NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Spending time with a Catholic Worker house in Northern California

John Dear | Jun. 25, 2013 On the Road to Peace

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the Catholic Worker, the movement of hospitality to the poor and public peacemaking, which I consider the greatest gift of the North American church. These days, I'm spending a few weeks helping out at the Kelly Avenue Catholic Worker house [1] in Half Moon Bay, Calif., while my friends Eric and Alice, who run the house, are away on a much-needed vacation. So I've been able to experience the Worker again firsthand and give thanks for this ministry.

Thirty years ago, I spent a few weeks at the New York City Catholic Worker, and I've visited many houses across the country since then, but this is my first time back staying at one. Of course, it helps that this house is located among the hills of Northern California along the Pacific Ocean.

At the moment, the Half Moon Bay house offers four main services: hospitality to the homeless; a soup kitchen that feeds 200 people twice a week; labor at a nearby community farm to harvest and distribute fresh, organic produce to low-income families; and a weekly distribution of donated items such as clothing, furniture and bikes. Currently, a Mexican family with two children is staying with us. The Worker also distributes food four times a week and offers emergency assistance as well as medical support and accompaniment to families and homeless people. My job is simply to be here and help out with these projects.

On my first full day, we were up at 5 a.m. to load the white pickup truck with 10 crates of fresh vegetables picked on the nearby farm for the Coastside Lutheran Church for the morning soup kitchen. Usually approximately 200 people come for breakfast, mainly farm worker families and a few homeless people. As the church volunteers arrived, set up and began cooking, it was announced that I would cook the pancakes!

"Excuse me," I said as gently as possible, "but I'm the world's worst cook. I routinely burn toast."

"No problem," they said.

"There are different gifts," I argued, quoting Scripture. It didn't work.

"There's the grill, there's the batter, here's a spatula -- get to work. We need mounds of blueberry pancakes immediately."

So for the rest of the morning, I stood over the massive hot grill, pouring out batter, flipping pancakes and putting them out for folks to eat, then cleaning the grill, oiling it down and starting all over. After a while, I got the hang of it and earned a few compliments. I made at least 500 pancakes, but it could have been 5,000 -- I'm not sure.

It was exciting and exhausting. At one point, I remembered the old "I Love Lucy" episode when Lucy and Ethel are working in the candy factory, putting little chocolate candies on the conveyor belt and barely managing, when the manager comes by and yells, "Very good! Speed it up a little!" At any moment, I half-expected the soup kitchen manager to yell out, "Speed it up a little!"

Of course, the whole experience set me thinking. I reminisced about my work some 28 years ago in the Saturday soup kitchen in the Bowery in Lower Manhattan, where I made meatloaf for 1,000 homeless people each week for two years. I thought of Jesus' soup kitchen -- the multiplication of the loaves and fishes -- and pondered our use of eggs and pancakes instead. I recalled his Matthew 25 declaration: "When I was hungry, you gave me food. When I was thirsty, you gave me drink." These works of mercy, for me, are the opposite of the works of war, and as Dorothy Day taught, a necessary ingredient to the life of Gospel peacemaking.

The volunteers were a happy bunch of retired church folk who usually got talked into helping out one morning years ago and have kept coming back ever since.

In winter, the crowds are bigger. That particular morning, we had about 125 people. Half of them were children. I presumed the fathers were already out in the fields. The children were shy, the mothers warm and friendly. I watched them all and noticed that each child filled up his or her plate with a pile of scrambled eggs, sausages and several pancakes -- an enormous portion -- and then, one by one, they ate every last morsel. Nothing was left over.

Clearly, these children were very, very hungry.

Over the years, the soup kitchen has worked hard to provide a gourmet meal. In particular, they cook mounds of delicious scrambled eggs filled with peppers, onions, cheese, potatoes and other goodies. This food would be quite expensive at a fancy restaurant, so maybe they eat so much because it's so good.

I wish that were true. You would never know it, but hunger is on the rise in the United States. Here in the land of obesity, millions are hungry -- and around the world, a billion are starving. I saw this with my own eyes here in the Bay Area this week. It was shocking and sobering to behold.

We have billions of dollars for war, drones and nuclear weapons, but no money to feed hungry children in our own backyard. If you don't believe it, start helping out at your local Catholic Worker, shelter or soup kitchen and you'll see for yourself what's really happening at the bottom.

The Catholic Worker provides a concrete opportunity for us to lend an immediate hand. It's simple and humble but powerful and impressive work. Most of all, it's the work Jesus expects of his followers. He insisted that he hangs out among the poor, the marginalized, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned and most of all, children. So it's a good place to meet Jesus.

"I came to the Catholic Worker because, as a follower of Jesus, I wanted to learn how to live a different way of life," Katerina Friesen, a young Mennonite volunteer, told me the other day. "The Catholic Worker tradition of resisting war and serving the poor made sense to me, and it's turned out to be a really liberating experience. Now, when I see a homeless person, I feel free to talk with him or her, to ask what they need rather than walking past or feeling afraid. And I used to be bound by anxiety about my life, but now I see how my needs are taken care of even as I help care for other people's needs."

At the moment, Katerina is trying to figure out how we will drive a homeless man at 5 a.m. across the Bay in a few days to a hospital where he has to undergo major back surgery, then where we can find a place for him to recuperate when he's released.

"There is no such thing as a *successful* Catholic Worker," Jeff Dietrich writes in the latest issue of *The Catholic Agitator* [2] of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, one of my favorite publications. "The life of the Catholic Worker is a life of struggle and disappointment that strips away your illusions, but never achieves your expectations, much less your hopes. It is a never-ending learning process fraught with pitfalls and foibles. Anyone can serve soup, and many people put their bodies in places of social distress, but to live in community or to try to hold a community together over the years is seemingly impossible. It is a journey that begs for a providential combination of grace, guts, and luck."

Here at the Half Moon Bay Catholic Worker, Eric, Alice, Melissa, Katerina and their friends and supporters struggle to offer loving solidarity to the poor. It's a life of service without any financial reciprocation. You serve those who cannot pay you back. But there are other returns -- the blessing of good friends, a sense of purpose and goodness, and the consoling experience of concretely helping others.

The Catholic Worker also pays very low-income people to work with them at a nearby massive community farm, harvesting and cleaning the organic vegetables for free distribution among the poor. Next week, I'll write about my long afternoons in the hot sun working in the fields to reap a harvest.

(Donations to support the Kelly Avenue Catholic Worker can be sent to the Catholic Worker, 160 Kelly Ave., Half Moon Bay, CA 94019.)

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John Dear will undertake a national speaking tour in the winter on his upcoming book, *The Nonviolent Life*. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [3]. John is now working with the Francsican-based peace group Pace e Bene [4]. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace [5]* by Rosalie Riegle and with Daniel Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* [6] by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [7] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [8], *Put Down Your Sword* [9] and *A Persistent Peace* [10], are available from Amazon.com.

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