

The joy of the Gospel: sisters and Catholic Workers

Mary Ann McGivern | Dec. 6, 2013 NCR Today

"The Joy of the Gospel" is about living out evangelization and making the poor feel welcome, opposing abortion and war and the death penalty while sheltering everyone. So says *NCR* columnist John Allen. Allen's column "[Francis and a church that breathes with both lungs](#) [1]" looks at these elements of the teachings of Benedict and Francis. He says it's rare in church conferences to find more than one part of the whole.

Not so in the conferences I go to. Of course, I have lived my life in the narrow worlds of nuns, Catholic Workers and my parish. I don't go to many other conferences.

Almost all Catholic sisters live a sacramental life and serve the poor as well as teach religion to children and to people interested in becoming Catholic. We carry this experience with us -- at bus stations where drunks inevitably find the sister, habited or no; on planes, where seatmates unburden their souls; with colleagues and family members who want to know what the Immaculate Conception really is. (A Jewish co-worker responded, "And they name playgrounds after this?") Simultaneously, we carry our experience of walking with people who are hungry, homeless, possibly pregnant, possibly mentally ill. Of course, one can only say one thing at a time, but we are living within the whole. Perhaps this sense of the whole is what unnerves some bishops.

And then there's the Catholic Worker. The Worker continues to be a hotbed of civil disobedience, a place of regular prayer, a solace to the destitute, a concrete choice for life. Almost all the Worker houses publish journals and sponsor speakers, the better to engage in clarification of thought, as taught by Peter Maurin. And they all remind one another of Feodor Dostoevsky's words that "love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams" and of Frank Donovan's comment that there are two classes of Workers: the saints and the martyrs who live with the saints.

Catholic parishes too achieve that fullness of spiritual life that includes challenging sermons, rich liturgy, active social service and the participation of a few homeless mentally ill persons in the warmth of the Eucharist. It is these last parishioners who disturb our comfort and invite us to participate in the lives of the poor.

I have had the great good luck, the lovely grace, to be given comrades -- Workers and sisters -- who have carried me along to places and people I never would have known. [In an *NCR* interview](#) [2], Sr. Carmen Sammut, president of the International Union of Superiors General, says that part of the role of religious life is "to meet those we would not by nature meet." We, the Worker and sister communities, stand on the shoulders of giants, our founders. We serve the church by serving the people of God.

The popes, like us, labor under the burden of being able to say only one thing at a time. We all lose track of what we've been emphasizing, and we are reluctant to change a train of thought that seems to be effective. So the popes and the bishops with them get caught in proclamations of authority or mores or liturgical correctness. They don't have the saving grace of a disoriented man with bangles around his neck, wandering up and down the aisles. Pope Francis should invite back that little boy who sat in his chair at a reception.

Our best bet, I think, is to continue to build small communities of faith. A diocese can't live evangelization the

way a parish or a Catholic Worker house -- or even a small hospital -- lives it, sheltering the poor and seeking justice.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/francis-and-church-breathes-both-lungs>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/news/sisters-stories/global-sisters-leader-pope-calls-us-move-make-difference>