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Catholic Workers rely on grace, guts, luck in 80-year-old mission

Jeff Dietrich | Sep. 14, 2013
Essay

This year we celebrate the 80th anniversary of the Catholic Worker movement and the 43rd anniversary of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. Just a few months after we opened our doors, Ammon Hennacy died. With the closing of his Joe Hill House of Hospitality in Salt Lake City, the newborn Catholic Worker in Los Angeles, Ammon Hennacy House, became the oldest Catholic Worker west of the Mississippi -- in fact, in 1970, the only Catholic Worker west of the Mississippi.

We have been here for a long time now, and we are still the oldest Catholic Worker west of the Mississippi. One would think that we would have lots of wisdom about how to run a successful Catholic Worker. Actually, there is no such thing as a successful Catholic Worker: 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.

When I came to the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, I was just a 24-year-old idealistic draft resister. Like most of the young people who are attracted to the Worker, I was anti-authoritarian. And like all the young people who continue to be attracted to the Catholic Worker movement, I wanted to do good things and fight against authoritarian figures who oppress the poor and make life miserable for the world's have-nots. Energy, idealism and willingness to struggle -- these are all great attributes as long as they are focused on the outside world. The problems come, though, when we try to live together in a community filled with other anti-authoritarians.

After my first two years at the Worker, our founders, Dan and Chris Delany, left. Their exit came on the heels of some months of community conflict between the young people and the old people. (In retrospect, the Delanys were not so very old then, but the young people were very, very young.) This difficult struggle set the motif for a pattern of community conflict that would periodically appear between the old people and the young people, between authority figures and anti-authority figures.

In the absence of the Delanys, I tried to assume, if not authority, at least adult responsibility. However, my friend and fellow community member Danny Bender felt that I had become dictatorial and rigid. So one night, he got drunk, tore up the house, broke out the windows, threatened to beat me to a pulp, and certainly would have had I not thrown myself on my knees and started to pray the Our Father. "Oh shit," he said as he walked away in disgust.

During those days, our community was engaged in the blood strike, a high-profile campaign boycotting whole blood banks to obtain more money and health care for Skid Row donors. For three months we ran the soup kitchen, slept in the basement with 10 homeless men, got up every morning at 5:30 a.m. and picketed the blood banks. We were assaulted and threatened with firebombing and death. And while our efforts were met with much media attention and public praise, the end result of our strenuous efforts was not victory, but the closure of all the whole blood banks on Skid Row.

After three years with the Catholic Worker, I was exhausted and burned out. My best friend had attacked me, my brother had recently committed suicide, and my girlfriend had just left me to travel in Europe with her English professor. I was ready for a change.

So, along with two old college friends, Gaye and David, and a sweet but ferocious-looking and very protective Doberman pinscher, I took a trip across the U.S. in a battered old green 1953 milk van. There were two seats up front and the rest of the van was just one large bed with an Indian print spread, and it had a secret panel where the plastic baggy of marijuana was stashed. Yes, it was a hippie van. We made the mistake of going to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls and, yes, we were detained and thoroughly searched for two hours by U.S. border authorities. No, they did not find the bag of marijuana. You have to give me a break: It was, after all, 1973 and, really, the marijuana was not mine.

In the meantime, Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker and my hero, had just been released from jail for protesting with the United Farm Workers in Fresno, Calif., and she was under court order to remain in the state. Consequently, Dorothy stayed with us for two weeks. I still had the green milk van and did everything I could to avoid her since I had already decided to leave the Catholic Worker and felt really guilty about it.

When Dorothy departed, I immediately announced to the community that I was leaving. In response, Holy Child Jesus Sr. Catherine Morris told the community that she would be leaving as well. Afterward, I walked her out to her little yellow Fiat. For some months, I had sensed that Catherine might have some interest in me, but she was a nun and it would have been an occasion of sin to allow my thoughts to linger in that direction for more than three seconds. But I did allow myself to imagine what it might be like to be married to a woman who actually wanted to do Catholic Worker service work -- and who was actually much better at it than me.

So after knowing Sr. Catherine Morris for two years and being really good pals throughout the blood strike and through multiple communal trials, in a moment of spontaneity I told the nun that I loved her. I could not see in the dark, but I am pretty sure that she blushed. I then followed suit and asked her to marry me.

"I couldn't do that," she said. Of course not, I thought to myself, you are a nun. You are the bride of Christ. Of course you can't marry me.

But no, she did not say that. She said, "I can't marry you because I'm too old." There is a 12-year age gap between Catherine Morris and myself. But her response caused me to say, "Whoa! If this is not a theological or ontological impediment, it could be doable."

So despite some objections from nuns, family and Catholic Worker community members, and an Italian postal strike that postponed Vatican approval, our marriage took place on Feb. 19, 1974. We both stayed at the Catholic Worker and struggled together.

After we were married, it seemed as if we could do nothing wrong. The community grew to encompass not only a soup kitchen, but a medical clinic with volunteer doctors and four full-time live-in nurses, a law center with a live-in lawyer and a staff of four community members, a playground project with a live-in, fully certified school teacher with two assistants, a bakery project, and an at-cost food store that served the Skid Row neighborhood.

With more than 30 full-time community members, we had achieved the apex of Catholic Worker development. We were sometimes known in the movement as the Catholic Worker empire.

And even better, we engaged in a highly successful, media-intense civil disobedience campaign that ultimately closed down the "Arms Bazaar" convention in Anaheim. That campaign also resulted in the publication of my first book, *Reluctant Resister*. After 15 years in the movement, I was at the top of my Catholic Worker career and could not have been more satisfied. However, it didn't last very long.

While our 10th anniversary had been a great success, the 15th was celebrated in spite of the misery and pain of community separation. Our community diminished from around 30 to just barely six folks, with all of our great projects gradually leaving as well. Once a successful Catholic Worker, I was quickly becoming an abject failure. The unraveling coincided with my 40th birthday, and while 40 doesn't seem so old today, when you still imagine yourself to be 24, it can be devastating.

Nonetheless, we pressed forward with our cadre of much diminished but hardcore committed members, and in the midst of our crisis, we came to the conclusion that we would no longer attempt to build a Catholic Worker empire in Los Angeles. Rather, we would attempt, as far as possible, to send out L.A. Catholic Worker folks to other locations to found new Catholic Worker communities in other areas. Great idea, but tough when you send out much-needed personnel from a much-diminished community. So, as a corollary, we developed the idea of our summer intern program to recruit possible new community members. We would offer an intensive six-week opportunity to live, work and party with the Catholic Worker and get an intensive ideological immersion as well.

Sounds good, but after 25 years the jury is still out on whether the amount of energy put into the project produces a reasonable return on our efforts, despite the wisdom of Dorothy Day, who said, "We plant the seed but we do not reap the harvest." Nice thought, but difficult to run a large soup kitchen project on such pieties!

Therefore, out of our despair, utter destruction and complete dismantling, the six people who remained went on to create a vision of sister house communities, a stripped-down "mother house" focused on Catholic Worker service, resistance and community that included not only regular business meetings, but regular Bible study, and cultural critique sessions, and personal meetings that opened a reasonably safe space in which people could express grievances, dissatisfactions, personal hurts. Sounds good. And it actually did work in its own limp-along manner. Over the next 15 years, there were minor scuffles and disagreements about the Bible, about Catholic Worker ideology, about beliefs and values and personal patterns.

People came and went, the soup kitchen was destroyed in the '87 earthquake. We built a new kitchen and created a gorgeous garden (the garden was idyllic, community sometimes not). We were arrested for occupying the old cathedral bell tower as well as at the cardinal's groundbreaking ceremony to protest the huge expense of the new cathedral in Los Angeles. We also poured blood and oil on the steps of the federal building to protest the first Gulf War.

Not a bad record, 15 years with only minor community strife. But major strife did come again. Yes, it is always about personality issues that get wrapped in ideological issues. It is always about the authoritarians vs. the anti-authoritarians. The young people vs. the old people. Finally, it is not about ideology, it is about who is in charge. Once again, it was the young people struggling against the old guard. They had a new environmentally driven vision of urban gardens, children's art workshops, and bicycle repair shops, and bicycle advocacy as the alternative to environmentally destructive automobiles. It was a good vision.

By this time, I was nearing 60 and my wife was almost 70. We had put in 30-some years and maybe it was time to step aside. Maybe the Holy Spirit was working to incarnate a new vision and we were an impediment. Together we created a "retirement plan." We would send out a CV to our 10 sister houses: "Older couple with 30 years of Catholic Worker experience, willing to live in hospitality house. Will do one day a week of child

care, one day a week of Bible instruction, will participate in all service and resistance activities, and attend all communal meetings. Not interested in leadership positions."

Catherine and I were actually warming up to our retirement vision. We had a particular house in mind in a small, rural farmworker town near the ocean on the Central Coast. We were sort of happy with our fallback proposal. However, when we presented our retirement plan to the community, the young people thought we were bluffing and the old guard just flat-out said, "If Jeff and Catherine are leaving, we are leaving too." Hmmm, that did not go well.

We had been through this before, and I knew that when a large number of people leave, they often take with them volunteers and donors who have been very attached to them, and even more, they leave an invisible trail of tears that potential new community members can sniff out and find to be an inaccessible roadway.

But we continued to soldier on: running the soup kitchen and hospitality house, protesting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, protesting drone warfare and Guantánamo Bay prison, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, accompanying the dying, and amazingly enough still attracting some young folks to the work.

However, by this August, most of our young people will be leaving, with the exception of Josephine, our 19-year-old from Canada who has made a one-year commitment to the community. Everyone else will be the old people. Most over 60. Most with multiple infirmities, prescriptions, doctor appointments, and generally diminished physical capacities. Recently, one of my heroes, Brendan Walsh, 45-year veteran of Viva House Catholic Worker in Baltimore, spoke of what I consider to be the bottom line. "Well," he said, "Willa and I can still lift the soup pots." In Los Angeles, our soup pots are a bit larger and heavier, but if we do it together, we can still lift the soup pots.

I take heart in the realization that in this current situation, all of our young people who are leaving are leaving not with bitterness but to explore other Catholic Worker paths or to form sister houses of their own.

I also take heart in the words of my mentor and friend Phil Berrigan, who said on his deathbed that his greatest disappointment was that he had not been able to form viable community. Community is elusive and volatile by its very nature. I think we have come close here in Los Angeles.

And I am grateful as I approach the end of my life that while a few of our sister houses have failed, there are also numerous others that continue to struggle in the same manner as we do and have done so for 15 and 25 years.

So, after 40 years, I live in a community whose future is currently dependent on one 19-year-old Canadian. Even though our retirement plan seems to be, as my wife tells me, dying and going to heaven, which I am not quite ready for, I still think it has been worth it.

Yes, as difficult and arduous as it has been, I am able to live in an environment that did not make me saintly or wise or famous, but just made me better than I would have been otherwise. I am grateful to Dorothy Day and all Catholic Workers, past and present; I am grateful to Phil Berrigan, I am especially grateful to my wife, Catherine, and all of the Los Angeles Catholic Workers, filled with idealism and anti-authoritarianism that have kept this place alive and helped me to know who I am.

[Jeff Dietrich is a member of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker and the editor of the *Catholic Agitator*, where this article first appeared.]

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