

“We Go Back”: Antimodernism in the Early Catholic Worker Movement

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Introduction

Scholars and admirers alike are given to categorizing the Catholic Worker Movement as a peace and social justice group. A few examples will illustrate this tendency. The venerable American religion textbook by John Corrigan and Winthrop S. Hudson lists the Workers in between the early twentieth-century's "The Catholic League for Social Justice" and "Association of Catholic Trade Unionists."¹ Recently, a reviewer for the 2005 documentary, "Dorothy Day: Don't Call Me A Saint," gathered that Day founded a movement which "became one of the leading proponents for economic and social justice."² And socially minded religious assemblies, such as Reverend Jim Wallis' *Sojourners*, and numerous Roman Catholic groups like Pax Christi, highly esteem the Workers as a rigorous peace and social justice movement. And they are all correct. After all, Day herself stated in the first issue of their paper that they wrote to promote "social justice."³

But an unqualified signification of social justice provides a skewed view of the Workers which results in interpretive problems. I encountered this while writing a term paper on the Workers. Their early writings recurrently allude to a perceived conflict between their Houses of Hospitality and the State. Particularly, Day wrote that they founded their Houses to combat the State's charity. From a social justice point of view this did not make immediate sense. Only later, by viewing the Workers as an antimodernist group, could I reconcile these statements. This is not to say that the

¹ Hudson and Corrigan, 400.

² Aaron Dobs, "Dorothy Day: Don't Call Me a Saint," available from http://www.tribecafilmfestival.org/tixSYS/2006/filmguide/event_np_full?EventNumber=2227; Internet; Accessed, February 15 2007. Claudia Larson directed the film.

³ *Catholic Worker* (May 1933): 4.

Workers, even then, did not strive for peace and social justice. Rather, solely understanding them as such distorts the meaning of their movement, particularly up until mid-century. During the fifties the Worker Movement “became the vital center of an emerging Catholic peace movement,” a turn in emphasis which continues, as mentioned, to define them.⁴ And so, scholars and admirers retroactively attribute the Workers’ more current emphases on the chronological entirety of the movement and attempt to understand them in kind. My thesis provides a corrective: the early Workers possessed definitive antimodern tendencies, and to interpret them as such enjoins a fuller understanding of their beliefs and actions.

Nonetheless, some of early the Workers’ antimodern tendencies have received a measure of critical attention. Most often scholars place the Workers’ agrarianism and craftwork under an antimodern heading. For example, historian Eugene McCarragher wrote on the Workers’ “battle with the forces of technological modernity.”⁵ These “experiments” on the communal farms came to naught, he wrote, and, eventually, “Day and other Workers attend[ed] to the issues of race relations and peace, and placards replace[d] plows as the tools of Catholic radicalism.”⁶ Though McCarragher solely references their agrarianism in this instance, he describes the transition from an antimodern emphasis to the more familiar concerns of peace and social justice. In another work, McCarragher also compared the Workers’ antimodernism, which usually

⁴Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 412.

⁵ Eugene McCarragher, et al., *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays*, eds. William J. Thorn, Phillip M. Runkel, and Susan Mountin, Marquette Studies in Theology No. 32, ed. Andrew Tallon (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 306.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.

took a medievalist form, to the medievalism, or neomedievalism, of the larger American Catholic community.

During the first half of the century, American Catholic thinkers “almost ritualistically” invoked the Middle Ages as a hallowed time and a source of inspiration.⁷ Neomedievalist corporatism dominated American Catholic social thought; inspired by scholasticism, it was a “form of nationwide economic planning that fused political democracy with the collaborative governance of industry by labor and capital.”⁸ Corporatists stressed unity and order, which they believed characterized the Middle Ages.⁹ But the medievalism of the Workers was “more pronounced than that of their corporatist brethren” according to McCarraher.¹⁰ The Workers more readily claimed the title and appealed directly to medieval figures, such as St. Francis of Assisi, and communities like those of the Benedictines. But they also deviated from the corporatists. The Workers did not champion such “unity and order.” Day said of Maurin, “He did not believe in blueprints or a planned economy. Things grow organically.”¹¹ The Workers also downplayed the “minimalism” of the scholastic natural-law tradition and in its stead followed “the ideal of Christian perfection.”¹²

Although I will address the Catholic Workers’ agrarianism, my explication of their antimodernism involves three core features of the Movement, the main organs through which they lived out their Christian perfectionism. Chapter by chapter, I will

⁷ Philip Gleason, *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121.

⁸ Eugene McCarraher, *Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 71-72. Reverend John Ryan typified the Catholic corporatists.

⁹ *Contending*, 121.

¹⁰ *Critics*, 82.

¹¹ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952; reprint, San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997), 224.

¹² *American*, 411.

examine the Workers' ideals of charity (or love), poverty, and community—the three characteristics Day herself labeled as being most significant to the movement.¹³ The Workers pitted their charity against that of the modern State as a way to defend and reclaim the religiously essential social space of charity. Through holy poverty, the Workers resisted and removed themselves from consumerist capitalism. And, lastly, the Workers sought community in a world they believed modern individualism had thrown apart. In all three cases, the Catholic Workers appealed to pre-modern sources for inspiration. By analyzing these fundamental constituents of the Workers' ideology, I will demonstrate that the early movement itself was antimodernist and ought to be understood as such. Hence, the Catholic Worker Movement belongs in both the history of Catholic social justice as well as Catholic medieval antimodernism.

My primary sources naturally fall within the time frame of interest, approximately 1933 to 1950. Foremost, I will analyze five of Day's books, Maurin's compiled "Easy Essays," and their writings from *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. One of Day's important books, however, falls outside this chronological window. Day published her history of the movement, *Loaves and Fishes*, in 1963. Although the book qualifies as a history of sorts, I have taken care to acknowledge and account for the retrospective nature of the work. In addition to written sources, I had the privilege of interviewing Sr. Ruth Heaney (1914-2006), who personally knew Maurin and Day, and, before joining the Benedictines in the early seventies, lived on Catholic Worker farms.

Background

Dorothy Day, a former Marxist and journalist, and Peter Maurin, an eccentric, peripatetic French peasant intellectual, founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933.

¹³ Long, 285.

They attempted to apply the teachings and traditions of the Catholic Church to what they perceived as the social and economic needs of their day. The Movement has neither official recognition from the Church nor an official creed.¹⁴ In short, it was a nationwide assemblage of communities—affiliated with the flagship community in New York—which served the poor in Houses of Hospitality, worked the land in farming communes, published a paper, and engaged in social and political activism. Of the two founders, Maurin remains the more biographically enigmatic figure. While Day wrote often about her life, even leaving an autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Maurin spoke little about his life and wrote even less. One Worker described Maurin as being remarkably “disinterested in his own personality.”¹⁵ Heaney related that Maurin only opened up about his personal history towards the end of his life.¹⁶

Still, a full sketch of his life can be rendered from the reports and writings of Day, fellow Workers, and researchers. The Maurin family roots sunk down 1,500 years into the soil of their small farm in the village of Oultet, France. But despite familial rootedness, Maurin led a nomadic existence for most of his life, having traveled throughout France, eastern Canada, and the United States. Maurin’s diverse occupations and ideological preoccupations mirrored his “wandering”—a word which biographer Marc Ellis uses to describe the majority of Maurin’s life before he found his vocation in the Catholic Worker Movement.¹⁷

¹⁴ The Church has not “recognized” the Catholic Worker Movement in the sense that the Franciscans or Benedictine Oblates (lay people associated with a particular monastery or convent) are officially recognized. It has, however, been acknowledged as an important part of the Church. For example, the recent (2006) American Catechism lauds Dorothy Day and the efforts of the Workers.

¹⁵ Donald A. Gallagher, et al., *Peter Maurin, Christian Radical: Essays and Reminiscences of the Founder of the Catholic Worker Movement* (Saint Louis, MO: Pio Decimo Press, 1950), 24.

¹⁶ Ruth Heaney, interview by author, electronic recording, Columbia, MO., 20 October 2006.

¹⁷ Marc H. Ellis, *Peter Maurin: Prophet in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 31.

Aristide Pierre Maurin was born in 1877 on the family farm. Maurin described their lifestyle as “peasant”; they raised livestock, which they pastured on common land, grew crops, and baked bread in a communal bakery. He received some education in Oultet, but continued his studies at a Christian Brothers school outside of town.¹⁸ After further education from the Brothers, Maurin entered the order as Brother Adorator Charles and served in Paris’ suburbs as a grade school teacher. Despite his status as a religious and his objections to military service, the government drafted Maurin into service from 1898 to 1899 after which he was honorably discharged.¹⁹ The tour profoundly influenced Maurin and prompted him to investigate politics, history, and social thought. “A restlessness, an intellectual conflict had begun, that would lead him out of the classroom,” writes Arthur Sheehan, Maurin’s primary biography.²⁰

Maurin continued to teach, but his social concerns began to take precedence and, after nine years with the order, he left.²¹ Maurin immediately involved himself with *Le Sillon*, which had previously attracted his attention. The organization, founded by Marc Sangier, “favored a Christian democracy” and “attacked bourgeois Catholic ideas.”²² Maurin reported that he sympathized with their ethical concerns and understanding of the “chaos of the time.”²³ But due to the group’s transition from confessional action to political, Maurin left in 1908.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22

¹⁹ *Radical*, 25-26

²⁰ Arthur Sheehan, *Peter Maurin: Gay Believer* (New York: Hanover House, 1959), 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²² *Ibid.*, 54.

²³ *Long*, 177.

By the end of the next year Maurin immigrated to Canada at the age of thirty-two.²⁴ The move allowed him to avoid any future conscription and to pursue his interest in agriculture. But his plans for a farm failed. Day reported him saying, “That [agriculture] is why I went homesteading to Canada in 1909, but after two years my partner was killed, I moved about the country with work gangs and entered this country [the U.S.] in 1911, where I have been ever since.”²⁵ Maurin’s jobs as an unskilled laborer carried him from province to province until he (illegally) moved to New York where he continued his nomadic work habits. Day wrote, “[H]e...traveled all through the Eastern and Midwestern states, working in steel mills, in coal mines, on railroads; digging ditches and sewers or serving as janitor in city tenements.”²⁶

In 1917, the year the United States entered the war, Maurin temporarily settled in Chicago. The war produced a demand for French teachers and French-speaking officers. In response, Maurin opened up a language school which lasted eight years and made him a relatively affluent man.²⁷ His career as a French teacher eventually brought him to New York where he worked as a private tutor. Shortly after his move, Maurin “underwent some great religious experience,” Sheehan writes.²⁸ He stopped charging for lessons, and insisted that the students, instead, pay what they thought the lessons were worth.²⁹ In the ten years before this point, Maurin mentioned that he had been “out of

²⁴ William D. Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and Catholic Worker Movement* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 29.

²⁵ *Long*, 177-78

²⁶ Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963; reprint, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 96.

²⁷ *Radical*, 33.

²⁸ *Maurin*, 83.

²⁹ *Radical*, 34-35

the Church” and “not living as a Catholic should.”³⁰ Both the circumstances and details of his “religious experience” and former estrangement from the faith are unknown.

Following his reengagement with Catholicism, Maurin took steps towards the vocation of poverty and social concern which would consume the rest of his life. Maurin eventually quit teaching French, and spent much of his time working for little more than room and board at a Catholic children’s camp in Mt. Tremper, NY.³¹ Day wrote, “He had access to the library [near the camp], and it was there, in the seven years before I met him, that he evolved the ideas he brought to me.”³² During this formative period, Maurin read, wrote, and assembled his social program. He soon began touting his ideas in New York, looking for partners. “He visited priests, editors, and others, trying to find someone to take up his plan,” Sheehan writes.³³ But his new-found apostolate remained a solitary one—until he met Dorothy Day.

In 1932, Day, after covering an out-of-state story, returned to her apartment and found Peter Maurin waiting there for her. Day recounted Maurin’s words at their first meeting: “George Shuster, editor of *The Commonwealth*, told me to look you up. Also, a red-headed Irish communist in Union Square told me to see you. He says we think alike.”³⁴ Maurin found the collaborator he had spent the last few years of his life looking for and with whom he would spend the remainder.

In many ways the two were an odd couple. Day observed, “He was a Frenchman; I was an American. He was a man twenty years older than I and infinitely wiser. He was a man, I was a woman...He was a peasant; I was a city product. He knew the soil; I the

³⁰ *Maurin*, 82.

³¹ *Ibid*, 87.

³² *Loaves*, 97

³³ *Maurin*, 88.

³⁴ *Long*, 169

city.”³⁵ But Day’s life resembled Maurin’s insofar as she was also a wanderer, geographically as well as ideologically, who wished to change the social order. Day’s biographer, William Miller, titled one his chapters on Day, “Adrift.”³⁶ And Robert Coles, a psychiatrist and biographer, likewise applied the term to Day’s life.³⁷ Her wandering ceased upon meeting Maurin as her lifelong religiosity and concern for the poor intertwined and took root.

Day was born on November 8th, 1897 in Brooklyn. Her parents were Grace and John Day, the latter of whom earned the family living as a journalist, a precedent three of the four children would follow. At age seven, her father relocated the family to Berkley, California to pursue a job as a sports writer, a post which was quickly abandoned after an earthquake destroyed the business’ building. Next, the family moved to Chicago where Mr. Day eventually found work as a sports editor.³⁸

Day’s religious and social concerns seem to have germinated during these early years. Miller notes that throughout Day’s childhood and early adolescence, “religion continued to preoccupy her.”³⁹ Though Day’s parents, of Episcopalian background, did not attend church, Day’s childhood playmates were religious and, around age ten, she began attending an Episcopalian church with her siblings.⁴⁰ Two accounts stand out in Day’s autobiography which point to her supposed “preoccupation” with religion. Day described how her “heart almost burst with desire” for a holy life at a childhood friend’s

³⁵ *Ibid*, 175.

³⁶ William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 87.

³⁷ Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1987), 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁹ *Dorothy*, 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

telling of a saint's story.⁴¹ Recounting her time in the Episcopal church, Day wrote on her love for the Psalms and Collect prayers, and how, though she "was only ten years old," she "called on all creation to join...in blessing the Lord."⁴² Before settling in Chicago, where Mr. Day found steady work, the Days experienced financial hardship. But by this point, historian Mel Piehl writes, "[Day] now saw economic hardship through the class-conscious writers of the day."⁴³ Her favorites during this time, Day recalled, included Peter Kropotkin, Vera Figner, and Upton Sinclair.⁴⁴

At age sixteen, after a successful tenure as a High School student, Day received a scholarship from the Hearst paper in Chicago and decided to attend college at University of Illinois in Urbana.⁴⁵ She spent two years there, during which time she pursued a general study of Latin, English, history and science.⁴⁶ Social issues continued to attract her; poverty and the class war became her central concerns, prompting her matriculation into the campus Socialist club.⁴⁷ Her amplified interest in Socialism accompanied, or perhaps encouraged, a retreat from the religiosity of her childhood, and she recalled "ruthlessly" cutting it out of her life.⁴⁸ Given her "natural piety," evident since childhood, Piehl classifies this relatively areligious period as an "aberration" in her life.⁴⁹ Her social concerns also drove her away from school to New York. There she found employment in the family profession working at socialist and radical newspapers such as

⁴¹ Long, 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴³ Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 7.

⁴⁴ Long, 38.

⁴⁵ *Devotion*, 2.

⁴⁶ Long, 40.

⁴⁷ *Harsh*, 40.

⁴⁸ Long, 43.

⁴⁹ *Breaking*, 16.

The Call, The Masses, and the Liberator.⁵⁰ Her assignments brought her to “all kinds of strike meetings, picket lines, [and] peace meetings” from which she wrote consciousness-raising pieces on poverty and labor.⁵¹ Day’s choice in friends (socialists and anarchists), living arrangements (Greenwich Village), and activities (“lectures, rallies and picketing”) all followed suit.⁵² But after an unhappy romance that ended in an abortion, and a brief marriage, Day moved to Chicago.⁵³

There, Day continued her journalistic work, held a couple of odd jobs, and wrote a predominantly autobiographical novel called *The Eleventh Virgin*. Day also dabbled in Catholicism, occasionally praying the rosary and attending evening services while working as a journalist in New Orleans.⁵⁴ Upon invitations from a friend, she also attended Sunday morning Mass back in Chicago while serving as a nurse.⁵⁵ Day’s time in Chicago came to an end after she sold the movie rights to her novel for five-thousand dollars and, at 28, bought a small beachfront house on Staten Island where she lived from 1925 to 1929.”⁵⁶

Day’s life at the beach house became the setting for a common-law marriage and the birth of her child, both of which, according to her narrative, eventuated her pivotal conversion to Catholicism. Forster Batterham, her husband, occupied himself with his biological interests and a job in the city, while Day wrote freelance articles and a serial romance.⁵⁷ To a limited extent, she recalled keeping up with her associations in the city

⁵⁰ *Devotion*, 2-3.

⁵¹ *Long*, 57.

⁵² *Dorothy*, 62.

⁵³ *Devotion*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Dorothy*, 152.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁶ *Long*, 109.

⁵⁷ *Dorothy*, 175.

as well.⁵⁸ An increase in religiosity marked Day's life on the beach, a foreshadowing of her entry in the Catholic Church. A friend noticed Day's interest in religion and gave her a statue of the Virgin Mary, to whom Day prayed, sometimes employing her rosary.⁵⁹ "Prayer became a central part of her life," writes Miller, and Day began regularly attending Sunday Mass.⁶⁰ However, Day does not point to a particular book, person, or theological issue as precipitating her religious renewal. She wrote, "I was happy but my very happiness made me know that there was a greater happiness to be obtained from life than any I had ever known...[I]t was at this time that I began to pray more."⁶¹ Hence, according to Day, "natural happiness" pointed her towards "supernatural happiness." Day's sentiment applied to her life with Batterham, but all the more to the birth of her child.⁶²

To Day's surprise, but profound delight, she found herself pregnant and gave birth to a girl, Tamar Teresa, just a few months before her 30th birthday. For various, yet inconclusive reasons, Day decided to have the child baptized as a Catholic. Miller points to Day's newfound, predominantly Catholic religiosity—her religious devotions, experiences and readings—as prompting this decision.⁶³ Just over a decade later, Day wrote on her reasoning, "I knew that I was not going to have her floundering through many years as I had done, doubting and hesitating, undisciplined and amoral."⁶⁴ At least in retrospect, Day desired to give Tamar a moral and spiritual center by bonding her to the Church. Between Day's religious life, and now the baptism of her child, an ever-

⁵⁸ Long, 115.

⁵⁹ Harsh, 56.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶¹ Long, 116.

⁶² In *The Long Loneliness* she titled the chapter which deals with this time, "Natural Happiness."

⁶³ Harsh, 58., *Dorothy*, 181.

⁶⁴ Dorothy Day, *From Union Square to Rome* (Springfield, Maryland: Preservation of the Faith Press, 1938), 127.

widening fissure developed between Day and Batterham who wanted nothing to do with matters of faith. “The tension between us was terrible,” Day wrote.⁶⁵

Though she understood that following her daughter into the Church would end her already strained marriage, Day decided to convert a few months later.⁶⁶ Drawing partially on Day’s assessment of Tamar’s baptism, Robert Coles offers an interpretation of the conversion:

“[I]t is hard not to dwell on the psychological significance of Dorothy Day’s conversion...[t]he Church will be a mother and father to this new and anxious mother, soon to be forsaken by Forster; the Church will give this somewhat rebellious and anarchic spirit...a home at last, a home in which, finally, she will really feel at home, and therefore able to offer one to her daughter.”⁶⁷

Coles suggests that Day entered the Church for two reasons. Tamar would have remained unanchored had her mother not entered the same “home.” And Day herself, as a “rebellious and anarchic” (drifting) woman with an imploding marriage, likewise needed the security of the Church. Perhaps the Church also offered Day a mooring for her religious habits, which, as noted, were already Catholic in tenor. In her autobiography, Day offered her own interpretation of the event, suggesting that her social concerns prompted her to join the Church: “My very experience as a radical, my whole make-up led me to want to associate myself with others, with the masses...[and] she [the Catholic Church] held the allegiance of the masses of people in all the cities where I had lived.”⁶⁸ Whatever the case, Catholicism and the masses did eventually provide Day

⁶⁵ Long, 144.

⁶⁶ Harsh, 58.

⁶⁷ Robert Coles, *A Spectacle Unto the World: The Catholic Worker Movement* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 28-29.

⁶⁸ Long, 139.

with a “home” in the form of her eventual life-long vocation as a Catholic Worker.⁶⁹

Within the year (1927), Day’s marriage perished as her life as a Catholic began.⁷⁰

Shortly after her conversion, Day closed the beach house and moved to New York where she wrote for various papers—including a few radical ones—and occasionally performed menial labor.⁷¹ Yet, Day did not immediately settle into a new life or her new faith.

Piehl wrote that within the next four years, a “continued vocational uncertainty and...aimless drifting,” rather than a definite social commitment, characterized Day’s life.⁷² He opines that she was at a “complete loss” on how to integrate her social concerns with her religion.⁷³ So at least from Day’s understanding, she was still unassociated with the “Catholic masses.”

Apart from writing assignments in New York, Day briefly moved to Hollywood after a studio offered her a screenwriting contract; she disliked the work and subsequently—for reasons unknown—moved to Mexico where she began writing articles for *Commonweal* magazine.⁷⁴ After returning to New York, she continued writing for the magazine and other liberal Catholic circulars such as *America*. On assignment from *Commonweal* in 1932, Day covered a labor march in Washington, D.C. where, observing the proceedings, she lamented at the lack of Catholic involvement in workers rights, labor issues, and the other social issues of the day.⁷⁵ After the march, she visited the national shrine in D.C. “There I offered up a special prayer,” Day explained in her autobiography,

⁶⁹ Tamar also became a Catholic Worker.

⁷⁰ *Harsh*, 59.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷² *Breaking*, 23.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁴ *Harsh*, 60-61.

⁷⁵ *Dorothy*, 224.

“a prayer which came with tears and with anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.”⁷⁶

Soon after, Day returned to New York and discovered, in her apartment, the answer to her prayer for a vocation and the end of her drifting: “I found Peter Maurin— Peter the French peasant, whose spirit and ideas will dominate...the rest of my life.”⁷⁷ But before the two began their mission, Maurin proceeded to educate Day; he visited her almost daily for over four months imparting lectures predominantly on Church history and the saints.⁷⁸ Day wrote that he related to her a “Catholic outline of history” along with the major tenets of his three-fold plan of action which involved “roundtable discussions, houses of hospitality and agronomic universities.”⁷⁹

Maurin’s “Catholic outline of history,” and his corresponding program, was fundamental to the formation of the Catholic Worker Movement. His outline at once presented an account of Western history stretching from the biblical and classical period to the present day as well as a parallel assessment of each epoch’s moral, intellectual, and spiritual standing. Maurin’s evaluation roughly took the shape of an arch, skewed to the right, which corresponded to the rise of Christianity out of commendable Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture, a summit during the high Middle Ages, and a precipitous decline ever since, reaching its nadir—with World Wars and the Depression—in the early 20th century. Maurin’s basic message vacillated between a condemnation of the centuries of error between the Middle Ages and the 20th century and an exultation of elements of pre-modern civilization wherein he saw hope for modern humanity. “My word is *tradition*,”

⁷⁶ Long, 166.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷⁸ Harsh, 63.

⁷⁹ Long, 172-173.

he stated.⁸⁰ This became his rallying cry. Maurin wrote, “Sound principles are not new. They’re very old; they are as old as eternity. The thing to do is to restate the never new and never old principles in the vernacular of the man of the street.”⁸¹ Hence, Maurin touted “tradition,” a set of timeless truths and values, which the Middle Ages most fully enfolded, as the answer to modern problems.

In ways relevant to the larger discussion, Maurin’s medievalism differed from the more popular strain in American Catholicism. Concerning the exaltation of the Middle Ages as the apex of Western civilization, Maurin departed from other medievalists by upholding communities of even earlier ages as imitable. In particular, he praised the Early Christians and the Irish of the early medieval period. And despite his frequent, sweeping historical overgeneralizations, Maurin, in contrast with the corporatists, offered a “grass-roots” medievalism. He most often advertised small Christian communities, rather than large-scale, institutional planning, as the best way to remake the past. This suggests a distance between the Workers’ medievalism and that of the larger American Church.

The theoretical apparatus that Bruce Lincoln, religious studies scholar, lays out in his book *Discourse and Construction of Society* aids in understanding the Catholic Workers’ sacred history. Lincoln demonstrates how myth and ritual may serve to deconstruct and construct social forms. He positions his work against Marxist orientated scholars like Roland Barthe and Maurice Bloch, who claim that myth and ritual, respectively, are mystifying and culturally determined, and, as opposed to the experience of productive labor, cannot produce novel societal forms. In response, Lincoln points out

⁸⁰ *Catholic Worker* (February 1944): 1.

⁸¹ Peter Maurin, *Easy Essays* (Fresno, California: Academy Guild Press, 196; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Rose Hill Books, 2003), 112.

that labor and production are also socially conditioned, and though “thought is socially determined [this] does not mean that all thought reflects, encodes, represents, or helps replicate the *established structures* of society.”⁸² A synthesis of countless thoughts, forces and discourses—including myths and rituals, many of which fall outside the main hegemonies—comprise any given society.⁸³ Myths, in particular, being narratives possessed of both authority and, along Geertzian lines, “*paradigmatic truth*,” have the potential to alter social groups because they arouse “sentiment.” Lincoln, drawing on sociologist Émile Durkheim, argues that a change of sentiments, meaning “above all those of internal affinity (affection, loyalty, mutual attachment, and solidarity),” result in changes in society.⁸⁴ Myths, then, possess the means (sentiment) and the models (paradigms) for new social formations.

Maurin’s sacred history constitutes what Lincoln terms “myth,” which recounts a formative and generally normative narrative of the past.⁸⁵ Maurin’s outline of history falls neatly into this category; his mythic history acted as a repository for specific values and communities, which became the organizing (normative) principles of the movement. Though Maurin undoubtedly held to a romantic view of history, especially the Middle Ages, the historical truth or untruth of his claims are not directly relevant. Lincoln writes, “[W]e would do better to classify narratives not by their content but by the claims that are made by their narrators and the way those claims are received by their

⁸² Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

audiences.”⁸⁶ What matters, then, is the myth’s ability to act as a “charter, model, template, or blueprint,” through whose “invocation” a social action follows.⁸⁷

The various ideal communities in Maurin’s history most often served as these “blueprints.” The “invocation” of the ideal ancient monastic hospice, for example, led to the establishment of the Workers’ poor houses. Hence, through an appeal to a mythic community, the Workers, in Lincoln’s words, “(re-)constructed” a past “social formation.”⁸⁸ And in doing so, the Workers assembled a social identity as well; they identified, as a community, with both the past myth and the present reconstruction. Therefore, Maurin’s mythic past imparted “models” and “templates” from which the Workers simultaneously assembled their identity as well as certain social structures. Summarily, Maurin stated, “What we foster did exist [at] one time. We go back.”⁸⁹ The “we” should be noted.

Then and throughout her life, Day maintained that Maurin’s “spirit and ideas” were fundamental to her life and the Catholic Workers—the greater “we.”⁹⁰ She referred to him as “the guide, the teacher, the agitator.”⁹¹ Heaney concurred, “He [Maurin] was a role model and source of ideas. And that’s what he was to Dorothy Day too—a source of ideas.”⁹² Moreover, both women sought to incarnate Maurin’s ideas. “That’s what we were doing [on Catholic Worker farms]—implementing his ideas,” said Heaney.⁹³ And Day wrote in retrospect, “I am so convinced of the rightness of his proposals that I have

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁹ *Catholic Worker* (February 1945): 7.

⁹⁰ *Devotion*, 13.

⁹¹ Dorothy Day, *House of Hospitality* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939), 269.

⁹² Ruth Heaney, interview by author, electronic recording, Columbia, MO., 26 October 2005.

⁹³ Ruth Heaney, interview by author, electronic recording, Columbia, MO., 20 October 2006.

walked in this way for more than 30 years.”⁹⁴ And Piehl describes Maurin as “the co-founder who set forth the theoretical ideals that Dorothy Day and everyone else tried to live out.”⁹⁵

Day recalled that at first she had difficulty understanding Maurin’s ambitious theories due to his thick French accent, the abstractness of his thought, and his unconventional character.⁹⁶ But, as a journalist and a believer in the power of the press, Maurin’s suggestion that they found a paper appealed to her. And so the two began planning a paper for “the man on the street.” They named it *The Catholic Worker*, a play off the communist circular, *The Daily Worker*. Maurin preferred the *Catholic Radical*, but Day, being more labor minded, pushed for “worker.”⁹⁷ After raising \$57, they published 2,500 copies of the paper in May of 1933. The first issue chiefly featured articles by Day along with some of Maurin’s “Easy Essays.”⁹⁸ One of his early Essays read:

“Catholic scholars
have taken the dynamite
of the Church
have wrapped it up
in nice phraseology
placed it in an hermetic container
and sat on the lid.
It is time to blow the lid off...”⁹⁹

With his essays, Maurin meant to open the lid; unwrap the phraseology; and deliver his interpretation of Catholic “dynamite” to the masses. Along with the inclusion of some of Maurin’s writings, the first issue of the paper predominantly offered articles written by

⁹⁴ *Loaves*, 104.

⁹⁵ *Breaking*, 61.

⁹⁶ *Long*, 169-171.

⁹⁷ *Loaves*, 22.

⁹⁸ *Long*, 182.

⁹⁹ *Easy*, 3. For readability and space, I will quote Maurin’s “Easy Essays” in full sentence form.

Day on topics such as local strikes and the plight of sharecroppers.¹⁰⁰ The content disappointed Maurin who desired to see more of his program put to page. Day reflected on the conflict:

“Much later...I could see more clearly what bothered Peter. We had emphasized wages and hours while he was trying to talk about a philosophy of work...“Strikes don’t strike me!” Peter kept saying stubbornly. It must have appeared to him that we were just urging the patching-up of the industrial system instead of trying to rebuild society itself with a philosophy so old it seemed like new.”¹⁰¹

Day’s statement reflects a transition from a perspective largely informed by her radical past to one which incorporated Maurin’s “old/ new” philosophy. Despite these initial differences, Day’s ideals dovetailed with Maurin’s as she adopted his mythos and, hence, a more antimodern interpretation of their still unfolding mission.¹⁰²

Maurin’s “Easy Essays”—short, pithy essays written in free verse—functioned as “slogans,” using Lincoln’s terminology. The Essays, which the Workers repeatedly published and preached, contained Maurin’s version of history as well as the essentials of his programs. The phrase, “As Peter said...” punctuated Worker writings. The “slogan,” Lincoln claims, can have substantial impact on a group; it is the “myth” in written or verbal form. The actual success of the “programs,” however, resides secondarily to the ability of the slogan to mobilize said group. And if it does, Lincoln says, a “revolutionary” action transpires: “It is nothing less than the embryonic appearance of a social formation arising in opposition to the established order.”¹⁰³ Through Day, his “slogans” effected the Worker movement, the “revolutionary action.” While Day labeled

¹⁰⁰ *Loaves*, 17.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰² Even so, Day and *The Catholic Worker* maintained a continual interest in labor. Day herself worked with Caesar Chavez years later in his efforts for worker rights.

¹⁰³ *Discourse*, 18.

herself the “mother” of the movement, she referred to Maurin’s thought as the “catalyst that brought it all about.”¹⁰⁴

Day, along with friends and supporters, sold the first issues paper for a cent a copy at Union Square and on street corners. Within a year circulation exploded forty-fold to 100,000 as additional volunteers sold the paper in New York and requests came in from around the country.¹⁰⁵ The Workers also increased in numbers. Day wrote, “Since this was the depression and there were no jobs, almost immediately we found ourselves a group, a staff, which grew steadily in numbers.”¹⁰⁶ And so the Catholic Worker Movement, as they termed themselves, began with the intent to “build a new society in the shell of the old.”¹⁰⁷

Soon after the paper began circulating, the Workers founded a House of Hospitality, one of the cornerstones of the movement, on Mott Street in New York. In the movement, the House of Hospitality became the most widely embraced portion of Maurin’s tripartite program.¹⁰⁸ The Houses involved multiple aspects of their antimodernism which will be discussed in further chapters. But speaking broadly, the Houses operated as centers for the performance of the Works of Mercy, a medieval scholastic articulation of virtuous action. Day enunciated the Works:

“The corporal ones are to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to harbor the harborless; to ransom the captive; to visit the sick; to bury the dead. The spiritual works are to instruct the ignorant; to counsel the doubtful; to admonish sinners; to bear wrongs patiently; to forgive offenses willingly; to comfort the afflicted; to pray for the living and the dead.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ *Loaves*, 142.

¹⁰⁵ *Long*, 182.

¹⁰⁶ *Loaves*, 25.

¹⁰⁷ *Long* 170. The Workers adopted the phrase from the preamble of the Industrial Workers of the World’s constitution.

¹⁰⁸ The program included Houses of Hospitality, farming communes, round-table discussions.

¹⁰⁹ *Long*, 244.

The founders considered the Works of Mercy to be essential for their movement. “It has always been through the performance of the works of mercy,” Day wrote, “that love is expressed, that people are converted, that the masses are reached.”¹¹⁰ In the early years, the Houses principally bore the Works of Mercy in acting as soup kitchens to feed the hungry and as homes for the “harborless” and Workers alike.

The uses of the Houses became diverse: newspaper offices, places of worship, craft schools, and meeting centers. The last item refers in part to another aspect of Maurin’s program, “round-table discussions.” Ideally, these involved open discussions, in a small meeting format, with diverse interlocutors taking part. “I want Communists, radicals, priests, and laity. I want everyone to set forth his views. I want clarification of thought,” Maurin wrote in an invitation to one discussion.¹¹¹ The actual attendees were of a more mundane sort. Day described one of the first sessions: “The audience was made up of unemployed men and women, plumbers, mechanics, steam fitters, sign painters, students from New York colleges, and Catholic Worker readers in general.”¹¹² Naturally, the Workers themselves also took part. The discussions generally centered on a presenter, usually an intellectual, religious leader, or activist. Early presenters included such notables as Hillaire Belloc, an English politician and writer, Jacques Maritain, an internationally admired French Catholic philosopher, and Paul Hanley Furfey, an influential American Catholic scholar.¹¹³

As the selection of speakers suggests, the Worker’s ideology possessed a cosmopolitan element. Several French thinkers, Jacques Maritain included, influenced

¹¹⁰ *House*, 54.

¹¹¹ *Loaves*, 23.

¹¹² *Catholic Worker* (December 1934): 8.

¹¹³ *Loaves*, 31.

Maurin, who, in turn, brought their ideas to the Worker. The philosopher and social activist Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950) held a position of special importance.¹¹⁴ Day wrote, “Peter used to say wherever he went, ‘There is a man in France called Emmanuel Mounier. He wrote a book called *The Personalist Manifesto*. You should read that book’.”¹¹⁵ In particular, the Workers adopted Mounier’s critique of modern “individualism” and his related community-orientated “personalism.”

The success of the Workers, and their sometimes controversial activities, increased their visibility to both the larger society and the Church. Their left-leaning stances on labor and their harsh criticism of modern capitalism drew almost immediate attention. And Day’s radical past did not assuage suspicions. Heaney said of the situation, “Our families were grieved because people thought that Dorothy Day was a commie, and we were all suckers.”¹¹⁶ The Workers actions also brewed tension with Church officials. At times the Workers published articles on labor issues which conflicted with those of bishops and others in ecclesial power. In one early case, the Workers backed a child-labor law while prominent bishops denounced it, claiming that it impinged on family matters.¹¹⁷ The Catholic Workers also acted on their criticisms. In 1949, they clashed with New York’s powerful Cardinal Spellman by joining an unsuccessful picket line formed by graveyard workers employed by the diocese.¹¹⁸ This type of behavior drew complaints from laity and clergy alike, and at times the hierarchy

¹¹⁴ It is unknown whether Mounier knew of the Catholic Worker Movement.

¹¹⁵ *Catholic Worker* (April 1950): 6.

¹¹⁶ Ruth Heaney, interview by author, electronic recording, Columbia, MO., 26 October 2005.

¹¹⁷ *Harsh*, 86.

¹¹⁸ *Harsh*, 222.

in New York expressed their displeasure with the Workers by either sending a representative from the chancery office or requesting that Day visit them there.¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, the Church higher-ups never took action. Day wrote, “The Church has never made a judgment on us. But individual churchmen, including bishops and archbishops, have occasionally expressed a definite point of view, sometimes in our favor and sometimes against us, though they never stated their opinions publicly.”¹²⁰ On the supportive side, some bishops, witnessing the success of their efforts, requested that the Workers found Houses of Hospitality in their dioceses.¹²¹ Through the years, the Workers also received continuous support from Catholic laity, clergy, and religious. For example, the internationally prominent St. John’s Abbey of Minnesota contributed both monetary and social support to the burgeoning Worker movement.¹²²

Despite tensions with Catholic officials and laity, the Workers retained a strong Catholic identity and maintained an allegiance to the Church. Piehl writes that the Workers possessed a “critical” but “fervent loyalty” to Catholicism.¹²³ Reflecting on the movement’s historically strained relationship with the Church, Day said, “Though she [the Church] is a harlot at times, she is our mother.”¹²⁴ And in regard to the Church authority, Day illustratively, and repeatedly, stated that if “Cardinal Spellman ordered me to close down the *Catholic Worker* tomorrow, I would.”¹²⁵ Hence, the Workers

¹¹⁹ Long, 219., Loaves, 63.

¹²⁰ Loaves, 122.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 42.

¹²² Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage* (New York: Catholic Worker Books, 1948; reprint, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 36. The selection is from the introduction by Mark and Louis Zwick.

¹²³ *Breaking*, 91.

¹²⁴ *Catholic Worker* (January 1967): 2.

¹²⁵ Dwight MacDonald, *Politics* (New York: Viking, 1970), 353.

considered themselves Catholics of the same body as their fellow laity and clergy. And the identification lent itself to a respect for ecclesial authority.

Yet, as already mentioned, the Workers sometimes differed with the wider Church on labor issues and in their medievalism (in kind if not in emphasis). Day felt that the commonly made distinction between matters of faith and social issues granted them autonomy in their activities. She wrote:

“The Church is infallible when it deals with truths of the faith such as the dogma of the Immaculate Conception...When it comes to matters of the temporal order—capital vs. labor, for example—on all these matters the Church has not spoken infallibly. Here there is room for wide differences of opinion.”¹²⁶

In addition to this view on social matters, Day’s strong sense of the unity of the Church also granted the Workers freedom to follow a distinct path. Piehl writes, “For Day, the indivisibility of the Church as a spiritual community freed Catholics, and especially lay persons, for greater action in the world...[T]hey remained united ‘at the altar’.”¹²⁷

Therefore, though the religious practices and orientations of the Workers may have differed from most other Catholics—such as taking on holy poverty and living in Houses of Hospitality—they still considered themselves of one body.

The Workers’ farming communes, the final third of Maurin’s plan, also distinguished them from the rest of the American Church. Compared to the Houses, which met “immediate needs,” the Workers considered the farms to be the “long-range” aspect of the movement. One Worker went so far as to say, “The House of Hospitality is not the primary work of the Catholic Worker. The farming commune is.”¹²⁸ Maurin, in particular, encouraged the establishment of the farms as part of his “Green Revolution.”

¹²⁶ *Loaves*, 122.

¹²⁷ *Breaking*, 92.

¹²⁸ *Radical*, 21.

In an editorial, he praised the rural and condemned the urban: “People will have to go back to the land. The machine has displaced labor. The cities are overcrowded. The land will have to take care of them.”¹²⁹ Cultivation claimed supremacy in Maurin’s plan because, as Day wrote, in the land he “saw the solution to all the ills of the world: unemployment, delinquency, destitute old age, man’s rootlessness, lack of room for growing families, and hunger.”¹³⁰ As an alternative to modern, urban “industrial” life and its resulting ills, the communal farm reveals itself as an instance of Worker antimodernism. The farms’ communal element also played strongly into their medievalist vision.

Before 1936 the Workers wrote about farming communes but did not yet own and operate one. The impetus to found one grew as Day implied in the statement, “‘You do not know,’ St. Francis said, ‘what you have not practiced.’ How could we write about farming communes unless we had one?”¹³¹ The Workers remedied the lack with the purchase of a farm about 70 miles away in Easton, Pennsylvania. Heaney, her husband, a couple of other families, and a few single Workers settled at “Maryfarm.”¹³²

The community came together and took part in raising small crops, rearing livestock, and craftwork.¹³³ But life on the farm frequently faltered due to inexperience and conflicts between the Workers.¹³⁴ “As farmers, perhaps we were ridiculous, but Maryfarm was a happy home that summer and for many summers after,” wrote Day.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ *Catholic Worker* (June-July 1933): 4.

¹³⁰ *Long*, 280.

¹³¹ *Loaves*, 51.

¹³² Ruth Heaney, interview by author, electronic recording, Columbia, MO., 26 October 2005. Heaney’s husband, Larry, died approximately 10 years later shortly they founded the Holy Family Farm in Starkeburg, MO.

¹³³ *Loaves*, 52-53.

¹³⁴ *Harsh*, 125.

¹³⁵ *Loaves*, 53.

The farm took on other functions, however. Day wrote that although the farm was not a “model” of what they had hoped for, “many a sick person were nursed back to health, crowds of slum children had run of the woods and fields for weeks, and groups of students spent happy hours discussing the green revolution.”¹³⁶ The farm also hosted retreats. But even with Maryfarm’s limitations and failures, their experiment on the land invited imitation. Within a few years, Workers founded farms in California, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Michigan.¹³⁷

The Worker farms and Houses of Hospitality sustained a blow with the onset of World War II. The damage resulted from conscription as well as contention within the Worker ranks. The movement suffered the loss of critical able bodies when many of the young men were drafted or enlisted. In addition, the Catholic Workers, by way of Day, “officially” adopted a pacifist stance in regards to the war, a continuation of their refusal to back Franco’s war in Spain. To announce their position, Day published an article in the January, 1942 *Worker* entitled “We Continue Our Christian Pacifist Stand.” She also sent a letter to all of the Houses explaining the Worker Movement’s commitment to pacifism. Day’s pacifism generated criticism within and without. And though she had many supporters in the movement, a number of Workers left over what they considered a just war. Heaney recalled bitter dissension, and, perhaps, even some resistance from Peter Maurin.¹³⁸ Between the draft and dissension, by 1942 only half of the original 36 houses remained, and by the end of the war only 10 were left.¹³⁹ The Workers also received criticism from the Church and the larger society for their unpopular position.

¹³⁶ Long, 230.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹³⁸ Ruth Heaney, interview by author, electronic recording, Columbia, MO., 26 October 2005.

¹³⁹ Harsh, 174.

Day reflected, “We were in the war, it was argued, and to try to talk pacifism was not only un-American but un-Catholic.”¹⁴⁰

Despite set-backs and controversies, within two decades Peter Maurin, the French peasant, and Dorothy Day, the former radical and journalist, founded, fostered, and propagated an enduring constituent of American Catholicism. Though the Catholic Worker Movement is generally thought of as a peace and social justice group, their enterprise contained a significant element of antimodernism. Under the auspices of a sacred “tradition,” the founders established the movement as a means to reconstitute the social order through religious renewal and the implementation of Maurin’s program of farming communes and Houses of Hospitality. The Houses became charity centers and a central expression of antimodern sentiment.

¹⁴⁰ *Loaves*, 196.

Charity: Holy Mother the State

Although the Workers emphatically and repeatedly stated that they “had no party line,” and were not interested in engaging the political system through political parties or other direct, established channels, they frequently mentioned the government in their writings. Day and Maurin saw the modern state as a beast that had stuck the many noses of its many heads where they did not belong, including economics, war, and charity. The Workers responded to the perceived advances of the State with their writings, protests, and pickets, but most importantly here, their charity. The Catholic Workers’ charitable endeavors stemmed not only from an impulse for good works, but also from a need to protect and (re)claim the social space of charity, wherein, they believed, indispensable religious acts transpired. The Workers felt that the modern State’s charity threatened this space by, first, a wholesale takeover, and, second, an influential but theologically repugnant approach and execution. In order to reclaim charity, the Workers drew on their notion of Church history, from which they unearthed examples of communal charity. They then sought to translate these ideas into action through their various programs, especially the Houses of Hospitality.

The Workers communicated in their writings that the State threatened Christian charity by its regulations and influential models. Day wrote, “It is a strange and terrible business, this all-encroaching state, when it interferes with the works of mercy.”¹⁴¹ In *The Catholic Worker*, Day indignantly recounts an incident in which a government facility arrived to inspect the House of Hospitality in New York. She wrote:

¹⁴¹ *Loaves*, 205.

“It was the Health Department last month. We protested their right to come into our home at 115 Mott Street and snoop around the kitchen. We were not running a restaurant or a lodging house, we explained. We were a group of individuals exercising personal responsibility in caring for those who came to us. They were not a stranger, we pointed out, since we regard them as brother in Christ. We were not an institution, or Home with a capital letter, but a home, a private home.”¹⁴²

Day’s protest points to her frustration over the government’s attempt to take control of personal activity by engulfing it under the label of “business,” like a restaurant, or a form of government charity, like a lodging house or any other “institution.” As a counterpoint, Day maintained that the Workers act as “individuals exercising personal responsibly” in a “private home.” Day stressed two important Worker ideals in this short passage. First, unlike a business or lodging house where one either makes profit or earns pay, the Workers operated under a moral imperative, “personal responsibility.” Second, Day maintained the House was a home, a model which, unlike a restaurant, connotes care and close relationships. Maurin echoed Day’s disdain of business models, “[H]ospitality, like everything else, has been commercialized.”¹⁴³ In writing the story, Day juxtaposed their non-institutionalized charity with that of the modern business or government scheme (commercial), making clear the important differences between the two and inferring the superiority of their approach.

Day grounded their concern over State influence in what they observed happening with other charities. She reported that under the direction and financial backing of the State, some Catholic charities had capitulated to inferior modes of charity:

“[M]ore and more they [Catholic institutions] were taking help from the state, and in taking from the state, they had to render to the state. They came under the head of Community Chest and discriminatory charity,

¹⁴² *Catholic Worker* (February 1938): 2.

¹⁴³ *Easy*, 9.

centralizing and departmentalizing, involving themselves with bureaus, building, red tape, legislation, at the expense of human values.”¹⁴⁴

Thus, the Worker’s claimed that the State, through the reciprocity inherent in monetary aid, brought other charities, even Catholic ones, under its method of charity—a fate they wished to avoid. In other words, the Workers felt that the State meant to remake them in her own image. Their vigorous response and condemnation of State influence suggests that the issue of *how* one conducts charity had serious theological consequences.

If the Worker’s decried the State’s mere influence, then naturally they reproved the state-run charities themselves. Characteristically, Day told a story to express her displeasure. After writing at length about their attempt to gather aid for a displaced single father and his infant daughter, she sarcastically summarized the reason for their frustrations: “[B]eing quite used to the ways of charity organizations and the efficiency which demanded that the recipient of charity be made to go through as many inquiries and as much red tape as possible regardless of the immediate need, we remained patient.”¹⁴⁵ Again Day criticizes the bureaucratic structure—choked with red tape—of contemporary charities. The case of the father and daughter serves to illustrate the delineation that the Workers’ felt other charities often made between the needy: worthy or unworthy (“immediate need” in this case). They found this theologically repulsive. Yet, even if a person managed to navigate their way to a “dole” or assistance, the Workers derided the “cold” charity such programs provided.

Upon the threat that the New York Chrystie Street House of Hospitality might be closed down, Day wrote, “I could see them [those served] being herded off to municipal shelters, mental hospitals, old age homes, the poor farms, hospitals on Welfare Island—to

¹⁴⁴ Long, 151.

¹⁴⁵ *Catholic Worker* (February 1939): 1.

all the huge, cold institutions that break the spirit and the heart.”¹⁴⁶ Both Day and Maurin made comparisons of “cold” institutionalized charity, and “warm” Catholic Worker charity, relating the issue to personal contact and intent. “Charity,” wrote Day, “is only as warm as those who administer it.”¹⁴⁷ So according to Day, institutions, as things of steel and wood, gave no warmth as they had none to give. Institutions, as opposed to the homey Houses of Hospitality, lacked the human flesh-and-blood aspect in Day’s mind.

Maurin drew out a further disjunction between authentic charity and the institutional sort, claiming that aid ought to be freely given from the heart without an institutional middle-man. “[T]hey [the poor] are given the hospitality of the ‘Muni’ [Municipal Housing]. But the hospitality that the Muni gives the down and out is no hospitality because what comes from the taxpayer’s pocket does not come from his heart.”¹⁴⁸ From Maurin’s perspective, authentic charity, as an essentially moral act, demands intent. Since citizens generally do not gratuitously pay taxes, let alone ear-mark them for specific charities or take part in those charities, any charitable operation funded from those monies lacked the necessary moral dimension. The Muni’s charity was less than cold for Maurin; it was not charity. Still, for both Workers, the issue came down to heart. For Day, institutional charity lacked heart, as in human warmth and connection, while for Maurin it lacked heart, as in a moral significance.

The New Deal, an unprecedented behemoth of state aid, stood as the back-drop for the Workers’ charitable activities. Considering the Movement’s genesis during Depression, the Workers’ views on their competitor, so to speak, are especially poignant.

¹⁴⁶ *Loaves*, 188.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 175.

¹⁴⁸ *Easy*, 9.

In one of their more unpopular stances, the Workers largely condemned the New Deal and its social programs, since, in their eyes, the New Deal constituted the thrust of modern government—to centralize, bureaucratize, and generally take control of the social scene. But more to the point, the Workers felt that the New Deal’s programs, in entering and overrunning charity’s social space, undermined personal responsibility and funded impersonal charitable programs.

In one of the issues of the *Worker* published during the Depression, Day juxtaposed the prevailing attitudes towards social issues and their own. The content of the article, her rhetorical technique, and even her use of italics all emphasized “personal responsibility” in the face of public, or governmental, action:

“The CATHOLIC WORKER admits of the importance of political action, but is much more interested in the importance of *private* action, in the creation of order out of chaos. The CATHOLIC WORKER admits of the importance of public responsibility for the poor and needy, but is much more interested in the importance of *personal* responsibility for the hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick, criminal, afflicted, and ignorant.”¹⁴⁹

The Workers’ insistence on personal responsibility at the price of supporting popular public workers such as the New Deal invited criticism from its supporters, including prominent Catholics, and hardship from a lack of government funds.¹⁵⁰ Day wrote reflecting on their position, “The point we make of emphasizing personal responsibility, rather than state or organized responsibility, has cost us a good deal through the years.”¹⁵¹ The question of why the Workers promoted personal responsibility over State action, even at a cost, opens the encompassing question of why they vigorously opposed State charity at all—its very existence, techniques, and influence on other charities.

¹⁴⁹ *Catholic Worker* (December 1936): 6.

¹⁵⁰ For example, Fr. John A. Ryan’s nickname was “The Right Reverend New Dealer.”

¹⁵¹ *Loaves*, 34.

The issue centered on a loss of social space and its religious implications. The way in which the Workers described and acted out their charity demonstrates a perceived clash between the secular and sacred spheres of life. Day made this clear: “The city, the state—we have nicknamed them Holy Mother the City, Holy Mother the State—have taken on a large role in sheltering the homeless.”¹⁵² Day’s sarcastically sacrosanct term “Holy Mother the State” played off of the common Catholic term, “Holy Mother Church,” the religious and appropriate locus of charity. Her rhetorical gesture highlighted the Worker’s lament that an inversion had transpired; the State, not the Church, now administered charity, a sacred undertaking. In response, the Workers declared that the time had come for Christians to reclaim charity. Day explicitly stated that the Houses of Hospitality, as dispensers of the Works of Mercy, were created to “combat” the “taking over of the state of all those services” which could be secured in other ways more sacred and spiritually salubrious.¹⁵³ For the Workers, then, the loss of charity—in itself or even its proper administration—meant the loss of fundamental aspects of their religiosity. The modern state represented a grave religious threat because charity, the Workers believed, offered immediacy with the divine, religious knowledge, and salvation.

According to Worker theology, to inhabit charity’s social space was to walk on hallowed ground. In their Houses, on the bread line, and even on the picket line, God came near in the person of the poor. Proximity to God depended on proximity to the poor. Maurin wrote, addressing the needy, “Although you may be called bums and

¹⁵² *Loaves*, 198.

¹⁵³ *Long*, 185

panhandlers you are in fact Ambassadors of God.”¹⁵⁴ The phrase constituted one of Maurin’s slogans and found common circulation in Worker writings, but it only touches on the religious ennoblement the Worker’s gave to the poor and charity.

Day took up the slogan, but commonly supplemented it with selections from the 25th chapter of Matthew. A favored verse reads, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”¹⁵⁵ Here Christ identifies himself with the “least of these,” interpreted by Day as the poor. The familial language Day appealed to here surpasses, in intimacy, Maurin’s use of political rhetoric, though he no doubt cherished this verse as well. So for Day, charity offered not only a representative of God, an “Ambassador,” but an encounter with Christ himself.

In relation, Day also believed that immediacy with the poor, in the context of charitable acts, provided a means to knowledge of God. She wrote, “Because I sincerely loved His poor, he taught me to know him.”¹⁵⁶ Since the poor, for Day, are both Jesus and “Ambassadors of God,” it is safe to surmise that they are the vehicles of divine knowledge. But it should be noted that mere association with the poor does not suffice for Day; it must be accompanied by love, or charity. Consequently, knowledge of God comes through the poor, affected by charity—a kind of religious epistemology of charity. Returning to the 25th chapter of Matthew, Day found another theological issue imbedded in charity, salvation. She wrote:

“I firmly believe that our salvation depends on the poor. ‘Inasmuch as you have not fed the hungry, clothed the naked, sheltered the homeless, visited

¹⁵⁴ *Easy*, 8. The selection was also published in *The Catholic Worker* (Oct, 1933) which explains it addressee.

¹⁵⁵ Mt. 25:40. Day generally used the King James Version in the early years of the Worker movement.

¹⁵⁶ *From*, 9.

the prisoner, protested against injustice, comforted the afflicted, etc., you have not done it to me.' Christ identifies Himself with the poor."¹⁵⁷

Assembling these theological statements, a brief Worker soteriology of charity materializes. The poor manifest Jesus. But the divinized poor can only be approached through the channels of charity, which include feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Interestingly, Day amended the verse adding, "sheltered the homeless"; "protested against injustice"; and "comforted the afflicted." She thereby located Catholic Worker activities within the scriptural mandate. Finally, the divine encounter posed salvific consequences; the last verse in the chapter promises punishment for the wicked and eternal life for the righteous. Or, in Day's word, salvation, precipitated by charity, "depends" on the poor. It is made possible by the meeting of the Worker, the poor, and Christ, a community affair the Workers believed government charity might disrupt, if not prevent, though its takeover and influence in this social space. Thus, for the Catholic Workers, the loss of charity meant more than the absence of good deeds. Salvation itself and communion with God were at stake.

Yet, how one performs charity also presented theological and moral difficulties for the Catholic Workers. Their aforementioned dislike of bureaucratic "red tape," and their insistence on "personal responsibility," poses two important issues. First, concerning the latter, forsaking personal responsibility divorced charity from a theological and moral foundation from the Worker's perspective. Maurin disavowed the tax-funded "charity of the Muni," which he found bereft of heart, or moral intent. In other words, it lacked a personal dimension; the government gathered involuntary-given funds with which to fund institutional charity. In the implied contrariwise situation,

¹⁵⁷ *Catholic Worker* (November 1949): 1.

people would take it upon themselves to provide both the funds and the charity. A selection from one of Day's descriptions of Maurin supports this interpretation:

“[H]e always reminded me, no matter what people's preferences, that we are our brother's keeper...that we must have a sense of personal responsibility to take care of our own, and our neighbor at a personal sacrifice. ‘That is the first principle he always said. ‘It is not the function of the state to enter into such realms...Charity is personal. Charity is love’.”¹⁵⁸

The passage equates personal responsibility, given at a “sacrifice,” with charity and sets it against state operations. Performed correctly, then, charity is love—the act of being ones “brother's keeper,” a biblical reference. Therefore, according to the Workers, a lack of personal responsibility in charity entails a moral and spiritual vacuum. Such “charity,” then, would fail to provide any of the religious benefits of charity, salvation included. That is, “personal responsibility” ensures the religious efficacy of charity.

Second, “red tape” not only meant institutional inefficiency for the Workers but involved religious repercussions as well. The Workers dismissed the cordon of red tape which, when applied, demarcated between the worthy and unworthy poor. Even so, this stance became an issue within the Movement; Day reported that some of their volunteers resisted the Workers' more indiscriminate charity.¹⁵⁹ But, to the extent they were able, Day insisted that the Workers attempt to “follow the Gospel and ‘to give to him who asks’.”¹⁶⁰ So this one instance demonstrates that “red tape,” as it was understood by the Workers, possessed the potential to override proper religious charity. The adoption of such a measure would have meant a denial of a Gospel injunction.

“Red tape,” more generally, also symbolized a lack of personal contact and warmth (the cold institutions), or, as stated previously by Day, “human values.” As such,

¹⁵⁸ *Long*, 179.

¹⁵⁹ *Loaves*, 48.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

the Workers believed “red tape” served to separate, through rules, regulations, and organizational schemes, the charity giver from the charity receiver. In light of the Worker’s theological beliefs, the seriousness of this becomes clear. For the Workers, to create bureaucratic distance would distance the charity-giver not only from the poor but from the divine as well. “Red tape” complicated the diplomacy of the “Ambassadors of God,” and sequestered the savior who was made flesh in the poor. Hence, from the Workers’ perspective, “red tape” simultaneously produced cold, impersonal charity as well as a theologically impoverished situation.

The last two issues of approach and method, as well as the three theological blessings of charity, all point to the Workers’ concern for community, which will be briefly discussed here. The Workers felt that community distinguished them from the State’s charity. Day wrote:

“[S]ocial legislation, with such measures as unemployment insurance, aid for dependent children and social security, was now in effect. Many felt that these would ameliorate on a mass scale the same ills and abuses which houses of hospitality had been set up to relieve in their way. Nevertheless, the latter have remained unique in their spirit of mutual aid and community.”¹⁶¹

In the passage, Day delineated a manner of competition between the Workers’ Houses of Hospitality and the government’s new programs; they attend to “the same ills and abuses.” But in doing so she sets up the opposing strategies of the Workers and the government. The state works on the “mass scale,” while the Houses “relieve in their way.” Day then claimed the uniqueness of their approach—“their way”—laid in mutual aid and community. The deficiencies of the State’s methods, as the Workers saw them, reinforces the distinction.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

For the Catholic Workers, a lack of “personal responsibility” and a surplus of “red tape,” posed direct problems for community. Concerning the former, even if a person willingly opted to be a secondary agent in charity (i.e. the Muni example), that would, by definition, preclude him or her from entering into direct communion with the poor. Likewise, “red tape,” as a barricade between giver and receiver, would inhibit the formation of a close communion in the Workers’ eyes. More significantly, the Workers’ three-fold theology of charity required community. The Worker’s expressed that they encountered the divine, gained knowledge of God, and achieved salvation all in the context of charitable communion with the poor. Thus, for the Workers, charity and community were inextricable tied to each other, and together made the proper religious life possible.

To review, the Catholic Workers condemned and criticized State charity on two main fronts. First, and most encompassing, they grieved its very existence in the social space of charity. State “ownership” of the poor, the Workers believed, checked Christian charity which was a requisite for an effectual religious life. Second, the way in which charity functioned also held theological significance. Day and Maurin insisted that it was spiritually detrimental to adopt from the State the status of a secondary agent in charity—that is, without “personal responsibility”—or the State’s methods and bureaucratic “red tape”. Hence, the Worker’s resisted State interference and regulations and criticized charities—Catholic ones included—which capitulated to it.

The Workers distanced themselves from the Church’s charitable operations as well. This is obvious since instead of joining or working for one of the Church’s extant

programs, the Catholic Workers initiated their own, without ecclesiastical direction or direct support. Day explained their relationship to the Church's aid organizations:

“Do we get much help from Catholic Charities? We are often asked this question. I can only say that it is not the Church or the state to which we turn when we ask for help in these appeals [support for their work]. Cardinal Spellman did not ask us to undertake this work, nor did the major of New York. It just happened. It is the living from day to day, taking no thought of the morrow, seeing Christ in all who come to us, trying literally to follow the Gospel, that resulted in this work.”¹⁶²

Although Day's allegiance to the Church cannot be doubted, the tenor of the passage still reveals an independence from the Church both financially and in terms of initiative and impetus. As Day wrote, “We never felt it was necessary to ask for permission to perform the works of mercy.”¹⁶³ The Workers' conception of sacred history contributed to this distance and independence from the Church's contemporary charities.

In the Workers' myth of Western history, the social and sacred channels of charity reached their apex, along with the rest of civilization, during the Middle Ages. But, then, as civilization fell into error, charity went with it. Hence, for the Workers, the finest exemplars and modes of charity far pre-dated modern Church charities. This suggests why the Workers intimated a distance from the Church's programs; they believed themselves to be chronologically removed in technique. Accordingly, the Workers looked back in time to plumb their sacred history for a better way to administer hospitality and charity. Moreover, the Workers felt that pre-modern modes of charity possessed the vigor to influence society such that “Holy Mother State” might be resisted and made irrelevant.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 123.

Maurin alleged that the early Christians, as a group, held up the biblical injunction of charity to a commendable degree. He wrote, “[B]ecause the poor were fed, clothed and sheltered at a personal sacrifice, the pagans used to say about the Christians, ‘See how they love each other.’”¹⁶⁴ But in the present times, Maurin explained, “[T]he pagans say about the Christians, ‘See how they pass the buck.’”¹⁶⁵ The passage directly preaches a fall or decline from an earlier height of charitableness—one more true to the Workers’ ideals. Furthermore, Maurin wrote that the effects of this charity were far reaching; the repercussions of their charity altered society as a whole. “The social order was constructed by the first Christians,” claimed Maurin, “through the daily practice of the Seven Corporal and Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy.”¹⁶⁶ Just as Day amended the 25th chapter of Matthew, here Maurin retroactively ascribes the “Works of Mercy,” a medieval formulation which they held dear, to the early Christians. In this way he rhetorically attempted to bring the past into the present, while superimposing the Workers’ present on the past. Although Maurin did not go into detail on how the “social order was constructed,” the statement remains important because it alludes to a time when Christian charity dictated the social space, not the State.

Moving chronologically, the Workers found exemplars of Christian charity in early medieval times as well. Maurin especially esteemed the Irish. He wrote, “And it was in the so-called Dark Ages which were not so dark when the Irish were the light.”¹⁶⁷ In the short sentence Maurin dismissed the uncomplimentary “Dark Ages” label of medieval times, while he praised the Irish. Among the Irish people’s many admirable

¹⁶⁴ *Easy*, 110.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

accomplishments, Maurin saw them as pioneers of hospitality. “The Irish Scholars established free guest houses all over Europe to exemplify Christian charity,” he wrote.¹⁶⁸ In the quotation, Maurin paralleled the Irish with the Workers; as the Irish once established “free guest houses” which “exemplify” charity, so now do the Catholic Workers. And similarly to the early Christianity example, Maurin situated the Irish’s Christian charity against a pagan group. He wrote, “This [charity] made pagan Teutonic rulers tell pagan Teutonic people: ‘The Irish are good people busy doing good’.”¹⁶⁹ Maurin suggests the superiority of Christian charity over and against pagan culture, a distinction the Workers certainly made between their religious activities and the State’s charity.

Day also sought examples of charitable precedents in early medieval Christian history. Although she appreciated the Irish, her accolades settled more on the continental monastics:

“The monks of St. Bernard are famous for their hospitality...The early monasteries founded by Benedict of Nursia designated monks as hospitallers and almoners. The former welcomed guests while the latter fed, clothed, and gave shelter to the needy.”¹⁷⁰

In the passage, Day not only praises the charity of these early monastics, there also seems to be a connection made between the boons of the Houses of Hospitality and those of the ancient monasteries: primarily food, clothing, shelter. The use of the titular word “hospitality” also provided a link between the two. Later in the same *Worker* article, Day strengthened the identification and added a new dimension. She wrote:

Did not the thousands of monasteries, with their hospitality change the entire social pattern of their day? They did not wait for a paternal state to

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁷⁰ *Catholic Worker* (May 1940): 10.

step in nor did they stand by to see destitution precipitate into bloody revolt.”¹⁷¹

Similarly to Maurin, Day established a correlation between the active implementation of charity and large-scale social change, the goal of the Catholic Worker Movement. Moreover, Day explicitly mentioned that monastic charity precluded the need for a “paternal state.” Thus, in conjuring the hospitality of the early monastics, Day established both a precedent and guide for their Houses of Hospitality. And the congruency between the two indicated a hope that the Workers’ Houses of Hospitality would be able to counter a “paternal” state just as the monasteries had 1,100 years earlier.

A final example, ancient hospices, demonstrates a near complete correspondence between medieval practice and the Worker movement in the 20th century. Maurin wrote, “[D]uring the early ages of Christianity the hospice (or the House of Hospitality) was a shelter for the sick, the poor, the orphans, the old, the traveler, and the needy of every kind.”¹⁷² Here Maurin explicitly unites the present with the past in naming the medieval hospice a “House of Hospitality.” The identification between the medieval hospices and their Houses, which the Worker’s commonly made in their writings, even preceded the establishment of an actual House. As Day wrote in the second issue of *The Catholic Worker*, “In the Middle Ages it was an obligation of the bishops to provide houses of hospitality or hospices for the wayfarer. They are especially necessary now.”¹⁷³ The Worker’s status as a lay group brings especial significance to this comment. Without ecclesial sanction or backing, the Catholic Workers enacted what they believed the

¹⁷¹ *Catholic Worker* (May 1940): 10.

¹⁷² *Easy*, 10.

¹⁷³ *Catholic Worker* (June-July, 1933): 4.

bishops should have been doing in the first place, a clear indication that modern Church charity fell short in their minds.

As competitive visions set against modern charity, the Workers argued that in hospices, monastery-like settings or other pre-modern configurations, charity found its proper expression. Their emphasis on community, with its Worker cognates of personal contact and theological fitness, is instructive. For the Workers, a tight bond connected Day's insistence that "it was the community that was needed," and their pre-modern inspirations; they were all instances of Christian communities that served the poor. The Workers highlighted the monasteries and hospices as examples of "traditional" systems of support that existed before the modern age tore "mutual aid" asunder. And they established their Houses of Hospitality, in particular, as the modern day incarnations of those ancient communities. In this way, the Catholic Workers attempted to repel the modern governmental system of charity using an ancient template centered on community.

This chapter rests on the premise that the Workers' charitable enterprises involved much more than social justice or good works. When understood as an instance of antimodernism, their harsh denunciations of "Holy Mother the State," and love of Church history, take on new dimensions. The Workers' claimed they beheld a shift in charity away from traditional, religious modes to modern, secular ones. The shift resulted in a loss of both the social space of charity, and the implementation of inferior forms of charity. The loss of charity, in turn, posed serious theological problems. Religiously, the Workers needed charity; direct service to the poor was indispensable for communion with

God and salvation. For an alternative vision of charity—one which could retake the social space in an appropriate manner—the Workers appealed to their conceptualization of Christian history. Particularly, the Workers wished to renew ancient communal forms of charity which, they held, the Church had largely abandoned but now needed. Therefore, along the lines presented here, the Workers' charity represents an instance of antimodernism.

Lady Poverty

Poverty was the near constant consort of the early Catholic Workers: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Of their complicated relationship with poverty, Day wrote, “I condemn poverty and I advocate it; poverty is simple and complex at once; it is a social phenomena and a personal matter. Poverty is an elusive thing, and a paradoxical one.”¹⁷⁴ An adequate understanding of the Workers’ views on poverty is likewise complex and elusive. An immediate assumption would be that the Workers, irrepressible advocates of the poor, fought and denounced poverty. But that is not the whole story. As the selection from Day reads, the Workers “advocated” poverty. Day stated Maurin’s related views, “To him, religion and asceticism go together. It is inconceivable for instance that one can truly be ‘religious’ and not embrace voluntary poverty.”¹⁷⁵ In part this is because, as others have shown, “According to Catholic Worker theory, voluntary poverty conferred both religious and practical benefits.”¹⁷⁶ But this chapter argues that their devotion to poverty reflected an antimodern ethos as well. Foremost, the Catholic Workers positioned poverty against the elements of modernity which revolted them, such as consumerism and capitalism. They believed that poverty, informed by their medievalism, offered both a corrective and holier alternative to modern abuses and errors.

At the outset, poverty, in the Workers’ sense, must be defined by what it is not. The Workers made a distinction between poverty, which they advocated, and destitution,

¹⁷⁴ *Loaves*, 71.

¹⁷⁵ Dorothy Day, *American Catholic Religious Thought: The Shaping of a Theological and Social Tradition*, ed. Patrick W. Carey (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 417.

¹⁷⁶ *Breaking*, 99.

which they labored against.¹⁷⁷ In this formulation, a destitute person languishes in a generally dire situation. They lack the basic necessities of life, and without aid they will likely die. Day described the “destitute” who came to their Houses as “ragged, haggard and hopeless,” scarcely resembling the “fathers and brothers and husbands” whom they really were.¹⁷⁸ In contrast, a person in poverty would have access to the “necessities of life.” On a fundamental level, Day explained that by “poverty” she meant “decent poverty, with sufficient food, clothing and shelter.”¹⁷⁹ Something even as basic as indoor plumbing, however, did not fall under this category.¹⁸⁰

Although Day did not readily articulate the constituents of “the necessary” beyond adequate food, clothing, and shelter, the concept is an important one. For the Workers, it demarcated a sacred line, however hazy, between what one could legitimately possess and what Christian charity claimed. Day commented on the “endless debates” over *how* much one should give; she said, whatever the exact case may be, “We *are* our brother’s keeper. Whatever we have beyond our own needs belongs to the poor.”¹⁸¹ Maurin, likewise, did not enunciate the exact “necessities.” However, he did explain that wherever the sacred line lay, it underlined sacrifice. To perform the Works of Mercy was to “feed the hungry at a personal sacrifice, to clothe the naked at a personal sacrifice, to shelter the homeless at a personal sacrifice” and so on.¹⁸² The two accounts propose subjective guidelines rather than a hard and fast distinction between the necessary and

¹⁷⁷ *House*, 273.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 273

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁸⁰ *American Catholic Religious Thought*, 417.

¹⁸¹ *Loaves*, 92.

¹⁸² *Easy*, 65.

what is owed to the poor. The two Workers left the Christian to decide whether he or she was giving to the poor, with a personal sacrifice, that which exceeded their basic needs.

Nonetheless, the Workers held to rubrics, such as “precarity,” which guided them in forgoing the unnecessary in the name of voluntary poverty. On a basic level, the Workers understood precarity as insecurity. The principle served to counter the temptation to expend resources for security beyond the realm of immediate or basic need. Or, in other words, precarity somewhat diffused the buffer of security between poverty and destitution. True poverty did not come without risks. To illustrate the point of precarity, Day printed a letter sent by an unnamed Canadian priest in one of her books:

“True poverty is rare. Nowadays religious communities are good...but they are mistaken about poverty. They accept...poverty on principle, but everything must be good and strong, buildings must be fireproof. Precarity is everywhere rejected, and precarity is an essential element of poverty. These last days our refectory was near collapsing. We have put several supplementary beams in place...[but]...[s]omeday it will fall on our heads and that will be funny. When a community is always building and enlarging and embellishing...there is nothing left for the poor. We have no right to do so as long as there are slums and breadlines.”¹⁸³

Significantly, Day did not model their poverty on frugal lay people, but a religious community; she identified the Workers with a monastic ethic. Precarity also meant that even remotely unnecessary expenditures were to be avoided. The priest’s dismissal of fire-proofing or safe roofs may seem extreme, but Day’s use of the piece indicates a strong dismissal of the extraneous. Elsewhere, Day addressed this issue in response to government pressure that they better equip their Houses of Hospitality. She wrote, “The authorities want us to live according to certain standards, or not at all. We are forced to raise our standard of living, regardless of the debts involved.”¹⁸⁴ The government’s

¹⁸³ *Loaves*, 89.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

interference suggests that the Workers' notion of acceptable living conflicted with at least a sector of larger society

The cost of living with security, as implied in the quotation (“debts involved”), is the primary point. Mirroring the concern of the Canadian priest, Day objected to a more secure life-style because it bound up money which could be spent on charitable work instead. “What right has anyone of us to have security,” she wrote, “when God’s poor are suffering?”¹⁸⁵ She observed a widespread ethic of security and acquisition, even in the ranks of her co-religionists: “In this present situation when people are starving to death because there is an overabundance of food...our Catholic young people still come from schools and colleges and talk about looking for security, a weekly wage.”¹⁸⁶ The Workers, consequently, felt that precarity provided a means of securing assets for the needy. And Day’s appeal to monastic ideals for this position, by way of an actual religious community, suggests a disjunction between themselves and the prevailing culture, as well as other lay people.

Security as luxury shined as only a single star in the constellation of luxuries forbidden by the Workers’ voluntary poverty. While poverty operated as a means to strip away all but the essentials, the Workers also argued that poverty enabled a person to procure those same basic needs of life. The Workers set voluntary poverty against the vices of the age, which they dismissed as impediments towards economic vitality. “Voluntary poverty, the doing without radios, cars, televisions, cigarettes, movies, cosmetics, all these luxuries, would enable men to buy the necessities,” wrote Day,

¹⁸⁵ *House*, 111.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 110.

predominantly targeting modern vices.¹⁸⁷ Day directed this approbation of charity at the populace at large, but the Workers applied the sentiment foremost to themselves. And from their persons, the Workers extended the ban on seemingly unnecessary accoutrements to their Houses. For example, in response to some of their detractors Day wrote, “What they are really criticizing is our poverty, the fact that we spend money for food instead of paint and linoleum.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, voluntary poverty offered practical material benefits. Ascetic citizens could provide for their own needs, even as the Workers provided for those of the poor.

Yet, to the Workers, the whole of the detriment of these vices and expenditures was more than the sum of their price tags. They claimed habitual consumption led to a perversion of the appetite and, eventually, addiction. However, instead of finding individuals at summary fault, Day laid most of the blame on the larger society. She wrote, “One of the most deadly sins is to...instill in him [the poor] paltry desires so compulsive that he is willing to sell his liberty and his honor to satisfy them.”¹⁸⁹ In particular, Day despised the advertising industry and considered it to be a profession contrary to the Works of Mercy.¹⁹⁰ Voluntary poverty, then, cleansed the palette of these addictive vices and offered a means to resist the marketers.

According to Day and the Workers, this habitual consumption, and concomitant addiction, of cheap vices constituted part of a larger consumerist problem. The Catholic Workers continually characterized the mechanisms of modern economics as financial slavery. Day wrote, “We as a nation of people owing debts and mortgages, are so

¹⁸⁷ *Long*, 195.

¹⁸⁸ *House*, 130.

¹⁸⁹ *Loaves*, 74.

¹⁹⁰ *On Pilgrimage*, 148.

enslaved by these and by installment buying that families live in poverty, only poverty with a new face.”¹⁹¹ So just as the “cheap vices” enslaved the appetite, consumerism, fed by interest rates, enslaved the pocket book. And in the credit system of installment buying, Maurin saw the cusp of a “modern” monetary practice which he and the Workers roundly derided: usury, or “money-lending at an interest.”¹⁹²

Maurin and Day repeatedly stated in their writings that usury, being directly opposed by the teachings of the “Prophets of Israel and the Fathers of the Church,” had rightly been censured by the Church in the Middle Ages.¹⁹³ The historicity of their claim meets scholarly support; as historian Jacques Le Goff wrote on the subject, by the Middle Ages the usurer stood “condemned’ by the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” and “cursed” by Scripture.”¹⁹⁴ And, as the Workers exclaimed, the medieval Church principally condemned the practice; the Church asked, in Le Goff’s words, “Choose! Your money or your [eternal] life.”¹⁹⁵ Hence, in agreeing with the ancient ecclesial censure, the Workers dismissed usury as morally and spiritually contentious. Furthermore, Maurin taught that usury precipitated the economic model around which consumerism orbited, the modern capitalist system.¹⁹⁶

For the Workers, underneath and behind the petty vices, consumerism, installment buying, and usury lay the primary point of economic conflict, modern capitalism. “The CATHOLIC WORKER is anti-capitalist, in the sense that it condemns the spirit of greed, of rampant materialism, that has become synonymous with that system and has led to the

¹⁹¹ *Loaves*, 73. The Workers usually used the word “poverty” in the usual sense unless it was being distinguished with “destitution” or used in the context of “voluntary poverty.”

¹⁹² *Easy*, 25.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁹⁴ Jacques Le Goff, *Your Money or Your Life: Economy and Religion in the Middle Ages* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 42.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65. The Church foremost saw usury as greed, a deadly sin.

¹⁹⁶ *Easy*, 80.

present abuses in production and distribution,” wrote Day. Or, as Maurin bluntly put it, “Christianity has nothing to do with modern capitalism.”¹⁹⁷ One does not have to look long in *The Catholic Worker* to find similar comments. Their critiques of capitalism ran down a number of channels; but, principally, they found the profit motive contemptible. The Workers felt that the profit system, like usury, was essentially greed-based, part and parcel of the “acquisitive” society. Maurin wrote:

“A business man is a maker of deals...[W]hile he tells you what a good bargain you are getting he is always thinking of what a good bargain he is getting. He appeals to the selfishness in you to satisfy the selfishness in him...But when business is based on selfishness everybody is busy being more selfish. And when everybody is busy becoming more selfish we have classes and clashes.”¹⁹⁸

Maurin took the “business man” as the icon and epitome of the capitalist system. And the business man, in his “selfish” aspiration for profit, in turn, characterized modern capitalism; it was morally bankrupt. Usury, then, only contributed to the thorough moral and religious failings of modern capitalism. And the result, according to Maurin, was social disarray, the “classes and clashes” of his day. Such profit-seeking was not the case, Maurin claimed, when the medieval Church’s strictures on profiteering held sway.¹⁹⁹ Sociologist Max Weber commented on the economic situation during this period: “The doctrine of *deo placere vix potest* was taken as genuine in medieval times, and was incorporated into canon law and applied to the activity of the businessman. This was also evident in the view of St. Thomas Aquinas, who characterized the striving for profit as moral turpitude.”²⁰⁰ So, taking Maurin’s lead, the Workers esteemed the

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁰⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 3rd ed., trans. Stephen Kalberg (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2002), 33. “The merchant cannot be pleasing to God.”

medieval epoch—with its profit-curbing canon law—as a model of economic righteousness.

Nonetheless, since the modern age lacked such a relationship between Church and economy, the correction to profit seeking needed to be self-imposed. Maurin wrote in one of his “Easy Essays”:

“The world would be better off if people tried to become better. And people would become better if they stopped trying to be better off. For when everybody tried to become better off, nobody is better off. But when everybody tries to become better, everybody is better off. Everybody would be rich if nobody tried to become richer. And nobody would be poor if everybody tried to be poorest.”²⁰¹

Maurin’s syllogisms bond the moral with the commercial and the commercial with the social. Economics were value laden for Maurin as evident in his argument that people would be “better” if they resisted trying to be “better off,” that is, to live by the profit motive. The answer, then, was to try and be poorest, to adopt voluntary poverty. In doing so, the individual became morally cleansed from capitalist endeavors, and contributed to the making of a better world, the social aspect. One must be a “go-giver” not a “go-getter,” as he often said.²⁰²

The Workers further argued that the immorality of the capitalist system was compounded by its being inextricably coupled to war. Day wrote, “Employment in this machine age is tied up with preparedness, armaments, war, and recovery from war.”²⁰³ And in a more encompassing accusation she wrote, “Our whole modern economy is based on our preparation for war.”²⁰⁴ From this standpoint, she reasoned that since war nourished the economy like capillaries nourish the body, it was best to excise themselves

²⁰¹ *Easy*, 37.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁰³ *On Pilgrimage*, 94.

²⁰⁴ *Loaves*, 86.

from any market organ, such as steel mill work or mining, which might contribute to the health of the war economy.²⁰⁵ Maurin, in agreement with Day's assessment, argued that capitalism itself naturally produced war. He wrote:

“Since Adam Smith...we have been told that competition is the life of trade and that it is the case of the survival of the fittest. So...looking for markets has engaged men's activities. And since trade follows the flag, industrial nations have also become imperialist nations. The fight for markets...was the main cause of the World War.”²⁰⁶

The argument here is capitalism writ-large compared to Maurin's previous analysis of the modern business man. In this case, however, the nation, erroneously in pursuit of greater profits, brings global (World War) ruin, instead of local disaster. Moreover, Maurin saw imperialism as the dark partner of global economics. In sum, capitalism, driven by a profit-seeking mentality of struggle, produced an imperialist global economy. In assessing this situation, Day therefore argued that the war economy—inherently immoral from their pacifist perspective—constituted “one of the great arguments for poverty.”²⁰⁷ Voluntary poverty, therefore, served multiple functions for the Workers in terms of the “whole modern economy.” First, the Workers considered the modern economy to be a purveyor of unnecessary goods which enslaved through “addiction” and installment-type buying. The Workers intended for voluntary poverty, as an ascetical practice, to counteract those consumerist tendencies. Poverty further acted as a means of egress from a morally repugnant (usury, profit-seeking) system. Finally, they proposed poverty as a way for a person to extricate themselves, morally and economically, from the war economy. The general tenor here is one of distance, the search for an exit from the modern economy. Day's citation of Eric Gill, an English Catholic, artist, and thinker

²⁰⁵ *On Pilgrimage*, 152.

²⁰⁶ *Easy*, 81.

²⁰⁷ *Loaves*, 86.

supports this interpretation: “It is to me perfectly clear that communities of lay folk religiously cutting themselves off from the money economy are an absolute necessity if Christianity is not to go down, either into the dust or the catacombs.”²⁰⁸ For the Workers, local economics, which they considered to be a part of voluntary poverty, followed Gill’s imperative.

The Workers suggested that the answer to a global capitalistic economy was a local one. Day wrote, “Poverty means nonparticipation. It means what Peter calls regional living. This means fasting from tea, coffee, cocoa, grapefruit, pineapple, etc.”²⁰⁹ In their strategy of “regional living,” the Workers fashioned another facet onto their definition of poverty, but one still related to the nonparticipation of the earlier examples (e.g. industry, advertising, etc). By avoiding the purchase of imported products, the Workers felt they were avoiding capitalism in its global form and its attendant imperialism. In addition, this new aspect of poverty reveals another point of Worker antimodernism, pre-modern, that is to say pre-capitalist, economics.

Briefly, a smaller economy meant, in the Workers’ scheme for a new social order, a return to a “medieval” form of economics. This generally entailed a “village” scale of commerce and an emphasis on agriculture.²¹⁰ Maurin supported this move with his oft-repeated slogan, “Grow what you eat; eat what you grow!” Concerning an economic format, Maurin set the medieval “guild system” against the “business man” and the capitalist drive for new markets and profit. He wrote:

“In 1200 A.D. there was no capitalist system, there was the guild system. The doctrine of the guilds was the doctrine of the Common Good. People used to

²⁰⁸ *Radical*, 30.

²⁰⁹ *On Pilgrimage*, 248.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

say, as they do now, “What can I do for you?” but they meant what they said...They did not look for markets, they let the markets look for them.”²¹¹

The picture Maurin painted in the passage directly inverts his estimation of the iconic business man and the capitalist world-wide drive for markets. While the business man appears to serve—gives you a “good bargain”—he is really beholden to profit.

Conversely, the guildsman, Maurin claimed, served the “Common Good,” not his own revenue interests. And likewise, while the profiteer disastrously seeks out new markets, the guildsmen were content with more local prospects. Hence, in invoking the righteous guildsman, Maurin deprecated the modern economics while setting up a mythic medieval alternative.

Day, her mind ever on labor issues, also saw their concept of voluntary poverty, in the local living sense, as a way to fight industrial abuses of the worker. She wrote, “Poverty means...seeing to it that these [clothes] are made under decent working conditions, proper wages and hours, etc...Considering the conditions in woolen mills, it would be better to raise one’s own sheep and angora goats and rabbits, and spin and weave and make one’s own blankets and stockings and suits.”²¹² Here again, Day stresses the relative virtue of a smaller economic sphere while pointing the reader to a specifically pre-industrial, agrarian substitute. So by sanctifying “local living” under the Catholic virtue of poverty the Workers adapted the religiously charged word to suit their overall resistance to capitalist abuse. Thus, Day’s critique of labor abuse cannot be separated from the Workers’ ascetic, pre-modern vision.

The Catholic Workers located much of the religious nature and antimodern content of their poverty in the person of St. Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan religious

²¹¹ *Easy*, 179.

²¹² *Catholic Worker* (December 1944): 1, 7.

order. Even though the Workers hoped that God would “give us a second St. Francis,” they were more interested in embodying Franciscan poverty in their own lives and calling others to do the same.²¹³ Maurin, perhaps more than any of the other Workers, propagated “Franciscanism”; he spoke often on Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical on Francis—his favorite encyclical—and wrote “Easy Essays” on the topic. Maurin himself constituted a Franciscan figure who owned nothing and spent a significant portion of his active life as an itinerant preacher and teacher. Mirroring St. Francis’ nickname, *Provello*, or “little poor man,” Day said of Maurin, “And amongst us all, Peter has most exemplified the man who was poor.”²¹⁴ With Maurin as the Franciscan exemplar, Day insisted that the Catholic Worker Movement itself had a Franciscan tenor. In an early issue of *The Catholic Worker* Day wrote, “We have tried to imitate St. Francis in his holy poverty.”²¹⁵ And in another work she mentioned, “Franciscan spirit grows hereabouts.”²¹⁶ The Workers, however, were convinced that Franciscanism belonged not only with the orders and themselves, but with the wider society as well. The Workers were, as Maurin explained, taking “monasticism out of the monasteries” and bringing it to the people.²¹⁷

The Worker’s recruited the much-beloved figure of St. Francis in their effort to convince the public to adopt voluntary poverty—Francis for the masses. Maurin wrote:

“St. Francis thought that to choose to be poor is just as good as if one should marry the most beautiful girl in the world. We seem to think that poor people are social nuisances and not the Ambassadors of God. We seem to think Lady Poverty is an ugly girl...And because we think so, we refuse to feed the poor with our superfluous goods.”²¹⁸

²¹³ *House*, 73.

²¹⁴ *American Catholic Religious Thought*, 420.

²¹⁵ *Catholic Worker* (January 1936): 1.

²¹⁶ *House*, 89.

²¹⁷ *Easy*, 119.

²¹⁸ *Easy*, 123-24.

In the selection, Maurin laid out what he deemed to be the religious and charitable consequences of the public's revulsion to "Lady Poverty." He argued that a person's inability to see poverty as a holy state contributed to their dismissal of the poor as "nuisances." And, in turn, a "nuisance" was not a likely recipient of charity. As a holy recourse, Maurin assumed that if the public saw poverty as St. Francis did—a beautiful and worthy consort—their perception of the poor would change and their willingness to give would follow. But the passage also insinuates that one ought to become poor, to actually "marry" Lady Poverty. The result seems to be the tenuous position of both being poor and giving to the poor.

In light of the Workers' emphasis on community and their allusions to the life of the religious, this paradoxical position makes more sense. Maurin's recommendation that one should jointly accept poverty and give to the poor betokens an intimacy and proximity with the needy that suggests community. The Workers' own lives bolster this interpretation; though poor themselves, either through circumstance or renunciation, the Workers administered charity in the context of community. Day and Maurin's recurring references to religious life, as with the Canadian priest and the Franciscans, more directly suggest "corporate poverty," the usual understanding of poverty within monasteries or friaries. That is, individually, one owns little to nothing, but corporately there is wealth—which would allow a community to administer charity. Therefore, poverty ideally acted as a reagent for community by way of corporate charity in a monastic vein. The Worker arrangement of Houses of Hospitality and farming communes resembled the religious scenario, though the Workers, unlike most religious, often lived with those they served. Concerning points of charity like co-habitation with the poor, Maurin went so far

as to chastise the Franciscans for not living up to their patron: “Through carrying out the farming commune program we prove we may be able to bring the Franciscans back to Franciscanism.”²¹⁹ Consequently, Maurin insinuated that the Workers, a lay group, “out-Franciscaned” the titular religious order on some accounts. In the same article, Maurin also criticized laypeople who found the Pope’s Franciscan encyclical, in particular, and Franciscan ideals, in general, to be untenable. “They have abandoned Franciscanism and so we will show them the way by proving it can be done,” he remarked.²²⁰

According to Maurin, then, laypeople in general ought to reclaim—he said it had been “abandoned”—Franciscanism. As one of his Easy Essays related, “What a fine place the world would be if Roman Catholics tried to keep up with St. Francis of Assisi.”²²¹ Still, Maurin called religious and lay alike not to current forms of Franciscan life, but to the more authentic manifestations of the past, which he believed the Workers embodied in the present. Day’s reference to the Canadian priest, who pined for the time when religious were truly poor, parallels this sentiment. Hence, according to Maurin, holy poverty ought to take on the semblance of the nebulous golden age of Franciscanism of medieval times.

But if the Workers could not convince a person to marry Lady Poverty, they at least recommended that one make her acquaintance through a more financially ascetic lifestyle. Day agreed with Maurin that “Franciscanism” belonged in the world, particularly the marketplace. She wrote, “Isn’t there an element of greed in the desire to have, for instance, new linoleums, electric refrigerators, new radios, new cars?...Why not a little more of the Franciscan ideal of holy poverty? Why not a little more disdain of the

²¹⁹ *Catholic Worker* (February 1945): 7.

²²⁰ *Catholic Worker* (February 1945): 7.

²²¹ *Easy*, 193.

unnecessaries of life?”²²² Here, Day directly set their religious ascetic ideal against modern consumerism in order to, as she succinctly said, “combat the bourgeois spirit by the Franciscan spirit.”²²³

Therefore, St. Francis, the obvious representation of Franciscanism, became an important symbol and source of inspiration for the Catholic Workers. Their frequent invocation of the popular saint, allowed them to firmly affix “holy” in front of their “poverty”; it had St. Francis’ patronage, so to speak. This subsequently gave the Workers’ poverty rhetoric both religious authority and a medieval cast. The Workers augmented the medieval character of their Franciscan pursuits with an emphasis on the Franciscanism of yore, which they were set to reclaim. In sum, the Workers made two seemingly discordant moves with their Franciscanism. First, they gave poverty a tonsure, apparently drawing poverty away from the mainstream, into the sphere of the religious. But their goal was quite the opposite; the Workers pushed their medieval, sacred poverty into the general social sphere. In doing so they hoped to diminish undesired economic trends, while encouraging charity in the context of communal, or corporate, poverty.

Yet even outside of the framework of a religious order, the Workers believed that voluntary poverty encouraged community. Or, rather, poverty prevented the severing of social ties in the first place. This occurred on multiple social levels. As previously mentioned, Maurin argued that a dismissal of Lady Poverty resulted in antagonism between the poor and the well-off, an example of his reference to “classes and clashes.” Day further insisted that the acquisitive mentality acted as a social solvent down to the

²²² *Catholic Worker* (October 1933): 5.

²²³ *Catholic Worker* (January 1936): 1.

level of family life.²²⁴ So while the modern economy served to sunder community, voluntary poverty knitted it back together again—especially for those whom the Workers saw as marginal in society, the poor and suffering.

For the Workers, then, sacrifice by way of poverty acted as a means of connecting with the people they named the paper for, the workers. Day explained how one should understand the broadly rendered term “worker”: “[W]e thought primarily of the poor, the dispossessed, the exploited.”²²⁵ And by taking up voluntary poverty one could enter into relationship with the worker. Day summed up their position, “Love of brother means voluntary poverty, stripping of one’s self, putting off the old man, denying one’s self, etc...While our brothers suffer, we must compassionate them, suffer with them.”²²⁶ In Day’s odd usage of “compassionate” as a verb, she stresses the active nature of poverty. One must willfully enter into poverty, which entails suffering, and therein the worker, the poor, will be met.

Compassion, then, was not mere emotional rapport for Day. It called for actual physical poverty, to truly “suffer with” the worker, to “compassionate.” “[I]f we are not among its [poverty’s] victims,” she wrote, “its reality fades from us.”²²⁷ In turn, compassion’s demands created a sort of community of suffering as in the case of the Houses of Hospitality. Day wrote:

“We wish to assure our readers that most of the people who are writing for, and putting out this paper, have known poverty...[S]ome have slept in city lodging houses, in doorways, in public parks, have been in the wards of city hospitals; have walked the city with their feet upon the ground searching for work, or just walking because they had no shelter to go to. The *Catholic Worker* is edited and written by workers, for workers.”²²⁸

²²⁴ *Loaves*, 74.

²²⁵ *Long*, 204.

²²⁶ *On Pilgrimage*, 247.

²²⁷ *Loaves*, 71.

²²⁸ *Catholic Worker* (May 1934): 4.

Here, Day makes an identification between the Catholic Workers and the workers whom they served. In light of the Workers' understanding of poverty, this identification establishes a sense of solidarity with the poor. The Workers, having known poverty themselves and now taking it upon themselves voluntarily, felt they "compassionated," suffered *with* the worker *as* a worker. And in doing so, Day said, "[S]ome will not have to endure so heavy an affliction."²²⁹ Their giving of themselves at a "personal sacrifice," as the Workers' articulated it, eased the burden of the poor. Therefore, the Catholic Workers argued that voluntary poverty, understood as suffering, acted to establish a community between themselves and those modern society had discarded. The poor served the poor.

On the face of it, Catholic Workers encouraging poverty sounds nonsensical, like firefighters handing out matches. But by taking into account Worker antimodernism, their statements not only make sense, but reveal the significant role voluntary poverty played in their economics and notions of community and charity. The Workers' advocated poverty less as a constructive force and more as a corrosive agent to strip away the superfluous accretions of modern consumerist society, and to corrode the driving forces of capitalism itself, like usury and profiteering, and its resultant moral failings, like war. In doing so, they held out voluntary poverty as a means of withdrawing from an imperialistic, immoral economy, in whose stead they envisioned a local, agrarian, medieval one. And as lichen corrodes sheer rock to allow for the growth of vegetation,

²²⁹ *On Pilgrimage*, 224.

the Workers hoped that voluntary poverty would break down the modern order, allowing charity and community of a medieval monastic breed, to take root.

Community: A Harsh and Dreadful Heaven

Community figures strongly throughout the Workers' sacred history. And, similarly to charity and holy poverty, they recount a fall from pre-modern communal life into modern dissolution. In forming their response to the modern situation, the Workers drew on the thought of other likeminded individuals. Their resultant conception of community embraced and supported their voluntary poverty, charity as well their eschatological vision. Therefore, the formation and maintenance of community was of critical concern for the Workers.

Though Day and Maurin held several historical trends culpable for the fall from community, predominantly they indicted "individualism" as the ideological culprit. At root, they felt that individualism promoted a false view of human identity, which, in turn, produced pernicious results. Day wrote in 1935, "The age of individualism, laissez faire industrialism and self-seeking capitalism is dead and gone...Men are beginning to realize that they are not individuals but *persons* in society, that man alone is weak and adrift, that he must seek strength in common action."²³⁰ In this premature obituary, Day linked the funeral of individualism and the industrial, capitalist economy, with the soon-to-be death of an "individualistic" view of humanity. In doing so, she propounded a tight, perhaps causal, connection between the three failed elements of modernity—all of which the Workers railed against—and individualism. Maurin made a similar, direct connection between individualism and modern capitalism: "The bourgeois capitalist believes in

²³⁰ *Catholic Worker* (December 1935): 4.

rugged individualism.”²³¹ Therefore the human, understood as an “individual” (individualism), produced or at least encouraged the contemptible modern state of affairs. Still, Day offered a hopeful suffix to her statement; if people are taken as “persons,” not individuals, strength in “common action” will follow. The person, then, must replace the individual in order for a healthy society to emerge. And, significantly, the proposed outcome resonates with overtones of community. But the Workers’ meanings of the “individual,” which corresponds to “individualism,” and the “person,” which corresponds to “personalism,” are not directly apparent in their writings. They borrowed the terminology from the philosophical discourse of the day, especially as espoused by the aforementioned Emmanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain. Both thinkers condemned individualism and argued for personalism in its stead, but by way of Maurin, Mounier exerted more influence on the Workers.

Mounier (1905-1950), a former student of Maritain’s, founded the journal *Esprit*, which called for no less than a “remaking of the Renaissance after four centuries of errors” and the building of a “new personalist civilization in the shell of the old.”²³² The Workers obviously sympathized with such a sentiment, and adopted a number of Mounier’s concepts including his understanding of individualism and its social effects.

Mounier wrote on the subject:

“Individualism is a system of morals, feelings, ideas and institutions in which individuals can be organized by their mutual isolation and defence. This was the prevailing structure of Western bourgeois society in the 18th and 19th centuries. Man in the abstract, unattached to any natural community, the sovereign lord of a liberty unlimited and undirected; turning towards others with a primary mistrust, calculation and self-vindication; institutions restricted to the assurance that these

²³¹ *Easy*, 115.

²³² Emmanuel Mounier, *A Personalist Manifesto*, trans. the Monks of St. John’s Abbey (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), 10.

egoisms should not encroach upon one another, or to their betterment as a purely profitmaking association.”²³³

Individualism, by Mounier’s estimation, brought about a cultural milieu in which humans were defined and understood by a separateness that *de facto* discouraged community. Chronologically, Mounier situated individualism within his “four centuries of error,” particularly with the rise of the bourgeoisie, connections that Maurin also claimed. Mounier additionally offered “profitmaking,” a reference to capitalism, in his analysis. Hence, the alienated “individual,” set against other individuals, brought about the corresponding society—an individual struggle for goods and profit—which Day decried and contemptuously eulogized.

Mounier, a self-designated “personalist,” contrasted individualism with personalism and the person. While the individual turns inward, defining itself by exclusion and rapaciousness, Mounier described the person in directly contrary terms. “[T]he fundamental nature of the person,” he wrote, “is not originality, nor self-knowledge nor individual affirmation. It lies not in separation but in communication.”²³⁴ In other words, the term “person,” as opposed to individual, implies communion with others. Mounier expounded on the concept: “The person only exists thus towards others, it only knows itself in knowing others, only finds itself in being known by them. The *thou*, which implies the *we*, is prior to the *I*.”²³⁵ Mounier’s personalism, then, demanded community in strong and even ontological terms.

²³³Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, trans. Philip Mairet (first published as *Le Personnalisme* in France, 1950; reprint, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952; reprint, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 18-19.

²³⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

²³⁵*Ibid.*, 20.

Mounier also attached an altruistic ethic to his personalism. “The vitality of the personal impulse is to be found...in *generosity* or *self-bestowal*,” he wrote.²³⁶ In altruistic interaction—emphasis on the “action”—personhood emerges. Briefly he said, “[W]hat is not acting is not.”²³⁷ So while individuality materializes in solitariness and acquisition, the person exercises being in active self-giving and community. Thus, when Day promoted the rise of the “person” and “common action,” she likely implied Mounier’s requisites of the personal life. And in dismissing “individualism,” she referred to its tendency to both break down community and promote bourgeois selfishness.

Maurin’s references to personalism gain context and texture with a fuller understanding of Mounier’s philosophy. Maurin wrote:

“A personalist is a go-giver, not a go-getter. He tries to give what he has, and not try to get what the other person has. He tries to be good by doing good to the other fellow. He is *altro-centered* not *self-centered*...Through words and deeds he brings into existence a common unity, the common unity of a community.”²³⁸

Maurin laid out the basics of Mounier’s claims in language accessible to the “man on the street.” The human as person, or “personalist,” defies individualism by focusing not on the self but the other in generosity. In doing so, Maurin claimed that the “altro-centered” person establishes connections, or a “common unity,” which produces a community. Adding the modifier, “gentle” to Mounier’s “personalist,” Maurin contrasted the “gentle personalist” with the modern day, and very American, “rugged individualist.” So in Mounier, Maurin found both a kindred spirit in denouncing the modern world, and an open font of personalist theory. Maurin also adopted Mounier’s label for the social incarnation of personalism, “communitarianism.”

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

²³⁸ *Easy*, 117.

Although Mounier toiled endlessly until his death extolling and articulating communitarianism, the Workers neither extensively expounded the fine points of his theory nor developed their own articulation of it. As one scholar claims, “The decentralized, communitarian society these Catholic Workers desired was never envisioned in detail, never theoretically conceptualized.”²³⁹ The Workers neglected the theoretical details because their “vision” was less conceptual and more historical in nature. While Mounier sought to bring the abstract concept of “communitarianism” into being, the Workers attempted to resurrect sacred historical communities which they labeled “communitarian” or, interchangeably, “communistic.”²⁴⁰ The Workers’ confirmed their Houses of Hospitality and farms as two such communitarian enterprises.

The “farming commune” claims multiple, but somewhat vague, historical referents. Maurin mentioned the Irish specifically, but generally any community of the past that embraced the three-fold criteria of cult, culture, and cultivation embodied this ideal.²⁴¹ The Workers turned, in particular, to their conception of the pre-modern or pre-industrial village. Day insisted that the Workers should think of their communal agrarianism not in terms of the individual farm, in the more modern sense, but the “village community,” wherein cooperation reigned.²⁴² One enthusiastic Worker wrote, “It [farming communities] must restore again in small units the society that is best described as Mediterranean society, based on the traditions that Peter himself had known

²³⁹ June E. O’Connor, *The Moral Vision of Dorothy Day: A Feminist Perspective* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 80.

²⁴⁰ Long, 267.

²⁴¹ Easy, 66.

²⁴² *Catholic Worker*, January, 1947, 2.

in Southern France.”²⁴³ The Worker interestingly appealed both to the sacred history of Maurin the theological historian and to the tradition of Maurin the peasant.

For the Workers, farm life and communitarianism went hand-in-hand. Day stated that Maurin proposed the communes “so that people could go in groups, and in groups to hold each other up.”²⁴⁴ Community became intrinsic to the Workers’ support of the farms, wherein mutual aid took place, and the Workers jettisoned what they felt inhibited community. For example, most of the early Worker farms rejected modern farm implements. Heaney, drawing on her long experience with Worker farms, explained why: “If you can do something with a machine, you don’t need your neighbor’s help in that job. Technology was almost in opposition with one of our biggest ideas [community].”²⁴⁵ In founding the farms and conducting them in such a manner, the Workers rejected what they felt was an individualistic, self-serving capitalist system for a personalist, “altro-centered,” agrarian one. Thus, on the ideal farm, the Workers promoted and lived their pre-modern communitarianism.

The Workers also located Christian communitarianism in the same groups they turned to for inspiration in charity. Maurin praised the Irish for their communal Houses of Hospitality.²⁴⁶ Day added that the early Christians, as well as the monastics, provided models for “Christian communism.”²⁴⁷ They did not make an incidental association between charity and community, however. The Workers extolled these groups in their communism, not because they appreciated an effective organizational scheme but by the fact that these ancient communities served the poor and each other. Yet, as previously

²⁴³ *Radical*, 21.

²⁴⁴ *On Pilgrimage*, 188.

²⁴⁵ Ruth Heaney, interview by author, electronic recording, Columbia, MO., 20 October 2006.

²⁴⁶ *Easy*, 66.

²⁴⁷ *Catholic Worker* (December 1936): 6.

demonstrated, the Workers admired their charity because these pre-modern groups operated in a community setting. From the personalist perspective this makes perfect sense; community and charity, properly understood, reside in necessary, mutual inclusion.

The Workers most often imitated and referenced monasticism, mainly of the Franciscan and Benedictine varieties.²⁴⁸ Day wrote, “We have tried, all of us...to combine work and prayer according to the Benedictine ideal.”²⁴⁹ The Workers’ use of monastic prayer in itself demonstrates a communal activity done in imitation of one of their pre-modern referents. More so, however, the manner in which they understood monastic liturgy reveals much of the Workers’ theology of community. And their liturgical life cannot be understood apart from the early 20th century liturgical movement as propagated by the Benedictine monk Virgil Michel. Though Michel was widely known by reputation, he also became a close friend and supporter of the Catholic Worker Movement, keeping correspondence and visiting the Houses. In this capacity he exerted a strong influence on the Workers.

Michel, a monk at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, defined liturgy as “the solemn and public worship of the Church, her official prayers and blessings, the sacraments, and above all the holy Sacrifice of Christ, the Mass.”²⁵⁰ Michel taught that the laity as well as the clergy and religious ought to participate in the liturgical life of the Church. Correspondingly, as one scholar wrote, “In his writings and lectures Michel was

²⁴⁸ Strictly speaking, Franciscans are not monastics, but the Workers’ view of them, as outlined in chapter 3, closely resembles a monastic model.

²⁴⁹ *Catholic Worker* (January 1936): 1.

²⁵⁰ Virgil Michel, “The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration,” *Orate Fratres*, 9 (November 1935): 540.

above all concerned to reestablish the bonds of community.”²⁵¹ Michel made his case for a Catholic, communally conducted, liturgy in the face of the modern error of individualism which he, the Workers, and Mounier all decried.

Michel charged individualism for perpetrating the dissolution of modern society and the spiritual integrity of the Christian faith. He defined individualism as a product of the Enlightenment which promoted “the view that if every individual looks to his own best interest and makes that his supreme law in life, then the good of society will also be best attained.”²⁵² Instead, according to Michel, the individualistic view of humanity produced grave results. He wrote, “What actually happened was that this principle of exaggerated individualism made society a battle-ground of all against all. This was a condition not of dignified human personalities and life, but a human version of the law of the jungle.”²⁵³ Hence, individualism not only dismembered an implied pre-existing unity, but also produced a society of self-seeking antagonism.

Michel further argued that the modern individualistic society proved detrimental to a foundational aspect of the Christian religion, the Body of Christ. He wrote:

“What is the basis of this [the Church’s] liturgy? It is that of the Mystical Body of Christ—a concept that was not only well known to the early Christians but also a primary inspiration for all their conduct and life. It was constantly preached by the Church Fathers and taught by the Church down to our own day, but it has often...been left in the background...especially since the growing dominance of un-Christian individualism.”²⁵⁴

The Mystical Body of Christ sits as the centerpiece of Michel’s exposition. He attributes significant traditional importance to the concept, spanning from the Early Church, through the formative period of the Church Fathers, and into the present day. But the

²⁵¹ Joseph P. Chinnici, *Living Stones: The History and Structure of Catholic Spiritual Life in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 181.

²⁵² *The Liturgy*, 537. Michel used “individual” in the same technical way as Mounier.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 537.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 541.

track is a downward one; at one time, he says, this point of theology dictated every aspect of the Christian's life, whereas now, it has been "left in the background." He names "individualism" as the culprit, opposing it to the Mystical Body of Christ. The rise of the one resulted in the diminishing of the other.

Michel promoted liturgy, which he linked to the doctrine of the Body of Christ, as the answer to this modern problem. As opposed to individualism, Michel's described the doctrine as essentially unifying. He wrote, "[T]he doctrine of the mystical body assures us that no Christian is as such ever separated from his brethren in Christ. He is never an isolated individual but always part of a greater whole, he is always a member of an all-embracing fellowship."²⁵⁵ The liturgy, then, served as a means to realize this spiritual communion. But Michel described the effects of the liturgy as more than a spiritual realization. He used the words "live" and "social." Hence, he meant for the Body of Christ, exercised through the liturgy, to take on concrete social dimensions. He wanted "an actual working out of this Christian fellowship and solidarity."²⁵⁶ The Catholic Worker Movement became part of this actualization. Under the auspices of the "liturgical movement," Michel's theological explication of individualism, the Mystical Body of Christ, liturgy, and their social effects profoundly influenced the Workers. The Workers described multiple intersections between community and liturgical practices. Stressing the communal nature of liturgy itself, Day defined it as "common worship, concorporate worship, worship in one mind and with one heart, and with one mouth."²⁵⁷ And in even stronger terms she referred to the liturgical movement as a

²⁵⁵ Virgil Michel, "Natural and Supernatural Society," *Orate Fratres* 10 (April 1936): 294.

²⁵⁶ *The Liturgy*, 543.

²⁵⁷ *Catholic Worker* (December 1935): 4.

“revolt against private, individual prayer.”²⁵⁸ This perspective appears aggressively communal, implying that an individual does not worship, a person with and within an assembly does. Indeed, Day esteemed liturgy, especially the Sacrifice of the Mass, as being “anti-individualistic.”²⁵⁹ So, taking Michel’s lead, Day declared a necessary antagonism between individualism and the liturgy.

According to Day, the liturgy also served to instill an awareness of spiritual community, understood as the Body of Christ. She wrote:

“When we pray thus [liturgically] we pray *with* Christ, not *to* Christ. When we recite prime and compline we are using the inspired prayer of the church. When we pray with Christ (not to Him) we realize Christ as our Brother.²⁶⁰ We think of all men as our brothers then, as members of the Mystical Body of Christ. ‘We are all members of one another’.”²⁶¹

By stating, twice, that the Workers pray not to Christ but with him, Day strikingly included Christ in the liturgical assembly. By changing the preposition—from “to” to “with”—the formerly transcendent Christ becomes immanent, realized in close, familial terms, a “Brother.” However, Christ, for the Workers, was also a Body, namely the body of believers with whom they worshipped. It seems in that way, as an assemblage of “Christs,” the Workers worshipped *with* Christ. Following Michel, Day additionally insinuated in the passage that the awareness of spiritual community ought to extend beyond the immediate community to all Christians. She wrote, “The Mystical Body of Christ is a union...In the Liturgy we have the means to teach Catholics, thrown apart by Individualism into snobbery, apathy, prejudice, blind reason, that they ARE members of

²⁵⁸ *Catholic Worker* (January 1936): 5.

²⁵⁹ *Catholic Worker* (December 1935): 4.

²⁶⁰ The liturgical sequence Day refers to in the passage is noteworthy. Prime (early morning prayer) and compline (night prayer) comprise two-sevenths of the Liturgy of the Hours, a liturgical sequence observed by religious and, to a lesser extent, secular priests.

²⁶¹ *Catholic Worker* (January 1936): 5.

one body.”²⁶² Hence, sharing in the emphases of the liturgical movement, the Workers participated in worship to bring themselves and other believers into spiritual and actual community.

Still, the Workers did not sharply delineate the boundaries of the Mystical Body of Christ, and, even less so, the limits of spiritual “brotherhood.” In the aforementioned passage, Day, without laying out the logical sequence, drew the implication that “all” men are as brothers in Christ—“members of one another.” While her sense of universal inclusion in the Mystical Body need be qualified, her sense of universal, spiritual brotherhood can be readily expanded. Remarking on an experience of collective kinship, Day wrote:

“[W]e were all children of a common Father, all creatures of one Creator, and Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Christian, Communist or non-Communist, [we] were bound together by this tie. We cannot escape the recognition of the fact that we are all brothers. Whether or not a man believes in Jesus Christ. His incarnation, His life here with us, His crucifixion and resurrection; whether or not a man believes in God, the fact remains that we are all the children of one Father.”²⁶³

Therefore, Day maintained that however removed people may be by creed or belief, they are still children of God. Moreover, one must recognize the attendant, binding, familial tie. Day’s understanding of the relationship between non-Christians and the Body of Christ, on the other hand, is important but less clear.

Day provided suffering as a link between non-Christians and the Mystical Body of Christ. She wrote, “Suffering, sadness, repentance, love, we have all known these. They are easiest to bear when one remembers their universality, when we remember that we are all members or potential members of the Body of Christ.”²⁶⁴ In the short

²⁶² *Catholic Worker* (December 1935): 4.

²⁶³ *House*, 180.

²⁶⁴ *From*, 16.

selection, Day associates suffering with a broad understanding of the Mystical Body. Interestingly, she includes “love” in her list of general human travails which are best borne in spiritual unity. Day thereby established a bond between hardship, in whichever form it may take, and the Body of Christ. And insofar as “potential members” take part in this universal suffering, they are also bound, in a way, to the Mystical Body.

Elsewhere she argued that this is especially so for those who willingly suffer for the downtrodden, such as her former radical and communist comrades. They, she explained, “should realize more readily than the great masses of comfortable people, the mystery of the tremendous sacrifice of Christ, who suffered in His agony in the garden, not only His own agony, but the agony of all others, the agony of those who suffered and the sins of those who inflicted suffering and death upon them.”²⁶⁵ Therefore, with the Body of Christ understood as a suffering body, the compassionate, regardless of their religious affiliation, draw near to, if not unite with in a limited way, the Mystical Body.

In a similar fashion, Day referred to suffering as a “bridge” between the non-Christian and themselves, or, more broadly, Christians in general. Speaking specifically about Communists she wrote, “The bridge—it seems to me—is love and the compassion (the suffering together) which goes with all love. Which means the folly of the Cross, since Christ loved men even to that folly of failure.”²⁶⁶ Suffering, then, equals “compassion,” or “suffering together.” From the Workers’ perspective, a person, whether a Catholic or Communist, does not suffer solitarily. Nevertheless, this bridge does not directly link the Worker to the “Communist”; the one for whom they suffer does, that is, the poor or the “worker.”

²⁶⁵ *Catholic Worker* (October 1934): 3.

²⁶⁶ *Catholic Worker* (November 1949): 2.

When the poor are directly factored in, Day's theology of the Body of Christ comes together. As previously established, the Workers considered communion with the poor as communion with Christ. So if a Communist "compassionated" they would, in turn, encounter Christ in the poor. Day wrote:

"Often there is a mystical element in the love of a radical worker [like a Communist] for his brother, for his fellow worker. It extends to the scene of his suffering, and those spots where he has suffered and died are hallowed... You²⁶⁷ know this feeling as does every other radical in the country... [Y]ou do not acknowledge Christ's name, yet, I believe you are trying to love Christ in His poor, in His persecuted ones. Whenever men have laid down their lives for their fellows, they are doing it in a measure for Him... 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these brethren, you have done it unto me'."²⁶⁸

Day claims here that so long as radical workers "lay down their lives," they are serving Christ, even if they maintain non-religious motives. In doing so, these "potential members" of the Body of Christ enter into communion with the poor as *alter Christus*. Through the bridge of active compassion, the non-Christian suffers with and perhaps in the whole Mystical Body of Christ.

Day's theology of an inclusive Body adumbrated by decades Jesuit Karl Rahner's terminology, which he eventually discarded, of the "anonymous Christian": through grace and right living, non-Christians may become "anonymously" linked to the Church. Day's theology, then, naturally invites some of the same criticisms that Rahner's did—namely, non-Christians may strongly reject such a label. Day's vision, however, was more congenial than the typical Catholic understanding of the Body of Christ at the time, which one historian describes as a symbol of "triumphalist exclusion" or the Church's "resistance to paganism" (secular, non-Catholic culture).²⁶⁹ Theological critiques aside,

²⁶⁷ Here Day is rhetorically speaking to the "radical worker."

²⁶⁸ *From*, 11-12.

²⁶⁹ James Terence Fisher, *The Catholic Counter Culture, 1933-1962*. (Chapel Hill: The University of north Carolina Press, 1989), 50-51.

Day's thoughts on the Mystical Body of Christ indicated an interest in cooperation and communion despite confessional lines.

To recapitulate, the Workers found friends in their denunciation of modernity and its consequences for community. Together with Emmanuel Mounier and Virgil Michel, the Workers condemned individualism, a modern error, which they believed produced societies of self-seeking individuals to the detriment of altruistic communities. The Workers, in response, turned to their sacred history for "communitarian" groups which to emulate. And in these monastic-influenced Houses and farms, they attempted to cultivate "personalist" ideals. Under Michel's tutelage, the Workers furthermore associated individualism with the sundering of the Mystical Body of Christ. Michel's liturgical movement, they believed, worked to reunite the scattered members of the Body into a loving whole. But the Workers' understanding of this doctrine encompassed, to a certain extent, non-Christians as well. Insofar as a "radical worker," for example, suffered on behalf of the poor he or she encountered Christ and, therefore, the Body of Christ. In their communes, liturgy, and theology the Workers thus attempted to undo the effects of individualist modernity

As it had with the "radical workers" and the suffering Body of Christ, compassion also served as a "bridge" between the Workers' understanding of poverty and charity. The Workers held that holy poverty demanded "personal sacrifice," which itself entailed a measure of suffering. Their Houses of Hospitality and communes thus became the sites where this "stripping of one's self" occurred.²⁷⁰ Day wrote on the relationship between the two, offering an apologetic:

²⁷⁰ *On Pilgrimage*, 247.

“Any statement that we love this life [in poverty], that we would not be happy elsewhere, that we rejoice in such wretchedness, would open us to the charge of perverseness, of masochism... To love is to be happy, and yet to love is also to suffer. To love the poor, one must be with them. There is always the yearning for union, for the close embrace, even if it leads to depths unutterable. We must show our love for Christ by our love for the poor.”²⁷¹

Here, Day elaborated on how the Workers understood the connection between their poverty and love, as in compassion. The relationship curiously parallels the traditional coupling of John the Baptist, the ascetic, and Jesus, the suffering savior. The Workers’ voluntary poverty “made way” for their self-sacrifice in charity on behalf of the poor. Their charity, then, fell under the shadow of the cross—“to love is also to suffer.” One of Day’s most popular quotations nicely summarizes this theological point: “But the final word is love. At times it has been, in the words of Father Zossima, a harsh and dreadful thing, and our very faith in love has been tried through fire.”²⁷² In other words, love meant sacrifice—poor food, cold, sickness, abuse, and all the other companions of poverty. Love and compassion—enabled by poverty—are, therefore, synonyms in Worker parlance.

Day emphasized community, the “close embrace,” as the context for poverty and charity. “[T]o pledge yourself to voluntary poverty for life so that you can share with your brothers,” she wrote, “is not enough. One must live with them, share with them their suffering too.”²⁷³ Hence, it was necessary that their work take place in a community setting, or, more specifically, a community of suffering. Day, nonetheless, also stated that they found joy in “such wretchedness” and that “[t]o love is to be happy.” So the

²⁷¹ *Catholic Worker* (April 1950): 1.

²⁷² *Long*, 285. Zossima is a character in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 214.

communities of suffering were simultaneously communities of joy. The Workers' theology of charity, outlined previously, offers a partial resolution to this paradox

According to this theology, the administration of charity carried immense spiritual importance. In compassionate acts, the Worker encountered Christ. They learned religious truths, and drew near to the divine. By establishing communes and moving in with the poor, so to speak, the Workers created communities in which Christ as the poor was a member. The "depths unutterable," were, hence, accompanied by a close, communal experience with Christ that brought religious satisfaction and joy. That these Christological communities also offered salvation further magnified their desirability. So these religious boons—the "ends" to the "means" of suffering—seem to be Day's answer to charges of "masochism." But the answer remains incomplete. The Workers' communities also subsumed the ultimate expression of Christian joy, heaven.

In Worker theology, heaven spanned the here and the hereafter. Theologian Brigid O'Shea Merriman comments that Day "tried to make the present like a foretaste of the life to come. This realized eschatology is present in the tension Dorothy felt between proper attention given to better this world's conditions and an acknowledgement that the present was a pilgrimage, a preparation for the fullness of life to come."²⁷⁴ Merriman accurately assesses the Workers' charity as a way to make life on earth more heavenly, a "foretaste" she says. But she overestimates the "tension" between "this world" and the "life to come" for Day. The strong continuity between this life and the next in Day's "realized eschatology" undercuts any such tension. Day wrote:

"We are not expecting utopia here on earth. But God meant things to be much easier than we have made them. A man has a natural right to food, clothing and

²⁷⁴ Brigid O' Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 182.

shelter. A certain amount of goods is necessary to lead a good life... We must keep repeating these things. Eternal life begins now. 'All the way to heaven is heaven, because He said, 'I am the Way'.²⁷⁵ The cross is there, of course, but "in the cross is joy of spirit'.²⁷⁶

In the first few sentences, Day summed up their apostolate to the worker and the world; they labored to bring about a world closer to their religious ideal, or, as "God meant things to be." She seems to place an "easier" life somewhere between utopia and the current state of affairs where "natural rights" sometimes go unmet. Day wrote, "The vision is this. We are working for 'a new heaven and a new *earth*, wherein justice dwelleth.' We are trying to say with action, 'Thy will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven'.²⁷⁷ Still, she acknowledged, they were not expecting "utopia." So between the earthly realm and the heavenly, Day did express dissonance.

Nonetheless, this does not entail that she saw this life as only a pilgrimage, a preparation, for the "life to come." In a manner of speaking there was no life to come as a discrete existence; "eternal life begins now." Any "pilgrimage" to heaven would thereby traverse heaven; "all the way to heaven is heaven," she recurrently stated. Day perceived heaven and earth as inextricably related. They were "linked together as the body and soul are linked together."²⁷⁸ Therefore, with Day's pronounced emphasis on the continuity between the here and the hereafter, any supposed "tensions" between the two are minimized if not transcended.

Day's realized eschatology additionally incorporated Jesus as "the Way." The christology inherent in this eschatological theology, parallels Day's concept of a "joyous" yet "dreadful" love. That is, the cross promises salvation and suffering, respectively. In

²⁷⁵ Day cited St. Catherine of Siena's interpretation of John 14:16.

²⁷⁶ *On Pilgrimage*, 177.

²⁷⁷ *Catholic Worker* (February 1940): 7.

²⁷⁸ *On Pilgrimage*, 202.

the passage, Day immediately followed her reference to Christ with the cross, insinuating that “the Way,” which she equates with heaven, follows the *Via Delorosa*. But, she says, the cross also brings “joy,” the joy of heaven, even on earth. Pre-mortem, at least, Day did not find heaven and suffering mutually exclusive. Therefore, the Workers could rejoice in their suffering because, in their communities, they had found heaven as well.

Community played an instrumental role in the Workers’ realized eschatology just as it has with salvation in general. Heaven was closed to individuals. Only a person, which is to say a community of persons, could enter into heaven. Day wrote, “We cannot live alone. We cannot go to heaven alone. Otherwise, as Péguy said, God will say to us, ‘Where are the others?’.”²⁷⁹ The selection reflects the Workers’ insistence that, on two counts, salvation followed community. First, charitable works, consummated in communion with the poor, procured salvation (as per the 25th chapter of Matthew). In other words, community stood as the venue on which salvific works of charity could be performed.

Second, the Workers also understood salvation as a close relationship with the divine—“the love of eternal friendship.”²⁸⁰ And, in turn, community, in the charitable, compassionate sense, offered the most ready access to this divine intimacy. “Communitarians, we find Christ in our brothers,” wrote Day.²⁸¹ Alienation from a community, then, would result in alienation from God and, therefore, a loss salvation. “Hell is not to love anymore,” Day approvingly quoted from *Diary of a Country Priest*.²⁸² This seems to be, in part, why Day stated, “We cannot go to heaven alone.”

²⁷⁹ *Catholic Worker* (February 1940): 7. Péguy was a French Catholic poet and essayist.

²⁸⁰ *On Pilgrimage*, 143.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁸² *House*, 251.

One must first love and “befriend” Christ in community before one may enter into heaven. And in terms of Day’s realized eschatology this makes considerable sense; the contiguous sense of heaven reflects the continuity in relationship between a faithful community and Christ before and after death. The bond forged in life continues after death. And in this sense, the Body of Christ becomes “the Way” of salvation. “Eternal life begins now,” as Day insisted, because life with Christ begins now. Day summed up this communal realized eschatology, “Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.”²⁸³

Community and compassion served as the foundation and mortar, respectively, for the Catholic Workers’ poverty and charity. Whether on a farm or at a House of Hospitality the Workers lived and served together. Community life functioned as the foundation for their movement because amidst and through it they married Lady Poverty and performed their charitable acts. Compassion, on the other hand, bonded poverty and charity; the one implied the other. Only in poverty could their charity truly be compassionate, a “suffering with” the poor. Given that, however, community and compassion become indistinguishable. As Day herself noted, “Sharing and community living mean laying down your life for your fellows.”²⁸⁴ The Worker understanding of community connoted benevolence at a “personal sacrifice.”

The Workers’ realized eschatology also reflected a strong communal emphasis. Day proposed a personalist eschatology whereby individuals precluded themselves from heaven, while persons entered in, joined together in the suffering Body of Christ, “the

²⁸³ *Long*, 285.

²⁸⁴ *On Pilgrimage*, 236.

Way.” United with their beloved Christ, the Workers found joy in heaven on earth—but also pain. Theirs was a “harsh and dreadful” heaven. Hence, salvation, along with the Workers’ program and their vision for a renewed society, depended on community. And so they denounced “individualism,” the divisive offspring of modernity, as a dire threat to society, salvation, and a proper religious life. As a countermeasure, the Workers esteemed and encouraged community-building efforts whether they were from their co-religionists like Mounier and Michel, or even “radical workers.” But foremost the Catholic Worker Movement attempted to reunite scattered, self-serving individuals into “altro-centered” communities whose precursors they located in their sacred history.

Conclusion

My three main chapters correspond to three aspects of the Workers' antimodernism: charity, poverty, and community. With the epithet, "Holy Mother the State," the Workers decried the charity of the modern State. They believed that at one time Christians provided for the poor within community settings like monasteries, but now the new Holy Mother embraced the poor to her cold bosom. On one hand, the Workers criticized this cold embrace as inhumane and inefficient. On the other hand, the Workers felt that the State endangered the theologically critical space of charity where salvation and intimacy with the divine could be found. Wishing to retake this space, the Workers invoked various charitable communities found in their sacred history, thereby initiating the formation of Houses of Hospitality. Despite the fact that the Workers combated poverty in their Houses, they adopted St. Francis of Assisi's apologue "Lady Poverty," promoting Franciscan "holy poverty" as an answer to the evils of modern capitalism and consumerism. They argued that while self-serving capitalism damages society and breaks down social bonds, poverty resists avarice and builds community. Drawing again on their mythic history, they imagined the ideal Catholic Worker community as agrarian, compassionate, and quasi-monastic.

As the first two chapters showed, community was paramount to the Workers. According to their thought, charity and holy poverty only flourished within a community setting. The Workers also emphasized a communal model of religion, an encompassing "Body of Christ," which served foremost as the locus of compassionate charity, a stripping of oneself to give and live with the poor. Nonetheless, Day's realized

eschatology, and the previously mentioned religious benefits of charity, promised joy within the suffering community. Concretely, the Workers communally “compassionated” in their pre-modern Houses of Hospitality and farms. In this way, the Workers set their personalist theology and communitarianism against “individualism,” which they criticized as an error of the modern age.

I have demonstrated that charity, poverty, and community were not merely secondary characteristics of the movement. Rather, they were fundamental to the Workers’ ideology and actions, and the Workers themselves recognized them as such. Hence, their fundamental antimodern tendencies reveal an antimodern, medievalist orientation. The Workers not only operated on antimodern suppositions, their identity was based, at least in part, on their premodern referents. By drawing on ancient communal archetypes, the Workers identified *with* these past communities *as* their current incarnation. In other words, their identity synchronously touched the past and present, the present as the past. As Bruce Lincoln puts it, by invoking the medieval, monastic hospices they “(re-)became” that community.²⁸⁵

Maurin’s mythic history stood behind all of these activities as a backdrop and antecedent. In this sacred history, the Middle Ages (predominantly) were an idyllic period which preceded a “fall” into modernity. The answers to the problems of modernity, then, resided in this conceptualization of the Middle Ages, which became normative. Hence, the catalogue of figures, communities, and ideals in the myth became organizing principles for the movement. The Houses of Hospitality and Franciscan poverty—a community and an ideal respectively—epitomize this tendency. The sacred history gave impetus as well as form to the Catholic Worker movement. The Workers

²⁸⁵ *Discourse*, 23.

explicitly attempted to bring Maurin's program, which he grounded in sacred myth, into actuality. So an antimodern sacred history played an instrumental role in the organization, execution, and origin of the movement.

The term "antimodernist," therefore, accurately describes the early Catholic Worker Movement, which raises interpretative issues. Though the "social justice" label is partially accurate, it becomes a misnomer when applied to the entire chronology of the movement. More importantly, this misattribution invites interpretive distortion; in neglecting the Workers' sacred story, one may miss aspects of the impetus and substance behind the movement. Claiming that the Workers criticized modern economics by way of St. Francis, for instance, without acknowledging their sacred history, would overlook why and to what extent Franciscanism was so important to them. Franciscanism mattered, in large part, because it basked in the reflected glory of the apex of history, the Middle Ages. Even more familiar Worker matters like "charity" can only be partially understood as "social justice." When viewed with an antimodernist lens, their charity assumes not only new dimensions but significant ones—it was a matter of spiritual life and death. Any investigation into the early Workers ought to at least entertain the possibility that the subject at hand relates to their antimodern mythic history. A possible intersection between the Workers' labor activism and their desire for a local, agrarian economy may prove promising for future consideration. So while my thesis complicates the history of the Workers, it offers new avenues of analysis as well.

The implications of my thesis range farther than interpretive matters within the movement itself. The Catholic Workers play a part in American religious history, especially within Catholicism. In terms of the early movement, however, their presently

defined role is sometimes an ill-fitting one. Although the Workers' antimodernism has received some attention—especially in terms of handicrafts and agriculture—the other deep dimensions of their antimodernism remain largely invisible, much less analyzed and accounted for in American Catholic history. I briefly mentioned how the Workers' medievalism compared to that of the larger Church's. A more thorough analysis would bring the Workers into dialogue with this phenomenon in American Catholicism, and chart how they each eventually “modernized.” Did the Workers follow the lead of the Second Vatican Council, for example, or were they already en route to their current form? The Workers may also be profitably compared and contrasted with the Protestant medievalists that historian T.J. Jackson Lears describes in his book on antimodernism.²⁸⁶ Was there denominational and chronological continuity? Why did medievalist Protestants extol St. Francis for his “childlike simplicity” while the Workers had a much different take on the saint? My thesis suggests that a new understanding of the Workers calls for a new articulation of their place in American religious history.

The history of the Workers themselves also comes into question. Though I affirm that the early Workers engaged in peace and social justice work, and can be identified by these concerns, my thesis pulls back the blanket application of such an identity, revealing an additional one. This new heterogeneous classification calls for a retelling of the story of the early Workers that incorporates both aspects of the movement. With this in mind, the Workers' longitudinal history must also be revised to accommodate for a transition from an earlier heterogeneous identity to the more familiar one. It appears the Catholic Worker movement failed as an antimodernist group, but survived as a social justice

²⁸⁶ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

entity. While this may be superficially true, the actual working out of this transition—what survived, what mutated, what was added—deserves a prolonged investigation.

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