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Spending time with a Catholic Worker house in Northern California, part two

John Dear | Jul. 2, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Jesus, according to the four Gospels, welcomed everyone with his healing embrace. In fact, his outreach began with those who were not welcomed anywhere else. He placed them at the center of his community of peace, love and nonviolence. He put them in the center of his nonviolent vision, his all-inclusive mission.

I've been thinking about this these last few weeks while spending time at one of the Bay Area's Catholic Worker houses [1] on Kelly Avenue in Half Moon Bay. What a blessing this has been for me. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker precisely to fulfill Jesus' commandments to invite the poor, welcome the poor, serve the poor and defend the poor.

That's what we've been doing in Half Moon Bay amidst the roaring waves of the nearby ocean and the gentle morning fog. Every week, food is picked at the nearby organic farm and distributed to the hungry as well as served at the soup kitchen. Many other good deeds are done as well, and it's hard for me to keep track of it all. Here, the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing, as Jesus recommended. We've been hosting a homeless family, serving the local homeless and trying to meet their most immediate needs. That means the work never ends.

One morning, for example, we distributed clothes, furniture, freshly picked organic vegetables, and bread to several dozen women and children, probably from local farm worker families. The day before, I went with Katerina, a young Mennonite volunteer who has been working here all year, to the nearby Safeway. They have to throw out all bread products that have reached their due date, so they gladly donate it to the Worker. We loaded up our truck with hundreds of loaves of bread as well as rolls and cakes. In the end, we couldn't give it all away, and had to throw some of it out.

We picked up an enormous TV and gave it to a homeless man who just found an apartment. We also delivered a beautiful queen-size bed as well as sheets and new pillows to a blind homeless man who was just given an apartment in nearby HUD housing.

Throughout the week, I've been working with Katerina to help a homeless man facing major back surgery. He was scheduled for several days in the hospital, then needed five days in bed. We set about raising money to pay for a week at a local motel. I called friends and local church people while Katerina asked for money from supporters and a local nonprofit that provides emergency medical help for the homeless. I'm happy to report that the gentleman did well in his surgery and is now spending a week in the beautiful motel. Katerina is working on follow-up support.

At the soup kitchen, I was assigned to spend three hours washing dishes. The next morning, I was back, pulling duty on the open grill, cooking 500 pancakes. Time flew because of the good spirit among the volunteers. We told stories, joked with one another and shared our lives. I think it's one of the best soup kitchens I've ever visited. As one friend said, "This is church for me."

On Monday, Katerina and I drove over to Redwood City for the weekly gathering of representatives from other Bay Area Catholic Worker houses. We ate breakfast, shared our journeys, then prayed at Mass with my friend Fr. Steve Kelly, who was just released from prison for his Good Friday protest at Lockheed Martin. It was an inspiring morning with a delightful group of dedicated Christians who serve the poor and work for justice and peace.

One of the key works of the Half Moon Bay Worker is collaborating with a large organic farm nearby. They donate more than 80 percent of their produce to the poor and the rest to their neighbors. Last year, they gave away more than 15,000 pounds of organic produce. They grow everything, and I think over the last few weeks, I've either picked or washed strawberries, raspberries, zucchinis, squash, beets, radishes, lettuce, kale, basil and onions. Standing and bending over in the fields and cutting the squash for two hours was bad for my back, but good for my soul. One day, I spent an hour mounding the dirt around the potatoes and weeding the giant cauliflower. Another afternoon, I spent a few hours washing the freshly picked lettuce, kale and onions.

Each week, the Worker pays a few local unemployed people to spend afternoons in the fields planting, weeding, harvesting, washing and packaging. And each week, the Worker collects about 20 large crates of fresh organic vegetables, which they distribute to those in need. Katerina and I joined the workers in the fields.

I've never participated in anything quite like this except when I lived in El Salvador and helped plant corn by hand in a large field as the U.S. government bombed the hills around us. This experience was far more healing and peaceful. It seemed to fulfill Maurin's vision of working the land and using the food resources for the poor. Of course, this practice will become standard for all of us as we continue to destroy the environment, undergo global economic collapse and suffer catastrophic climate change. Local organic farming is the way forward, as Gandhi and Maurin argued. Having experienced it firsthand, I see the wisdom and hope that life on the land brings.

But it wasn't the holy work I most take from my visit. It was the laughter and good cheer of these good people -- the other Workers, the volunteers and the needy who came for help. It was so good to be around these people. They are happy people. Happiness and hope are rare commodities these days, and they rub off easily.

We laughed a lot. One morning, for example, at 5 a.m., as we loaded up 20 crates of vegetables into the back of the pickup truck for the soup kitchen, Katerina realized she had lost the big mound of keys, some 25 keys to everything -- the house, the soup kitchen and the trucks. We had a spare key to the other truck, so I moved most of the crates to that truck while Katerina searched the house again, going over every inch for those keys.

By now we were late for the soup kitchen and panicking. That was when I told Katerina -- the young Mennonite -- that she might consider becoming Catholic. If she were Catholic, I said, she would know to pray to St. Anthony like this: "St. Anthony, we need those keys right now! Immediately!"

She looked at me like I was crazy, and we both laughed. I turned around to reach into the back of the pickup truck and there, on the top of a huge pile of organic lettuce leaves, sat the 25 keys. They might as well have dropped from heaven! We laughed out loud and felt overcome with joy, faith and hope. The soup kitchen volunteers enjoyed hearing about our escapade with St. Anthony, too.

"All are welcome, all are welcome." That's the motto of our Catholic Christian life. "No more violence. No

more fear. No more despair. No more anger. No more hate. No more hunger. No more greed. No more war. No more nuclear weapons. All are welcome into the new life of peace, love and nonviolence."

That's the message I heard at the Catholic Worker. It's also the greeting that the nonviolent Jesus will say to each one of us some day. It's a message we all need to hear, and it's one worth living and even singing about.

(Donations to support the Kelly Avenue Catholic Worker can be sent to the Catholic Worker, 160 Kelly Ave., Half Moon Bay, CA 94019.)

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Next month, John Dear will speak at the Wild Goose Festival [2] in Asheville, N.C. John will undertake a national speaking tour in the winter on his upcoming book, *The Nonviolent Life*. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [3]. John is now working with the Francsican-based peace group Pace e Bene [4]. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace [5]* by Rosalie Riegle and with Daniel Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* [6] by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [7] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [8], *Put Down Your Sword* [9] and *A Persistent Peace* [10], are available from Amazon.com.

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