

BLACKFRIARS

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THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

NEW YORK, Mott Street, Chinatown . . . It is the district of the Law Courts, the prisons and Police Headquarters. Only poor Italians and Chinese live here. At night sight-seeing buses come down from Times Square filled with tourists from Europe and the "West" who want another thrill out of this amazing cosmopolis. There is only one bright spot in this ugly place which has grown like a cancer from avid speculation and deforms the gigantic body of New York. It is a square cemented site surrounded with chicken-wire fences, a playground for the poor children of the immediate neighbourhood—another humane deed of Mayor La Guardia and his energetic and efficient assistant Mr. Moses, who has dotted the huge metropolis with playgrounds and parks. Yet even this playground would be sad and dull, were it not filled with the laughter, the singing and screaming of poor Italo-American children and their gossiping mothers. It little resembles our European playgrounds, with their shrubs and lawns, their flowers and shady paths. It looks more like an open wound amidst the ghosts and skeletons and sub-human mansions called tenements. Yet if not here, the poor little boys and girls would have to seek their exercise and amusement on the littered streets, in dark and damp backyards, and between parked cars.

The streets are full of loud and noisy men, fat, unshaved, whose cap seem to be part of their body. You hear the women sing and squeal in piercing tones out of their open windows. Half-grown boys squat on the side-walks all day long playing endless, excited card games.

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But once a year there is a great change. Mott Street is flooded with tens of thousands of green, white and red bulbs spanning the street in dozens of arches. Big altars made of painted canvas are set up like theatre decorations hiding the faceless fronts of ugly houses. The even uglier iron fire-escapes attached to the houses are shrouded in Italian and American flags. The air is filled with the shrill tones of gay band music. It is around August 15th, the day of the *Assunta* and Fr. Mancini, Pastor of Baxter Street, carries Our Lady's picture in a procession through Little Italy, or better Sicily, off Canal Street.

This is the great day for all Sicilians down there. Their holy places, Valle di Pompei near Naples, their shrines around Palermo, Caltanisetta, Siracusa and Messina, fill their home-sick imaginations. They forget their hideous prison, built by greedy speculation eighty years ago and now populated by its last tenants, poor gay workers, taxi-drivers, cobblers, barbers and shoeshiners.

Mott Street is a condemned slum. Officially it was condemned two years ago. It was quite a relief to me when I was told this during my first call on the Catholic Workers. But meantime some "politician"—which in America means some man with secret, irresistible influence, a "wire-puller"—has managed to put off the date *ad calendas graecas*. That is of course the drawback of democracy; in such matters a dictator can go faster. But still, it is amazing what Mayor La Guardia and Mr. Moses have accomplished, fighting their way step by step.

But here it looks as if everything had come to a standstill. A coat of new paint has covered the dirt and decay, some cheap fireproof material has been put on the stairs and the all too rusty fire escapes have been replaced by some new iron contraptions; that means years to come without any considerable change for the better. Men will continue to live in these caves, twenty families in each building with perhaps one water tap and one toilet in the backyard. And, what is worse, here live people who fled from poverty in their home-

land, from the poverty of beautiful, laughing Sicily with its blue sky and its wholesome cultivation of the soil. And they stay here. Is that a proof that things at home are more hopeless still?

Two minutes from the Bowery with its famous night lodging-houses and missions, five minutes from fashionable, dignified and clean old Washington Square, a few steps from Canal Street which hums with motor traffic, half of it comprising elegant cars skirting misery on their way from one suburbia in New Jersey to another one in Long Island, through Holland Tunnel and over Manhattan Bridge. This is truly New York, the city of screaming, tragic contrasts, transition.

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Here is No. 115 Mott Street. The main door leading through a smelly, dark alley way to the backyard. On our left there is a little shabby shop. The window bears the inscription, "*Catholic Worker*" and behind it is a cheap white plaster statue of St. Joseph, Father of the poor, and Patron Saint of the worker—Barclay Street trash, if that means anything to you. (Well, Barclay Street is the centre of "holy" business, where you can buy the latest pious atrocity, a neon tube halo for your May altar or artificial roses for your terribly sweet Sacred Heart statue or vestments of the worst kind. Wholesale and with the advice of an "artist" thrown in!) And next to that poor, poor statue some pieces of cardboard scribbled with announcements.

Lately Adé Béthune has put some plain and childlike frescoes on the walls of the poor shop: Christ feeding the poor, healing the sick, working in his Foster-father's shop; St. Peter visiting St. Paul in his Roman prison. But they are already peeling off. Nothing sticks on these miserable old walls, nothing but dirt, smell and poverty. All the pictures are poor in every sense, I mean those besides the frescoes, and there are not two chairs which match.

Unpolished, ugly and naked poverty is here, not the philosophical "coquetterie" of a sophisticated Diogenes.

Here they meet almost every night in stale, humid air.

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You will always be able to discuss or to listen. Papers are read and talks are given on social, economical, and even artistic problems. Do not be afraid; you will meet priests and seminarists, professors, and workers, unemployed on the dole and bankers, seamen and college girls, writers and peasants, Jews, Communists, pagans and Christians.

Let us cross the filthy and dark backyard, darkened by washing drying in that air (one wonders how). There is the House of Hospitality, St. Joseph's House, loaned to Dorothy Day by the landlady to shelter her, her staff and the poor. There is a fruit shop on one side and the "editorial offices" in a small room on the other. The "*Catholic Worker*," 110,000 copies a month! When they print it, the whole staff goes over to the press on Broadway and helps the printers to put it through. I joined them last August and we had lunch in a workers' cafeteria with fresh strawberries. People were very kind and the Roman collar caused less objection than surprise in such a cheap place.

This house is only one room deep and its back stands against a similar house of the other half of the block. It is damp and carries the smell of many changing generations of poor, unhygienic people. There are three floors, where the members of the group live a common life with the poor to whom they give shelter and food. They work for their protégés and live with them. They sleep in the same beds, live in the same rooms, eat the same food, wear the same second-hand clothes given by charitable friends. It happens quite often that one of the young men or women has to turn out to make room for a late guest. The worker then sleeps on the floor of the landing, or on a desk or a chair. And the belated guest is a poor man—sometimes ill, sometimes drunk.

Those who are turned away by all other Institutions and Hostels find shelter here. The Salvation Army requires twenty cents for a night, and if you have only eighteen or nineteen cents you are not admitted to their shelters. Here you are admitted free!

Dorothy Day—"our Mother Abbess" they call her teasingly—was once told by a lady who was "also keenly

interested in the poor workers" that her work was degrading, unsystematic and disorderly. It was against the sane principles of up-to-date Social Work, you know; nice, clean quarters for the staff dressed in spotless white, telephones on all desks, beautiful file-boxes full of carefully typed, copied and re-typed applications, cards and statistics: Have you ever been here before? What illness did your Grandmother die of? When did you have the measles? Do you receive support from other sources? Well, Dorothy "got mad" and said: "Why do we feed the scum of the earth and shelter bums who *are* beyond hope? I'll tell you; because they are our brethren. We want no assets, we want obligations. We want to carry the burden of our neighbour; we do not want to sit in the comfortable swinging chairs of well and over-organized charity."

This is the idea of Peter Maurin's Houses of Hospitality. I cannot mention him without describing him. Pierre Maurin, one of 21 children of a French peasant of the Auvergne came to America thirty years ago, fleeing from French conscription. He has been a worker, a bum, and a wanderer all his life. He gives as his profession, on official records, "agitator." He nearly settled down once, having been almost two years in a Chicago "drug store." He has white hair, only one suit of clothes; sleeps on chairs, benches, or in beds; lectures to bankers, leftist workers, seminarists, ladies' Clubs and College undergraduates, and goes around among his contemporaries "agitating" them with the dynamite of a revolutionary doctrine, called the Sermon on the Mount.

He was the first Catholic, I think, who practically restored the old Christian institution of hospitality. He wants no parish to be without such a House connected with the rectory. His boldest dream is—a Bishop running the Houses at the expense of the Diocese. In spite of his amusing French accent and his linguistic fireworks, his predilection for "jeux de mots" and alliterations, he is deadly serious and is taken seriously. Of course he *is* a Bohemian, but only a Bohemian or a Saint could live his life, which you

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must either like naturally or bear heroically. Peter is the theoretician of the movement which gave Dorothy Day her ideas.

These young men and women are gay, happy and pious. Dorothy told me a few months ago that one thing which helps her to tide over times of mental anxiety is the fact that healthy, strong and young personalities are attracted to the movement. Imagine this; college graduates, people with a future, give up all they have and join this crowd of happy "havenots." It is they who fight for the re-instatement of the poor in the place of honour in the Church—the same old combat which St. James describes so vividly in his epistle and which made St. Francis Lady Poverty's Knight. Voluntary poverty, not in the sheltered, clean and peaceful Cloisters of Religious Communities, but poverty covered with the wounds of Lazarus is the weapon with which these young Christians fight the hardened bourgeois mentality and the capitalistic deafness of a number of their co-religionists. Truly, this is a dangerous movement. In fact the only dangerous one, because if it spreads, Communism will be in danger! Here the axe is laid to the root, as once St. John the Baptist said.

My description cannot give an idea of how far this spirit has already influenced the minds of young American Catholics. One feels its repercussions in almost every city in the States.

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It is perhaps instructive to compare the Catholic Worker movement of America with other youth movements within the Church. When I wrote my first article on the *Catholic Worker* in a European Review in 1935, the struggle between the Nazi Government and the German Bishops for the post-scholar education of youth was still going on. In a desperate attempt the German Hierarchy tried to keep the Catholic youth under Church guidance and to let them have a movement of their creed. This fight is now over. Only a shadow survives, and since in Austria even the Youth Movement has been turned over to Hitler's men, there is no hope

that the German Church will ever win back her control over the education of youth as long as the present government lasts. The best organized and most thorough Youth Organisation in the world, numbering three million boys and girls, possessing the most perfect youth, educational institutions and secretarial facilities, from seamen to college students, from peasant girls to brides, has been wiped out. One understands now the reluctance of the American *Catholic Worker* to become anything like an Organisation and its firm determination to remain a movement, a leaven in the minds of Catholics.

In France we have the J.O.C. as well as in Belgium. Although they work far more systematically and thoroughly, especially in their educational activities, I wonder if even their influence in the people's life reaches as far as the *Catholic Worker*. Of course, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin are lay people and have not ecclesiastical authority. It is amazing for a country where Catholic laymen are more strictly controlled and led by their clergy than anywhere else, and where one could almost change St. Paul's words about women into "*Laicus taceat in ecclesia*"; it is, I say, amazing that in such a country a purely lay movement could become so important. The moral integrity of the American clergy has made them very highly respected. Their standard of life gives them a very high social standing. In a country of immigrants, mostly of very poor class and little or no education any *homo literatus* has an enormous power. Add to this the fact that by far the majority of the leading clergy are of Irish descent and have therefore all the abilities of that highly intelligent race of political leaders and diplomats, and you will be the more surprised to see the non-clerical members of the Mystical Body of Christ becoming active, feeling responsibility and assuming tasks which might seem to be incompatible with their status. We see here, thousands of miles away, the same symptoms which made Romano Guardini say fifteen years ago: "The Church is awakening in the souls of the Faithful." Perhaps all these currents: German Youth Movement, J.O.C. in France and Belgium,

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the Grail in Holland and the Catholic Worker are nothing but one and the same rejuvenating breath of the Holy Ghost assuming the force and shape of the national unit in which It works.

I am afraid that I may be regarded as being tactless, if I venture to give an opinion on the rest of Anglo-Saxon Catholicism. As long as BLACKFRIARS exists there is hope. There is a minority of sound, unbiassed men. There are modest offsprings of the *Catholic Worker* in England, Toronto and Sydney, conscientious and dutiful attempts to transplant this idea on foreign soil. Will all these be able to contend with the intellectual opportunists in the Catholic press who show the same sad lack of balance as the German Paper Group with its counterpart in France, Spain, Italy and perhaps the United States? A quarterly or a weekly paper may be far above the *Catholic Worker* from a technical, newspaper point of view, without being equal to it in true Christian firmness and evangelical simplicity. After all, the make-up of the *Catholic Worker* is not at all bad—although all too often the contents are not quite so “hot.”

It seems to me that this movement is so genuinely American that it is impossible to imitate it elsewhere, especially as conditions in other countries are so different from those of the United States. It is a bold and naïve simplicity which is its distinguishing mark, a simplicity difficult to find in more traditional and conservative surroundings.

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I have used St. John the Baptist's expression of the axe laid at the root. This needs an explanation. It is always dangerous to use words of such weight in connection with a young movement like this and to compare frail work of our contemporaries with the providential task of Christ's Forerunner. But I think that even if the present *Catholic Worker* collapses or proves to be incapable of rebuilding American Catholicism, through some human shortcoming of

its members, the spirit which animates it is the only one which can save the Church in America.

America is a non-Catholic country. Although Catholics are about one-sixth of the population, their real influence as such has never been considerable, nor is it so now. Of course there are local Governments of cities and States which are in the hands of a Catholic group, especially in the East, around the industrial areas of the Middle West and on the coast. There are places where politics are fashioned in covert agreement with the clergy or powerful laymen and women of the Catholic Faith. But these are exceptions, and when one looks at the integrity of these local Governments run by Catholics one cannot say that they are exactly what one would call *civitas Dei*, the realisation of the Sermon on the Mount on earth. The episcopalian Mayor La Guardia of New York can stand comparison with the Catholic Jimmy Walker. On the whole Americans who are not Catholic, i.e. more than a hundred million people, do not want to be governed by Catholics. Al Smith does not prove the contrary. He was not elected, and if he had been elected it would not have been just because he was a Catholic. Besides, these last ten years have seen a great growth in anti-clericalism especially in connection with the Spanish civil war, and other European incidents. American Catholics have not even been able to get a protest from their Federal Government against happenings in Mexico.

If one points to the fact that Bishops and priests have been asked to settle labour strifes or to preside at State Labour Relation Boards this shows exactly where the force of the Church lies in America, and why the *Catholic Worker* has the right attitude. The bulk of American Catholics belong to those nationalities which have the least economical and political power in the U.S.A. and which have not yet made any considerable contribution to American culture—Italians, Poles, Spaniards, South Americans, French Canadians, a German minority and the powerful Irish group. This latter is in a different position, being the eldest group and speaking the language of the country as its

mother tongue, and it is just about to attain power outside the Church. More and more "presidents" of banks, industrial plants and Trusts bear Irish names. Departments in Washington, the diplomatic service, Park Avenue and big Long Island Estates show an ever-increasing number of second and third generation of Irish-American names. Many of the better movie actors and editors are Irish. One cannot say that all of these are practising Catholics. We may definitely say that their *contribution* is not Catholic, and that they may have replaced bearers of old Dutch, French and English names without restoring what one might call a Catholic or Christian civilisation. On the contrary, their ambition is usually to conform with upper middle class civilisation as far as they imagine Faith permits—and that is often very far. What makes a Catholic different from other Christians, and a true Christian different from a non-Christian modern business man, professor, worker, student or artist, (disregarding the exterior differences which are not essential), is scarcely to be noticed even in the U.S. city, town or rural community that is predominantly Catholic. The sad experiences of Germany, Austria, Spain, show us that political power, mass action and demonstrative Catholicism are by no means safeguarding the straight path to Christ's Kingdom. That lies, on the contrary, in the true understanding of the Holy Father's idea of Catholic Action. The Church is the ever-revolutionising leaven in the mass of dough. The Church has a debt to pay to the Nation and one of the promising attempts to pay this debt seems to be the *Catholic Worker* movement.

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Nobody can doubt that all official and collective pronouncements of the Church in America show a wonderful frankness and sincerity when dealing with social questions. Again and again the Hierarchy and the National Catholic Conference have taken the same stand as Leo XIII and Pius XI, and have drawn practical conclusions for America. But when you speak to the average man in the street, even

Catholics, intellectuals or working class, they do not know the real position of the Church. Very often a young Communist student at Harvard or Yale or Columbia, or a seaman will tell you: "Oh yes, we know all about your Encyclicals, joint Pastorals and other official stuff. That is the new kind of dope you give the world, after your talks about eternal reward fail to attract the masses. Where are your deeds?" And they point to the clerical Institutions, the gorgeous seminaries, rectories, convents, monasteries, residences, universities and schools; to the banquets, the Conferences in first-class hotels, and other things which their embittered criticism and their sharp eyes resent. "It's a racket," many of them say. They do not understand that American Catholics with their vast majority of poor and lower middle class have to work off an inferiority complex among a world of well-to-do puritan first-comers. Did not the leading group of the Church in America, the Irish and Germans, come from countries where they had already acquired this feeling? They had to prove that they were just as good as the others as citizens and men, and better as Christians. The voice of their Christian conscience is so easily drowned in vapourings about the higher standard of life in the New World—forgetting about Mott Street, Harlem and the South. This is no reproach. These things are born of necessity. They are based on a fact which is really the glory of the Church in that country—the wonderful solidarity of the laity and their readiness to sacrifice more for the Church than perhaps in any other country.

But outsiders do not see this. They see only apparent wealth and financial dealing where they expect evangelical simplicity. That may be narrow, evil-eyed and even heretical. But can one simply disregard those people? Do we not care about the outsiders? Are they not all potential Christians? If we have not given up all hope of converting America, we cannot disregard the main obstacle to a friendly approach. If the Church appear to be just another racket, and her teaching dishonest, what are we going to do about it?

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I feel quite incompetent to suggest a solution. What can a newcomer say without antagonising and embittering those who have borne the heat and burden of the day. Prophets had visions which frightened them before they went and told their co-religionists disagreeable truths, and I have not had any, except the one of my own frightful incompetence. I can only say what I experienced. I saw that young converts recognised the Church as Christ's through the life and works of mercy of the *Catholic Worker*. I saw disgruntled priests and laymen getting new hope through these simple, sometimes heroic, sometimes very human and weak young men and women. I heard Protestants and Communists speak of them with admiration. I know that a well-known Professor of an American Seminary said to friends that Dorothy Day was the first Christian he had met in twenty years. And I know that well-to-do Catholics, people who go to church every Sunday, have called her a Communist and have sneered at the "spiritual Bohemia" in Mott Street and Easton.

Who is she? She is undoubtedly the driving power and leader of the *Catholic Worker* movement. This frail woman of forty with her wonderfully spiritual face has a clear vision of what the world expects from the Church of Christ in our days and of why men object to her. She does not waste her time in criticising. She acts. She wears the worn-out clothes which are given to the poor, just as the poor women and girls around her do. She lives in the same rooms with them and eats the same food as they do, with them. When she is not in the dark house in Mott Street or on the farm near Easton, she wanders through the country to speak to strikers in their homes and workshops, to the unemployed and the workingmen. She tells them about the social teachings of the Church, about Christ and the Saints. Or she calls on bankers and industrialists and discusses with them their responsibility for the poor and the working class. She has been asked to advise Bishops and Priests, who call on her or who invite her to meet them. When she travels, she stays in Convents, with working families or with well-to-do families who want

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to help the movement. Friends of the movement provide her with the necessary finances for travelling throughout the country, with clothing for herself and the poor, with money to print her paper, to furnish a house, to buy a farm to take children to the country, to give medical assistance to the sick. Among those who help are Bishops, priests, wealthy laymen, and the poor. I have often admired her when she remained cool and charitable after being called a Communist or calumniated by being accused of saying foolish and even wicked things, or after having been called "anti-clerical." She bears this with serene charity, and desires nothing but to carry on her work unnoticed, a poor woman among Christ's poor, His pride and honour. Even if fellow Catholics call her a Communist agent who works from within, she takes it calmly knowing that calumnies are the reward given her by those who are disquieted by the evangelical simplicity and "foolishness" of her methods. She is not responsible to those Catholics who possess everything except a Christian apostolic restlessness, but only to God, her country and her Bishop. A sensitive lady with a good education, a successful journalist and a young woman who has a keen sense of the beautiful, living in the undisguised ugliness of poverty—here is proof of real conviction. She could protect herself by a religious habit, by a chosen companionship of picked comrades trained in a Novitiate, she could surround herself with the clean and stern beauty of cloistered poverty—but she leaves these things to those whose vocation lies in those paths. Her vocation is the raw poverty of a modern slum without protection. She is not anti-clerical, neither in words nor deeds, and has that regard for the priesthood which only supernatural faith can inspire and preserve. But she believes that it is her task to show a world of bourgeois comfort that faith is strong enough to face the ugliness of poverty in the raw, without the safeguard and respectability of a Religious habit and a Community of equally idealistic and heroic souls.

It is strange to think that the theorist of this movement is a French peasant, one of twenty children of a poor family of

the Auvergne. He has been a tramp all his life, never afraid of work, always facing hardships because of his indomitable sense of justice. He speaks English with an amusing French accent, full of French vivacity and fireworks. He is self-educated, yet he knows German history as well as Russian literature or the social history of ancient Greece. He constantly quotes, and quotes well, Nietzsche, Comte, Berdiajeff, Dawson, Guardini, Rosmini, Maritain, St. Thomas, St. Augustine, Lenin, Marx, Pope Pius XI and many other philosophers, theologians or economists. He thrills whole audiences—workers, intellectuals, seminarists, and nuns. Professors listen to his talks with deep and serious interest. So do unemployed men and washerwomen. When he attacks Mussolini or Hendrick de Man's social theories he knows what he is talking about, and quotes page and line. Your first impression is a hopeless confusion, but you gradually perceive a plain, Christian and Catholic social system, tinged with a certain sound romanticism which is the result of his homeless and hard life. He is responsible for the strong back-to-the-land character of the movement, and the Houses of Hospitality and farms are his ideas.

Peter is a jealous prophet. The slightest deviation from their original evangelical simplicity arouses him to fits of anger. He not only tells the Capitalist that he is practically betraying the Sermon on the Mount, but he also tells the working classes that they are very often only "impeded capitalists" in their greed, opportunism, disdain for poverty and lack of solidarity. He tells Communist meetings frankly that only Christ can give them a solution for their problems, and they do not sneer, but listen with earnest attention, because Peter's personality is so convincing—because he lives what he preaches. He wants the "new man in Christ," not a mere change of conditions through a system conceived at desks and in libraries. Although he is perhaps the only one who really meets the Communist at the battle front, he creates a great hostility among a certain set of Catholics who in his eyes are a scandal. They sit at "Communion breakfasts," listen to "Catholic" politicians, join in baiting the

Reds and applaud pompous harangues and attacks on Communism, no heroic deed of love and self-sacrifice following.

The latest offspring and, I think, the most vital and hopeful one is ACTU, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists. It ought to be described in a special article, but I restrict myself here to mentioning those characteristics which mark it as a child of the *Catholic Worker* movement. Although its Headquarters are a block away from Mott Street, its founder and its personnel are *Catholic Worker* men. The idea of working from within all Trade Unions and syndicates without weakening the Labour Front, is well known and approved of by our Holy Father. But it needed a man who would not only preach this idea, but who through his convincing personality and his heroism would win Trade Unionists to this apostolic task. A young Harvard graduate who gave up his career and his comfortable home life and lived with the poor at Mott Street, started this movement about eighteen months ago. John C. Cort, who is now Secretary of ACTU, has won outstanding priests such as Dr. Monaghan of Corpus Christi in New York to help him. Fordham University has organised special courses for Labour Leaders. These young and courageous men do not shrink from touching hot iron, and their paper, *The Labour Leader*, tackles every existing problem, even at the risk of creating hostility. The secret of their success is their sincerity, their courage and their faith. When priests walk as sandwich-men in a picket line outside a factory in Pittsburg, as did Fathers Heussler and Rice last winter, then this idea must have something contagious in its bland idealism. But even here all strict and rigid organisation is shunned. To be organised means a danger as well as a force. The danger would be the loss of the spirit. There might arise a generation of professional organisers with representative obligations, looking for social security. We have a sufficient number of organised charities, congresses, conventions, etc., the air is filled with resolutions. Do they not sometimes betray the spirit? Of course there may be lack of discipline in such a movement—but is discipline a definitely Christian virtue?

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It is all against experience, caution, tradition and good diplomacy. But is that so bad? I think there have been precedents which were blamed for the same sort of thing, and yet managed to restore the Christian spirit in barren periods. Many young seminarists have been inspired to take up apostolic work through these young lay people, and many priests go down to that Street at night to listen, to see, and to go home with serious thoughts. The *Catholic Worker* is not the Church, but it is a leaven in the mass. No one can eat pure leaven, but it is needed to make good bread. There are enough people whose wisdom is to wait, and thus to miss every opportunity, and who always keep on the side of established order. That may be necessary to preserve, but we need daring young Christians to prevent stagnation.

H. A. REINHOLD.