

St. Louis Catholic Worker

Winter Edition '78



*cost Xerox in
one day.*

Now in 1977 we find a Catholic Worker House once again in St. Louis. Seven women have accepted voluntary poverty as a way of life so that they may be a part of the lives of the poor they are serving. It is heartening to see the vitality of the movement after forty years as shown by the interest and concern of many St. Louisans. Only a few follow Dorothy Day in voluntary poverty, but others see Christ's presence in Karen House and are eager to help and to pray that it will be a haven of mercy.

HISTORY OF KAREN HOUSE

This Catholic Worker House, which we call Karen House, had its beginnings in January of 1977 with the quiet arrival in St. Louis of one woman from Omaha. She had lived in St. Louis before, and liked us. She had lived in a Catholic Worker House in Omaha, and liked them. The dream was to bring these two good things together in one place.

After a month of telling people of the dream, there was a community of thirty people working together to understand Catholic Worker ideals and find the ways to actualize them in St. Louis. Four women decided to form the live-in community at the house. Within two months there was a group of sixty people working, praying and learning together about the needs of St. Louis and how we might best respond in the light of the Gospel.

By June we were moved into a building and were named Karen House, for our first guest. After a summer of painting, repairing, cleaning and moving, the doors of Karen House opened on September 26. We are now a live-in community of seven women receiving women and families for emergency shelter. As the house fills and involves more and more people, the goals that we wrote to guide us last March have more meaning than ever. I would like to share them with you as an expression of who we are and an invitation to you to join us.

We hope to develop an atmosphere of prayer so that our actions will be a reflection of the radical Gospel message:

- To share a sense of joy in life with others-
- To develop an affirming atmosphere for each individual-
- To strive to build a community that provides an alternative to our present day capitalistic system-
- To challenge one another to respond justly to ourselves and all creation through non-violence, the works of mercy, voluntary poverty and simplicity.

Virginia Druhe

REFLECTIONS ON THE CATHOLIC WORKER

The Catholic Worker Paper first appeared on May 1, 1933. We might think of that memorable day as the beginning of the Catholic Worker Movement. Actually, so much in the lives of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin were leading up to that moment. Dorothy tells the story in The Long Loneliness. We learn that her search for God and her concern for the poor were the dominant themes of her life from early childhood. Peter had for years been trying to interpret the Gospel message in terms of the world today.

When Dorothy became a Catholic, she found the call to justice for the poor in the Papal Encyclicals and she yearned for a way to express those thoughts in her own life. The first issue called attention to the Encyclicals. Dorothy summed up the purpose of the paper on the editorial page as follows: "In an attempt to popularize and make known the Encyclicals of the Popes in regard to social justice and the program put forth by the Church for the reconstruction of the social order, this news sheet, the Catholic Worker, is started."

The circulation of the paper jumped from 2,500 to 20,000 in the first six months. By 1936 it had 85,000 subscribers. Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality sprang up across the country. In 1935 a House was opened in St. Louis, a storefront on Franklin Avenue, just off Grand. Weekly meetings were held and we had a fairly good library of books and pamphlets. In 1936 a coffee line was started, and a little later we moved to a house on West Pine, east of Grand, where the poor could be housed. We even had a farm near Frederickstown which we hoped would be a haven for the alcoholics and the destitute. That was a complete failure in that it never really got under way. Peter spoke at our place on Franklin Avenue and Dorothy visited St. Louis a number of times. Her first appearance here was at St. Louis University in the spring of 1935.

I have some notes on one of the meetings with Dorothy dated January 30, 1936. Among other things she told us:

"Do not think in terms of numbers, but in terms of individual responsibility. You have accomplished something here.

Do not look for very real results-perhaps they won't come in your lifetime. Remember, too, that you are bound to disagree. There are several people in our group in New York who think we are crazy for trying to start a farming commune. There are others who think voluntary poverty is the bunk. As long as you are agreed on the fundamentals, you need not worry too much about the methods.

The system must be changed by little dribs. It is always a battle. Yes, Christianity has been here for two thousand years and the world is still a very unpleasant place; but always keep before your eyes the failure of the cross."

The first approach, such as picketing and distributing copies of the Encyclicals to workers and starting soup kitchens, coupled with the fact that 1933 was the bottom year of the Depression, gave the Worker a crusading appeal that struck fire in certain Catholic circles. Father Dennis Geaney has written: "It was a Christian revolution she was starting. She was opening the minds of bishops, priests, seminarians and lay people to the fact that Christianity was not a stuffy sacristy affair. She was a trumpet calling for all of us to find Christ in the bread lines, the jails, the tenant farmers, the migratory workers, the Negro. Here is a woman who has placed her stamp on American Catholicism. The seed she sowed in the thirties is bearing fruit a hundredfold in the fifties." And one can add, in the seventies.

So many people turned to her because they saw her-and still see her-as a prophet of our times. Jacques Maritain, Karl Stern, John Cogley, Michael Harrington, Virgil Michel, Thomas Merton, Paul Furfey and W.H. Auden sought her out. The great as well as the everyday people and the troubled, the poor and the destitute have come, and their lives have been touched.

The story of the Catholic Worker through the years is told in Dorothy's books: The Long Loneliness, From Union Square to Rome, House of Hospitality and Loaves and Fishes. William Miller's A Harsh and Dreadful Love is the most complete account of the people involved and of the thought and activity that have grown from that inauspicious beginning. Robert Cole, a research psychiatrist at Harvard, has written A Spectacle unto the World. A line in one issue of the Worker reads: "Those who may be wondering what we are doing will find an answer in this book." A bibliography of books, pamphlets, and articles about Dorothy, Peter, and the Movement would fill a small book.

It is inspiring and challenging that the influence of the Catholic Worker is alive and vibrant today. Just last year Eileen Egan wrote: "Prophetic positions on war, conscientious objection, voluntary poverty, and personalism that the Catholic Worker had championed for over four decades were by 1976 the positions taken by thoughtful Catholics from every part of the Nation."

A final word about Dorothy, a word that is an essential part of anything written about her—her faithfulness to the Church. Robert Cole put it well: "It goes without saying that for Dorothy Day, for the men and the women she has worked with most closely, year after year, there is nothing more important than the Church. She loves the Church passionately...The Church has suffused her, possessed her." "Where shall we go," writes Dorothy, "except to the Bride of Christ?" She reminds us that "Christ is closer than the air we breathe and just as vital." Because of her deep, passionate love of Christ, she has been able to give of herself and His love to others without counting the cost.

Her love extends to all people. Someone asked her if she could make a judgement about someone like Richard Nixon. "I don't think we should," she answered. "He is also part of the one Body," Christ said we should forgive our brother and our sister seventy times seven." "I think we are wrong if we feel malice. We get mad, yes. But you know what one fellow who came to work with us said? He said one reason he came to the Catholic Worker was because there is an attitude of respect

toward all...But it's hard, of course it's hard. In the New Testament it says it's a terrible thing to fall into the hands of a loving God."

Dorothy reflects the Scripture in her embracing love. Her primary concern is the poor and neglected, but all are to be loved.

Bolen Carter

ON THE JEWS OF SILENCE

The Jews of silence.

That's what Elie Wiesel called them--the three million Soviet Jews who undergo fear, at the minimum, and persecution more actively, during the whole of their existence in the U.S.S.R.

Jews of silence is what Wiesel called us too--Jews and gentiles--who said nothing while our brothers and sisters underwent the experiences he describes in his book by that title: The Jews of Silence.

Later, in a book we did together, Wiesel said this: "If someone suffers and he keeps silent, it can be a good silence. If someone suffers and I keep silence, then it's a destructive silence. If we envisage literature and human destiny as endeavors by man to redeem himself, then we must admit the obsession, the overall dominating theme of responsibility, that we are responsible for one another. I am responsible for his or her suffering, for his or her destiny. If not, we are condemned by our solitude forever and it has no meaning. This solitude is a negative, destructive solitude, a self-destructive solitude."

As we consider the plight of Soviet Jews, then, we are dealing with the very meaning of life, and particularly the meaning of our lives. Unless we act to save suffering people, we fail to save ourselves. By our inactivity, by our passivity, by our silence, we deny responsibility--we deny, in fact, this most important aspect of purpose in our being.

And yet so many of us have remained Jews of silence for so long. Sometimes the excuse is given: I don't want to get involved in politics. But this is not, basically, a political problem. It has been properly confronted by Mihajlo Mihajlov, a Yugoslavian dissident (and remember the Russian word for dissident--inakomyslyashchiv-literally means "one who thinks in a different way") who concludes that "the struggle taking place between man and the forces of evil and death... is, least of all, a strictly political struggle." Later he emphasizes this again: "the struggle which is occurring today in totalitarian countries is not, in essence, a political struggle, but rather a religious struggle."

Solzenhitsyn comes near this as well in The Gulag Archipelago II. And in Gulag I he noted that "it was only thought that was punished." Or as A. Shifrin called it, in his work In the Fourth Dimension, the most terrible crime is "different thinkingness."

But Mihajlov takes the discussion further. "It was not thought which was operative, but the complete spiritual, internal striving toward a specific goal...It is not thought that is being punished, but the spiritual striving."

I submit then, that we dare not turn our backs on the "spiritual striving."

I submit, then, that we dare not turn our backs on "the spiritual striving" of the Jews in the Soviet Union. In a very real sense, they are our link to God. If we ignore them, in their suffering, we literally ignore the meaning of life, of our own personal responsibility to people whose silent cry must be heard as being infinitely louder than the placating words of totalitarian dictators.

Leonid Brezhnev said last June that "The socialist countries are not a closed society. We are open to everything that is truthful and decent, and are prepared to multiply contacts in every way, making the most of the congenial conditions created by detente."

We must insist that Brezhnev honor his own words, and that others

in positions of authority do likewise. Otherwise we will be truly Jews of silence--a silence which snames our very humanity.

Harry James Cargas

THANK YOU

Karen House is finally a reality. The doors are open and guests have arrived. In looking around the house we remember all the people who are part of this opening--the people who planned and dreamed, who advised on gutter and roof repairs, who taught us to plaster, who coaxed electrical systems into working order, who painted and cleaned and moved and ate and drank and sang and prayed with us. "Thank you" sounds small in the face of all that. But know that we know that it is because of each of you that Karen House is a reality, and we thank God for you.

SPECIAL NEEDS

- FOOD--Especially perishable items
(Eggs, etc.)
- DIAPERS,
- PILLOWS,
- TOWELS,
- DRESSERS,
- PEOPLE TO WORK WITH US,
- CLERICAL ASSISTANCE--Filing, typing,
Compiling lists,
- MAKING OF DIRECTORY OF RESOURCES &
TALENTS,
- ELECTRIC TYPEWRITER,
- NEED FOR A SPECIFIC COMMITTEE TO
HUSTLE AND MEET NEEDS OF HOUSE,
- BUNKBEDS,

Any donation to offset the cost of this newsletter would be appreciated.

Catholic Worker
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