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In tough times, remember values of 'the commons'

Jeff Dietrich | Sep. 1, 2011

A 15th-century illumination shows French peasants mowing hay. (Newscom/Album/Oronoz)

ESSAY

?I can?t pay the rent. I?m back on the streets tomorrow cuz they cut $40 bucks off my check ... Hey, they took my psych meds, they cut me off Medi-Cal, and now I heard that checks won?t be sent next month ...? Times are tough and that is the ?street talk? at the Catholic Worker soup kitchen.

The recent vitriolic debate in Congress about raising the debt ceiling, the rancor at paying taxes for other people?s health care, the thought that Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid might be cut, and public education dismantled, the destruction of unions, and the denigration of voices calling for mutual responsibility all reflect the degree to which the values of the marketplace have displaced our sense of the common good.

When I think of the common good, I think of the commons, the common land worked communally in pre-Renaissance Europe, and I think of Peter Maurin, cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, who still had a memory of the commons æ a memory of medieval times, forged by his early village years in a part of France that was slow to develop and still lived by the old values and rhythms.

Lewis Hyde tells us in his now classic book, *The Gift*, that this way of life was largely destroyed throughout most of Europe, and he reminds us that it was the Reformation that changed everything. In 1525 the Peasants? War, precipitated by the liberative aspects of the Reformation, was at its height in Germany. Hyde writes, ?Germany had seen over a hundred years of unrest as feudalism faded and [Lutheran] princes began to consolidate their power by territory. ... The basis of land tenure had shifted. ... Now men claimed to own the [common] land and offered to rent it for a fee.?

Thus the mass displacement of commoners from the common land, driven by capitalism, led to an unprecedented increase of impoverished people from rural areas migrating to the plague-infested slums of large European cities, there to be exploited as cheap labor for the industrial revolution and consumers of its mass-produced commodities.

Hyde describes the Europeans? export to the New World of this same process of displacement of commoners and commodification of the commons: ?The Peasants? War was the same war that the American Indians had to fight with the Europeans, war against the marketing of formerly inalienable properties. Whereas before a man could fish in any stream and hunt in any forest, now he found that there were individuals who claimed to be the owners of these commons.?

Like the Native Americans, the ancestors of our Judeo-Christian tradition were also tribal people. The 12 tribes of ancient Israel, our forefathers, escaped slaves from the ?overdeveloped? Egyptian empire, understood that ?development? and exploitation of common creation was the primary sin of humanity. They incorporated the understanding of the gift of common creation to all from the Creator God into their very laws. ?Don?t take more than you need. Make sure everyone has enough. Don?t work on the Sabbath? (Exodus 16:16-30).

The Sabbath day prohibitions call us to stop and rest in creation, as did the Native Americans, who were regarded by European settlers as lazy. It is all gift, and the more we work the more we delude ourselves into thinking that what we have is what we earned and that we deserve what is in reality a gift. That is the meaning of Sabbath.

The church?s doctrine of the common good filters down to us through the scriptures. However, its moral formulation was birthed during the feudal era, a time of peasants who, like Peter Maurin, lived off the common lands and were displaced by the lords and princes of this world. The Robin Hood story of Sherwood Forest is an old memory of that struggle. Our collective longings for primeval trees, large-eyed deer and doe, and the shining salmon surging up crystal streams recall a time when the gift of creation was common to us all.

Hyde tells us that we should understand gift as a ?total social phenomenon -- one whose transactions are at once economic, juridical, moral, aesthetic, religious, and mythical, and whose meaning cannot, therefore, be adequately described from the point of view of any single discipline.? The meaning of the gift, he says, is always enshrouded in mystery. However, the doctrine of the common good can be seen as not mysterious, but rational and reductionistic.

Yet, as Catholics, we are marked in our hearts and souls by mystery -- the mystery of the Eucharist.

Hyde has helped me to understand the mystery of the Eucharist, the mystery of gratitude. And it makes no difference whether we believe in the traditional eucharistic doctrine of ?transubstantiation,? or we believe in the ?unbloody sacrifice of Calvary,? or we believe that we simply ?share a meal, a common meal, so that all might be satisfied.? It is still mystery.

And mystery, Hyde says, ?revives and refreshes? and marks us as people of the gift and the common good, causing us to remember the startling words of Isaiah: ?Why work for that which is not food? Why give your life for what does not satisfy?? I also think of Dorothy Day, who at the end of her life could say, ?All is grace, all is grace, all is gift and grace.? Hyde quotes Thomas Merton, who says, ?Grace and gift flow to the empty places, grace flows to the poor beggar with the empty bowl,? and the mystery of the Eucharist is that gift and grace flow back from the empty places, softening the hardest hearts.

As Catholics, we know intuitively and irrationally that our redemption, our very salvation, is bound up with softening hearts and the mutual reciprocity of gift that flows to the empty places. We are all people marked by mystery and the gift of the common good that surpasses all understanding and flies under the radar of logic and rationality, striking the core of our being. We know that in some mysterious way we are all connected, that we are all in communion, that as Dorothy Day would say, ?An injury to one is an injury to us all.?

In addition, we know that the rancor, rhetoric and rectitude of the current public discourse is not our language.

We know that our mother tongue is the language of soft hearts, of gift and grace and Eucharist. We know that we cannot be whole until all empty bowls of the poor are filled and all empty spaces are filled -- until the hills are brought down and the valleys are filled.

We cannot be satisfied until all are satisfied.

Times are tough. The commons will continue to be rapaciously ?developed? for the profit of the few; the poor will continue to be evicted from the commons and marginated from the common good. Wealthy capitalists will try to commodify and control every element that is common to our common humanity: food, water, earth and even the air; and then they will try to sell it back to us for a profit.

We live in a perilous time, a time that calls for perilous action, but we cannot save the world. As Christians we are enjoined to believe that the world has already been saved, as absurd as that notion may seem. In the words of St. Teresa of Avila, ?The worst is already over.?

If we believe such pie-in-the-sky nonsense, we have only one choice: We are compelled to live our lives as a testament to that very nonsense. We have to fly like a bird under the radar of marketplace rationality and marketplace logos and risk the derision, diminishment and dismissal that come to fools who take it all seriously. We have to risk everything on the importance of the common good and put ourselves in the flow of the gift relationship, into the mystery of the Eucharist that is celebrated, however improbably, in such disparate places as Sunday suburban parishes, ghetto hovels, prison cells, papal palaces, and, yes, the basements of tawdry soup kitchens.

[Jeff Dietrich is a Los Angeles Catholic Worker community member and editor of the *Catholic Agitator*, in which a longer version of this article appeared. His new book, *Broken and Shared: Food, Dignity, and the Poor on Los Angeles? Skid Row* will be published this fall by Marymount Institute Press.]

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