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Catholic Workers celebrate 75 years

by Eileen Markey

More than 500 current and former Catholic Workers, adherents of a radical fealty to the beatitudes who have taken their Catholicism all the way to the margins of society, gathered in Worcester, Mass., July 9-12, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the movement.

They came from throughout the United States and from Europe to share stories, pray, discuss the nitty-gritty of life in Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, hash out philosophy and dance. They produced a statement urging the church to reject war and speak loudly for justice.

At this critical point in history, as we face unending war, including U.S. plans to attack Iran, ecological destruction and economic collapse, we call on our church and nation to join us in repenting our affronts to God, the statement read in part.

We once again implore the leadership of the Catholic church in the United States, now and without evasion, to break its silence and to wield the authority provided by the nonviolent Gospel of Jesus Christ, by calling the entire nation to repent for the war crimes we have committed in the so-called War on Terror.

For many the gathering was a chance to connect with old friends. Between shared duties preparing meals and managing child-care, participants listened to a lecture on the history of the Catholic Worker, delivered by four authors who have written on *Day and the Worker*. They attended workshops on Catholicism and the Catholic Worker, raising children in the movement, CW farms, anarchism, seamless garment theology, racism and how to make CW houses more welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people.

(An expanded version of [this story](#) and [a report on the role nonviolence](#) has played throughout Catholic Worker history appears in the July 25 issue of *National Catholic Reporter*.)

In the 75 years since Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin began feeding the destitute men of New York's Bowery and speaking out against militarism, the Catholic Worker has grown tremendously. It now includes at least 180 communities, among them dozens of small, organic farms growing food for community pantries and hungry neighbors, an art gallery, scores of houses of hospitality offering long- and short-term shelter to undocumented immigrants, women fleeing domestic violence, people exiting prison and those without a place to sleep or belong. It has produced four generations of Catholics living gleefully in opposition to a dominant culture of consumerism and violence.

Sheila Stump who lives with her husband at John Leary House in Boston and a friend who is raising her children at the Nazareth House Catholic Worker in Raleigh, N.C., sat in folding chairs breastfeeding their toddlers and remembering the years they lived together in Virginia.

"All the Worker houses we lived in were families with kids. It seemed like such a better way to live, to raise a family," Stump said, as her daughter dozed off to sleep. "I'm very happy that the children are raised in this culture of resistance, but at the same time that it's a resistance born of love."

The Worcester gathering was notable for an event of the Catholic left: It was not dominated by gray hairs. There were plenty of peace veterans who had been with the Catholic Worker for 20, 30, 40 years. But there were nearly as many people in their 20s and 30s, and a whole crop of children.

[Eileen Markey is a freelance writer living in Bronx, N.Y.]

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