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What we can learn from a Catholic Worker life

John Dear S.J. | Mar. 6, 2012 On the Road to Peace

I consider Jeff Dietrich one of the best spiritual writers in the nation as well as one of our most faithful Christian witnesses. Alas, too few know him or read his work. For 40 years, he has lived at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker and edited their newspaper, *The Catholic Agitator*, which I consider to be one of the best Christian publications in the nation.

Marymount Institute Press has now published a superb collection of Jeff's best writing called *Broken and Shared: Food, Dignity, and the Poor on Los Angeles' Skid Row* [1]. With a foreword by Martin Sheen and an introduction by Daniel Berrigan, *Broken and Shared* takes its place beside Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness*, Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* and Dan's autobiography, *To Dwell in Peace*, as one of our most inspiring Christian autobiographies, a book to return to over and over again. I urge everyone to get it, and to subscribe to the *Agitator*. (The newspaper publishes bimonthly and costs $1 a year. To subscribe, write to LACW, 632 N. Brittania St., Los Angeles, CA 90033, or go to lacatholicworker.org [2].)

Thousands of us write and speculate about spiritual, theological, even Gospel matters, but few live them with such Christian authenticity. Like his friend and teacher Dorothy Day, Jeff Dietrich has been writing for 40 years about such matters, usually after a long day serving 1,000 homeless people on Skid Row in Los Angeles. Like other Catholic Workers, Jeff practices both Matthew 25 (feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned) *and* Matthew 5 (love your enemies, be as compassionate as God, hunger and thirst for justice, blessed are the peacemakers). Jeff is one of those rare souls who embodies the Gospel teachings, who lives them day in and day out, and who can also write well about them.

Since 1970, you can find Jeff most mornings on Skid Row in Los Angeles at their large Catholic Worker soup kitchen, known affectionately by the locals as "the Hippie Kitchen." Each week, about 3,000 meals are served by the L.A. Catholic Workers and volunteers. They also run a free dental clinic and a small medical center. Through the decades, Jeff has also protested every war and injustice, and has been arrested more than 40 times. He has spent several long stints in prison, as his prison journals published here attest.

Broken and Shared takes us through his time in the county jail, his service at the soup kitchen, his thoughts on the church, his civil disobedience actions against war, his resistance to the U.S. empire, his insights against technology, his understanding of Christian anarchy, his biblical reflections and some final thoughts on compassion -- as "an act of seeing."

I particularly liked his opening essay, "Forever Young." It tells a remarkable tale, a St. Paul-like testimony of a Christian journey in post-Christian, late 20th-century America. His journey to the Catholic Worker was literally the fruit of a Jack Kerouac-like road trip. He started hitchhiking from New York City with only $3 in his pocket and made his way to Los Angeles, where, by the providence of God, he landed at the Catholic Worker, and he's been there ever since.

His journey began when he fled the country to avoid being drafted into the Vietnam War. Then, after traveling through Europe, he came back, a long-haired hippie. He expected to be arrested at New York's Kennedy airport.

Ignored by customs, he set off for Los Angeles. In St. Louis, he was invited to attend a Peacemakers conference. There, he was surprised to meet, among others, a group from Milwaukee who served the poor and resisted the draft, and who did so -- brace yourselves -- as Catholics. They called themselves Catholic Workers.

"As I listened to their story," he writes in these opening pages, "a light suddenly went on in my head. This is what Jesus would be doing if he were around today, I thought. He would be feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and burning draft files!"

Amen, Jeff. Yes, if Jesus were among us today, he would be feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, healing the sick -- and protesting our wars, resisting systemic injustice, defending creation, engaging in civil disobedience, agitating for peace and justice. In short, Jesus would be working to welcome God's reign of nonviolence here and now in our midst.

Jeff continues:

> It was what the Buddhists call Samadhi -- a flashing moment of realization. I understood that all of those gospel stories I was vaguely familiar with were not just spiritual allegories; that the life of Jesus was not just some sacramental metaphor; that the Sermon on the Mount was not just a quaint collection of spiritual poetry; that Christianity was not just a set of dogmas and prohibitions; that we were not supposed to worship Jesus -- we were supposed to practice Jesus. We were supposed to be feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and burning draft files. It was the most radical thing I could imagine, and it was being done by Catholics, a group that had been thoroughly purged as irrelevant from my recently formed radical soul.

Once in Los Angeles, Jeff made his way to the Catholic Worker. Within 30 minutes of his arrival, he was assigned the job of editor for their newly formed paper, *The Catholic Agitator*. Jeff was mightily impressed with their service to the poor and homeless of Skid Row and their steadfast protests against the Vietnam War. So he stayed. Forty years later, he writes:

> To be a Catholic Worker does not mean that we believe we can transform the poor or the domination system itself but rather that we believe we can transform ourselves. The most important thing for us is to live our lives as if the gospels were true, calling us back to a more sustainable vision of community, simplicity, and resource. We try to live our lives by the story of Jesus, but that story is not a success story. It is, rather, a failure story. Jesus was betrayed by his best friend, denied by his lead disciple, deserted by his followers, and ridiculed by his once-adoring crowds. He died a painful and humiliating death on a cross. And his resurrection was not a triumph but rather an affirmation of his "failure project" -- that radically inclusive program in which the "successful affluent" would redistribute their resources in community with the "unsuccessful poor" such that "all ate and were satisfied" (Mt. 14:20).

The Catholic Worker vision is "impractical, unquantifiable, and unachievable, but essential to our humanity," he continues.

> It now has been forty years since I first encountered the Catholic Worker, and I still feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless, although I have never burned draft files. I have poured blood and oil on the steps of the Federal Building downtown Los Angeles to protest the Persian Gulf War; cut the fence around the Nevada Nuclear Test Site to protest nuclear weapons; occupied the bell tower of the cathedral and appropriated the Cardinal's bulldozer to protest the Church's extravagant building project; blockaded the bathroom of City Hall to get porta-potties for those who sleep on the streets; and placed my body under the giant tires of a dump truck to protest the city's theft of property from the homeless.
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> Though I am older now, I still operate out of the youthful assumptions that originally attracted me to the

> Catholic Worker, that basic sense of simplicity and immediacy of the gospel put into practice, that calls us to give up everything and become a disciple of Jesus and serve those in need, confront war and injustice, be a human being, and do this outside the context of an institutional apparatus, whether that be State or Church or foundation or nonprofit corporation. To meet human needs in a human way -- this is what appealed to the youthful pilgrim in me. The Catholic Worker ... is simply a living witness to the gospel ethic of humans responding humanely to one another.

What a dazzling witness to truth, service, compassion and peace! You won't hear such a luminous vision on the nightly news, or from our politicians, or even from most chanceries. Jeff has joined the ancient lineage of the prophets and early apostles who speak the truth through word and deed. He is a worthy son of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin who shows us that we can live the Gospel story in our own times in our own ordinary lives and that we can be faithful to that witness.

He writes:

> I believe the gospels are the best story we have. They are the singular counter-narrative to our consumerist, war-mongering, media-saturated, technologized, dehumanized, death-oriented culture. The story of the gospels -- the triumph of goodness and mercy over the powers of death and domination -- cannot be proven; and we cannot accept the story on faith alone; but we love the story so much that we want it to be true. To will the story into existence by our own living testimony to its veracity, thus giving witness to our deepest hopes for humanity -- that is what attracted me as a young person to the Catholic Worker.
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> It is simply a love of the story and the existential recognition that the 'making of the story real' is the best and perhaps only hope of humanity. What we do here at the Catholic Worker is so small and insignificant, this practice of the insubstantial, this act of living poverty, this hope against hope. But it is absolutely essential to the salvation of the world that we give witness to an alternative reality -- that we say with our whole lives and our whole beings that there is another way to live, a more human and compassionate and meaningful way to live. I hope that I have lived my life conformed to this gospel ethic, shaped by this movement that continues to call young people to respond to a suffering world, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Thank you, Jeff Dietrich, for setting before us the example of a more human, compassionate, meaningful way to life, for sharing your testimony in *Broken and Shared*. May many read it and join you in the great work of making the Gospel story real.

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John Dear will speak March 8 at the Festival Center in Washington, D.C.; March 14 in Atlanta; March 16 in Nashville, Tenn.; and March 17 in Knoxville, Tenn. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [3], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [4]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [5] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[6]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[7]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[8]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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