentive to the indirect consequences of this morning's soup line if I am preoccupied with this afternoon's demonstration. At the demonstration, I may be irresponsibly unconcerned with the effects of my action because I have already done my «practical» work in the morning. The «moral authority» I derive from my commitment to hospitality may make me more self-righteous as an activist. And I will doubtless be unconscious of m because I am so tired from all the running and forth!

The combination of hospitality and resist in other words, is meaningful only if it is intentional - if each commitment is allowed to touch and shape the other. Catholic Workers don't always achieve this degree of intentionality, but the Catholic Worker movement provides a rich framework for moving toward it. At their best, Catholic Workers bring hospitality and resistance together through the practice of *mutual critique* and through an ever deepening *self-awareness*.

By «mutual critique,» I mean taking the sort of questions that are proper to one task and applying them to the other. Thus, a Catholic Worker running a house of hospitality might ask, is this good resistance work? When I ladle out soup or make beds, am I helping to build a society in which people won't need to walk the streets in search of food and shelter? If the hospitality house is absolving the larger society of its responsibility to provide affordable housing, or if it reinforces the class divide between those who dispense soup and those who receive it, the answer may be a resounding «NO!!» On the other hand, if it provides a framework in which homeless people can organize to take political action, or if middle-class and homeless people are forging real friendships, then the answer may be «yes, indeed.»

In this regard, some of the best work is being done by very small Worker communities that intentionally limit their hospitality to what can be done in the context of a traditional household. In Worcester, Massachusetts, the Saints Francis and Therese Worker offers hospitality to just four or five people at a time. This model has inspired several local families to open their homes to a single individual, often building friendships that last for decades. Here in LaCrosse, Place of Grace offers another model of how hospitality can become not a specialized activity, but part of the rhythm of life for ordinary Christians.

Catholic Workers Angie O'Gorman and Patrick Coy have used this practice of mutual critique to show that hospitality can be a form of the «active nonviolence» that is often sought by war resisters. In hospitality houses, Workers practice nonviolence in their daily dealings with people who struggle with addiction, anger, and violence. Workers also practice nonviolence in their dealings with one another - many of whom have issues similar to the guests! The commitment to consensus decision-making and close living with limited resources provides many opportunities to resolve tensions and disagreements without violence. As Ann Manganaro explained to Coy and O'Gorman, Catholic Worker nonviolence is daily «tested

by very mundane practicalities, by raw, real-life human situations, by all the failings and frailties and marvelous strengths of people who are very different in background» (O’Gorman and Coy, 239-41).

A mutual critique also invites Catholic Workers doing resistance to ask, is this good hospitality? When I demonstrate at an air base or an Army recruiting office, am I open to seeing Christ in the face of the general, the recruiter, or the janitor who must clean up after the demonstration? Often, Catholic Workers’ long practice of hospitality empowers them to recognize the human complexity of their opponents in resistance work. Thus Duluth’s Joel Kilgour tells of a housemate who «has just an amazing ability to connect with people, whoever they are,» and who sometimes visited army recruiters in the hospital or was invited to their homes for dinner (Kilgour, 2002). Jim Forest extends the challenge by recalling that «Thomas Merton said the root of war is fear. If that’s true, then peace work has to have something to do with helping people overcome that fear. If you manage to reinforce the fear, no matter under what banner you’re doing it, you’re contributing to the problem of war ... One of the things that’s very often missing in a peace movement is a compassion for - a sense of sympathy for - those people who are frightened by Communism, frightened by change, frightened by AIDS, frightened by divorce rates, frightened by the possibility that their kids are going to end up gay. All the ten thousand things they’re worried about» (cited in Troester, 196-97).

The work of mutual critique can go a long way toward overcoming the dangers of inattentiveness and irresponsibility. Resistance questions, applied to hospitality work, invite Catholic Workers to attend to the long-range consequences of their actions, asking if they are truly building a world in which it is easier for people to do good - in Peter Maurin’s famous phrase. And hospitality questions, applied to resistance work, keep them grounded in the more immediate, face-to-face implications of work that is focused on a distant goal.

Both sets of questions can lead Catholic Workers to a much deeper self-awareness. Who is the «I» who does both hospitality and resistance? How do my day-to-day interactions with people in need shape my imagination of what a transformed society might look like? How does my hope for a new society find concrete expression in daily work? How do my personal needs and desires fit into all of this? Such questions can overcome both unconsciousness and self-righteousness, forcing Catholic Workers to embrace both their hidden motives and the real limits to their ability to effect short- or long-term change.

Pat Coy and Angie O’Gorman, in their study of nonviolence and hospitality, conclude that the most important work of nonviolence is that which occurs within the self. Because Catholic Workers confront violence on so many different levels, they often come to this realization more quickly than other activists. «Many Workers have experienced firsthand that when they wanted to dominate, to win out over the hostile guest, or to look good, they acted in ways that increased the hostility, whether they intended to do so or not. ... In these situations Workers began to see how strongly their own desires, as well as their own anger in the form of revenge and the desire for power, can effect the outcome of a hostile encounter» (O’Gorman and Coy, p. 251).

Many Workers testify that the most transformative moments occur when they place limits on their hospitality and resistance work for the sake of the quality of the work or their personal sanity. Such limit-setting actually returns the Worker to its original vision, in which hospitality and resistance are not the

preserve of a specialized or heroic few, but are shared by the whole church or the whole society. «Do your share and do it well,» said Dorothy Day. «And then agitate the rest of the community to do their share» (quoted by Bob Tavani, cited in Troester, 165-66). «If it's not fun, don't do it,» adds Willa Bickham, who has made both resistance and hospitality fun for more than thirty years at Baltimore's Viva House Catholic Worker (cited in Troester, 193). This is good advice, for only those who root hospitality and resistance in their own deepest desires can, in Gandhi's words, «be the change that you want to see in the world.»

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