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## The simplest expression of identity and mission

By Pat Marrin, editor of *Celebration*

In 1932, when itinerant French thinker Peter Maurin first met Dorothy Day, journalist, single mother, former communist and recent convert to Catholicism, it would have been impossible to predict the far-reaching impact of their collaboration in what became the Catholic Worker movement.

Maurin, already in his 50s, was by all accounts a quixotic, non-stop apostle of his own version of Personalism, a post-World War I form of humanism. Personalism, the brainchild of French writer Immanuel Mounier, was a small boat launched into the swells and tides of Capitalism and Communism, then competing to fulfill history with their variant forms of social and economic utopia. Personalism focused not on some broader program of evolutionary progress toward higher and higher levels of material satisfaction and cultural development, but on the transformation of the individual human person.

### The absolute value of each person

Maurin's Christian Personalism emphasized the assent of each person to the mystery of love as the organizing principle of all created life. The absolute value of each person transcended both history and all its systems, and respect for the individual was the standard that judged their validity. In the 1930s, worldwide depression had created systemic unemployment and dislocation for millions of workers and their dependents, exposing the failure of Capitalism. Communist manipulation of the masses and the failure of collectivist economic models showed thin promise of real liberation or authentic community.

A deeper vision was needed, one that accounted for the paradox of human aspirations and the intrinsic limitations of human life marked by suffering and death. Maurin found that deeper vision in Christ, whose self-sacrificing love was the essential and natural pattern of human development. The paschal mystery -- personal transformation through death and resurrection -- was the engine of history and its fulfillment beyond history. Human progress could not resolve the puzzle of human existence. The fulfillment of all creation lay beyond itself in the emergence of the Spirit of love within matter, accelerated by the conscious assent of free human persons.

The Peter Maurin who walked into 35-year-old Dorothy Day's Fifteenth Street New York tenement was a one-person revolution, and Day became the vehicle of his indefatigable vision of personal transformation that then leads to a renewed social order.

Hindsight might say that Maurin and Day were in the right place at the right time to capture the multiple currents of thought and action in that critical era, not the least of which was the early seismic shift in Catholic thought that would 30 years later produce Vatican II: A liturgical renewal that recovered the primitive church from suffocating layers of historical accretion, a lay revival to full, conscious, active participation in the mission of the church, a simpler and more radical reading of the New Testament that led to a deeper commitment to serve the poor, oppose racism and all forms of violence, especially war.

Other assessments of the Catholic Worker movement, its complex evolution and the diffuse identity of its 180 or so houses in the United States today might as easily question its significance, citing its

peripheral rather than radical impact on a largely bourgeois Catholic culture that pretty much goes with the flow of American culture.

But what stands out in the enduring presence of Maurin and Day in any discussion of whether the Gospel has ever been taken seriously is not the success of its program but the astonishing imprint of holiness they left behind. By starting houses of hospitality and roundtable discussions to apply Catholic doctrine and papal encyclicals to contemporary social problems, Peter Maurin was affirming the basic character of the complete human person. Dorothy Day's oft-quoted paean to hope in the midst of the human condition is a complete ecclesiology: "We have all known the long loneliness, and we have learned that the answer is love, love in community."

While both Maurin and Day broke the hagiographic mode with their complex lives, other important witnesses affirmed the balance and depth of their vision.

Benedictine Fr. Virgil Michel, fresh from the same European ferment that had produced both Personalism and the first manifestations of the pastoral-liturgical movement he would broker within the American church, expressed joy at visiting the first Worker houses in New York to find embodied his own fiery vision of the church as body of Christ.

French philosopher Jacques Maritain brought the majestic, comprehensive Thomistic tradition to bear on the Worker movement's immersion in the Incarnation, God alive and active in the world, grace perfecting nature. Somehow, amateurs Maurin and Day got it right by placing the still point of liturgical and personal prayer at the center of a life of active love expressed in the corporal works of mercy. As challenging as that was, and is, it was the simplest expression of the identity and mission of the church herself.

### **My trip to the Catholic Worker**

I found myself pondering this heady set of ideas last year in the only setting appropriate to the task. With the generous permission of my wife and high-school-age son and with much accommodation on the part of my employer, I spent six months living at Holy Family House, one of two Kansas City-area Catholic Worker Houses. As the busy days filled with communal prayer and service to the guest community went by, I tried to find a balance between my own desire to grow spiritually and the hospitality mission of the House as it opened its doors for morning coffee and donuts and again each evening to provide dinner for about 150 guests.

Christian Brother Louis Rodemann, Holy Family's longstanding director, reminded us at morning prayer one day that we had all the elements for the Christian life. I thought about this as I sank into the living room couch, listening with one ear to the Gospel reading for the day and, with my other ear, to a loud conversation on the front porch below. Anxiety about what could come through the front door drove me deeper into prayer.

To open the door of the house meant first opening the door within my own heart to find the same God we believe is always waiting within and without, accessed in the same, single act of hospitality. The Mass we celebrated on Thursday nights after supper used the same small table that held bread and desserts for the serving line. Eucharist and table fellowship were a continuation of each other. The community of volunteers from area churches and organizations who came to serve each night merged awkwardly or seamlessly with the community of guests who came to share the meal. Conversation ranged from the mundane events of the day to broader issues of national and world politics and led to deeper questions about how social change is brought about by collective efforts.

Life in a Catholic Worker House is deemed an extraordinary experience, and that is so. My return home and to regular life was marked by a slower pace, less stress and far more predictability. But what I now reflect on is how much life there is like life as it could be lived in the church if we kept things this simple. Peter Maurin's modest program -- hospitality, dialogue and a love for the earth -- opens all our inner and outer doors to life and to the mystery of God found in active love.

Dorothy Day asks us: Isn't this love the sacred center we seek in prayer, celebrate in the Eucharist, try to express in community outreach to those in need? If we are hospitable, will we not make everyone feel welcome, especially the stranger and even our enemies? If we have differences, can we not simply talk to one another? Don't we all hunger for respect within the community and for meaningful purposeful lives? If we expose our common vulnerabilities and shared sufferings, will we not, as occasion arises, practice the corporal works of mercy for one another? If we start small, do what we can where we are, will not the circle of our concern expand gracefully and naturally.

### **Labels disappear**

In such a simple church, labels tend to disappear. Dorothy Day had a full sacramental life, went to daily Mass and prayed her rosary. She had the highest respect for the church authority and for the liturgical leadership of the clergy. At the same time, she recognized that the Catholic church was made up mostly of the laity, and she believed that their baptismal identity gave them everything they needed to live and carry the Gospel into the world. She once said that she had never needed to ask a bishop for permission to live her Christian life. When her convictions led her into controversial positions on war, race, human rights and the needs of the poor, she could ably defend herself by invoking the scriptures and the example of Jesus.

Twenty-five years after her death, I find myself thinking a lot about Dorothy Day and her collaboration with Peter Maurin, and how they didn't wait for permission or more promising circumstances to be church. They just did it. Are not all the elements here for us to do the same?

To learn more about the Catholic Worker Movement, visit their official Web site:

<http://www.catholicworker.org/>

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