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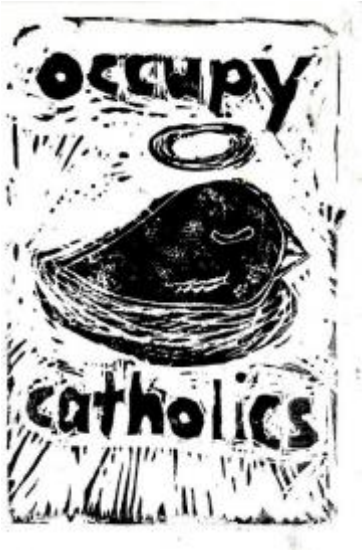
Occupy Catholics seeks to make tradition relevant to a new movement

Jamie Manson | Jul. 9, 2012 Grace on the Margins

"We are the 99%, made in God's image, seeking God's justice."

So declares the Facebook page [1] for Occupy Catholics, one of the latest additions to the pantheon of Catholic church justice movements. But rather than emerging out of Vatican II or in direct response to a particular crisis within the institutional church, Occupy Catholics might be the first progressive Catholic group to grow directly out of a popular movement.



"The idea was to find ways for Catholics to support the Occupy movement and to think together about challenges the movement poses to our church," said Nathan Schneider, one of the group's founders.

It's also one of the first church justice groups to be created in part by members of the Millennial generation. And it shows: Occupy Catholics has no offices, positions or leadership structure. It's an organization that reflects the value the Millennial generation places on autonomy and collaboration, as well as their mistrust of authority.

"We're just people who work together, and pray together, to do stuff," Schneider, 27, said.

Interestingly, it was a protest against an Episcopal church, not a Catholic church, that first brought the founding members of Occupy Catholics together.

After Occupy Wall Street was aggressively evicted from Zuccotti Park in New York City, Occupiers hoped to set up camp in Duarte Square, an empty lot they found in lower Manhattan. The space seemed promising because it is owned by Trinity Wall Street, an Episcopal congregation that often runs large conferences on topics related to social change. (Their upcoming conference will be headlined by Sr. Joan Chittister and Fr. Richard Rohr.)

Up until this point, Trinity, one of the largest landowners in the city, had been giving Occupiers small meeting spaces. They drew the line on allowing a large encampment in Duarte Square, however, because the church believed that would be breaking the law.

Occupy Wall Street organized a protest against Trinity at Duarte Square. Among those gearing up to occupy the new space were Sr. Susan Wilcox, a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood, N.Y., and Fr. Paul Mayer, a former Benedictine priest.

Schneider, a writer and editor for the web publications Waging Nonviolence [2] and Killing the Buddha [3], was on site to cover the protest as a journalist.

The three Catholics struck up a conversation.

"We were all people who have been interested in the Occupy movement, but also experienced the movement as something that resonated with our Catholic faith," Wilcox said.

When police arrived, Wilcox and Mayer were among the first to go over the fence. They and many other protestors, including an Episcopal bishop, were arrested.

A week later, Schneider, Wilcox and Mayer met to explore the ideas that emerged among them at the protest.

"We were three months into the movementand wondering, 'Where are the Catholics?' " said Wilcox, 53.

"We struggled to get support from the local Catholic clergy," she said. They realized that any Occupy Catholics movement would have to be lay-driven.

After establishing themselves on Facebook, Occupy Catholics began to attract attention from a spectrum of Catholics, including young adults and Catholics who were not tied to established church justice groups.

For their first action, they joined Catholics United on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral in a Good Friday demonstration against Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan's budget. Together, the groups carried banners and sang, "Were you there when they crucified the poor?"

"We are the church, and we love our church, and right now the church needs to speak," one protestor declared from an open mic.

"We're not protesting, we're advertising love," read a sign held by a member of Occupy Catholic. After the event, a number of Occupy Catholics attended the standing-room-only Good Friday service at the cathedral.

There was one clear distinction between Occupy Catholics and Catholic United, however: Occupy Catholics did not have a petition to deliver to Cardinal Timothy Dolan.

"Giving a petition asking a leader to say something, it's just not a very Occupy-ish thing to do," Schneider said. "It is something we respect and will support, but I think our purpose is more focused on just helping encouraging others to speak up."

In contrast with many Catholic reform groups, Occupy Catholic does not hold a certain set of goals in common. They do not have a membership or a mission statement.

"Our agenda is kind of limited," Schneider said. "We're more of an agitator trying to stir up energy."

But the group does hold one conviction in common with other progressive Catholic groups.

"We share the belief that ordinary Catholics have a voice that isn't being heard in the church and that we are the church and that we need to find ways to be heard," Schneider said.

Schneider admits that not taking a definitive stance on the burning issues for Catholics in the U.S., such as women's ordination, the full inclusion of LGBT Catholics and the use of contraception, can be a challenge. A visit to the group's Facebook page shows the variety of opinions being debated on these and other topics.

"We try to respect one another's views," he said, "and hope we won't lose anyone in the process."

Occupy Catholics attempts to take a creative approach to engaging the pronouncements of the bishops, a tactic on full display recently in their response to the call for a Fortnight for Freedom. For Occupy Catholics, it sounded like a great idea -- in theory, at least -- to stand up and talk about freedom.

"Freedom is a wonderful word within the Occupy movement," Wilcox said. "So when the bishops proposed that we talk about freedom, it was irresistible."

The group sent a letter in advance to Cardinal Dolan, advising him that on June 21, which was the eve of his Fortnight Mass, they meet outside of St. Patrick's for a general assembly to talk about freedom. When they arrived, they found their right to assemble nearly compromised.

"We were greeted not by the open arms of the church, but rather the steel cages of police barricades," Schneider said. "We learned immediately that any attempt to do something grass-roots that wasn't totally in keeping with their particular political message was not welcome."

Assembling on a little slice of the sidewalk, 25 Occupy Catholics talked for two hours about identifying a list of threats to freedom [4] that most concerned them as Catholics. Their discussions included freedom from discrimination, freedom from complicity in the war and the economy of the 1 percent, and freedom to self-govern in both church and society.

"The longer it went, the deeper the conversations got," Wilcox said. "It was a brutally hot evening, and yet rather than being depleted, the people became more energized as time went by."

When the assembly concluded, several Occupy Catholics created a "night fort" and slept outside the cathedral. They rose in the morning and attended Dolan's Fortnight Mass.

With the fortnight behind them, Occupy Catholics hopes to move toward the kind of concerns that are deeply embedded in the Catholic social justice tradition but outside the internal turmoil of the institution.

Their plan is to help raise awareness of the issues of war and nuclear weapons to the larger Occupy movement, which has been largely silent about these global crises. Their hope is to bring the experience and wisdom of the Catholic activism to a movement that is still young and developing.

"We think our faith and our tradition has a lot to offer the Occupy movement, which has a lot of frustration but not as many answers or experience to draw on," Schneider said.

They try to incorporate not only the social justice theories of Catholicism, but also its liturgical traditions. After a group reflection on their Good Friday action, "one of our members thought, wouldn't have been great if the day before, we had done a foot washing?" Wilcox said. "And we said, There is never a wrong time for a foot washing."

So on the evening before Occupy Wall Street's large May Day action, the group set out to wash the feet of Occupiers. Both the protestors and passersby were touched by their action.

"People walking on the streets of New York were stopping and telling us how moved they were" by the sight of the foot washing, Wilcox said.

Other works of mercy that they have brought to the larger Occupy movement include a ministry of hospitality for protestors. Members work with local Catholic schools to find lodging to traveling Occupiers. They are also creating a jail support network of people who will receive arrested protestors when they are released.

"For us, it has to go both ways," Schneider said. "It's not just about trying to agitate in the church. It's also about being a forum through which the Catholic tradition can be made relevant to a popular movement that stretches beyond Catholics."

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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