

Afterword:

A Decade Later

*When Michael Sprong and Beth Preheim asked me to revisit these essays ten years after they were first published in *via pacis*, I doubted I would find much that I cared to see again. It was a pleasant surprise to discover a certain amount of good sense. I agreed to revise them and in doing so inserted some material to bring them in line with events of the intervening years. I made no major changes. Instead, I proposed this afterword as a way of raising some further issues not treated in the original essays that have become important in the intervening decade. I don't intend to discuss these issues thoroughly, but I believe they need to be posed as challenges the Catholic Worker movement must face, if we are to avoid becoming a curiosity from the past, a tourist attraction like the Shakers or the Amana society.*



A Dangerous Moment

This is a real danger. The very form of the essays in this booklet shows why: a commentary on a commentary on the social encyclicals, which are themselves, of course, a commentary on Scripture. Now that Dorothy and Peter are both dead, and many of their companions have joined them, and we find our papers reprinting articles from the past more and more often, we need to resist the temptation to look

backwards for guidance. The Catholic Worker movement, after all, had its birth in tough times that posed new problems, and it proposed new ways of facing them. To be true to our heritage, we must do the same.

My friend Brian Terrell and I beguiled a summer afternoon back in 1977 by strolling around the campus of Grinnell College and spinning a vision of the New York Catholic Worker, where we both lived at the time, a couple hundred years in the future. We pictured a kind of Assisi. St. Joseph's House and Maryhouse are places of pilgrimage, both buildings preserved whole and freestanding at opposite ends of a single basilica three blocks long and six stories high. A Brother Porter, equipped with a ritual mop and bucket, admits the faithful to St. Dorothy's, and Dorothean Sisters (dressed in denim A-line dresses and coiffed with blue bandannas, wearing not crosses around their necks but eyeglasses, whether or not they need any) give guided tours, complete with improving stories. By special dispensation, Vespers in the Dorothean Rite is still recited from the pre-Vatican II English breviaries supplied by St. John's Abbey in Minnesota. An air of hushed piety prevails. If you look long enough, you may find the tiny side chapel commemorating Peter Maurin.

The picture we conjured up had a rather bitter flavor even then. Though Dorothy was still alive, she already attracted pilgrims, who often burdened her increasingly fragile health, not to mention the patience of the rest of us. (My patience, I freely confess, was usually more fragile than Dorothy's health.) Honors came to her from parties that had previously spent considerable energy ignoring her existence, or explaining it away as not true Catholicism, or as special holiness not meant for ordinary folk, or any of the several other traditional

evasions. The telephone conversations between community members in New York and the chancery of the Archdiocese over the question of the site and celebrant of her funeral Mass — which being gossip I will not retail here — confirmed Brian's and my gloomiest predictions.

The Catholic Worker movement has become the stuff of PhD. dissertations; but there is reason to fear that the "dynamite of the Church," to use Peter's none-too-pacific phrase, is stored less in the basement of Catholic Worker houses than in other places, mostly located in other countries. Hence these closing challenges, offered to provoke debate and to help clarify thought. As believers in a God of history, we have an obligation to engage the times we live in, and these times raise questions not only for Catholic seekers after justice, but for all Christian anarchists, for all nonviolent activists, for social revolutionaries of every stripe.

Peter Maurin warned us that there can be no revolution without a theory of revolution. Theory has had a bad reputation recently. Too many activists have fallen for the glib shallowness of phrases like "the paralysis of analysis," and Catholic Worker folk, despite our tradition of devoting half a day to work and half a day to study, are no exception. Yes, there has been a lot of work for us to do — more than half a day's worth, most days — because the suffering unleashed by the last decade's return to the worst of the age of robber barons has been beyond measuring.

But the greater the suffering, the more urgent it is that we think clearly about how to end it. When we are pressed for time, we can't afford to waste any by not planning our work. This is as true of making revolution as it is of making soup.

A promising moment

The collapse of what was falsely called "communism" has left many progressive people searching for some kind of alternative to the cut-throat capitalism whose promoters are now claiming victory. I suspect the claim is premature, but there certainly are all too many war casualties. In these grim times anarchists can bring a message of hope. The failure of statist approaches offers strong arguments for the anarchist communism of Dorothy's beloved Peter Kropotkin.

Elsewhere, in the realm of Church, many of us are near despair. We are living through one of the several periods in Church history when the institution promotes the idea that nothing has changed since the Resurrection. Cardinal Newman, who also lived in such a period, devoted his considerable intellect to showing that the belief of Christians has developed over time, and that change is not necessarily corruption. He particularly believed the laity had at least as much to do with the latter half of his proposition as the teaching Church did. Speaking of the Arian controversy he wrote, "The Catholic people, in the length and breadth of Christendom, were obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not." These are words of hope when we find ourselves overwhelmed by refusals of the hierarchy to live in the world as it is.

As always the word of hope for the Church is spoken by the mouths of the oppressed, especially from people the Jewish theologian of liberation Marc Ellis has described as "on the wrong side of the Gospel." A caution is in order: we in North America have much to learn from liberation theologians in other parts of the world, but first we have to get past our habit

of consuming theology produced by Latin Americans or South Americans, as we have consumed their coffee or their diamonds. As Elizabeth McAllister said some years ago in Des Moines, we have to start doing our own work in theology, too, and not continue exploiting the labor of others.

An Anarchist Moment

Free enterprise and democracy, we are told daily, have triumphed. The fact that this triumph has brought falling material prosperity and rising violence ought to raise doubts, but it doesn't. This is made possible by omitting the step of asking what we mean by "free enterprise" and "democracy." In fact, of course, as opposed to fiction, it is rapacity and reaction that are in the ascendancy.

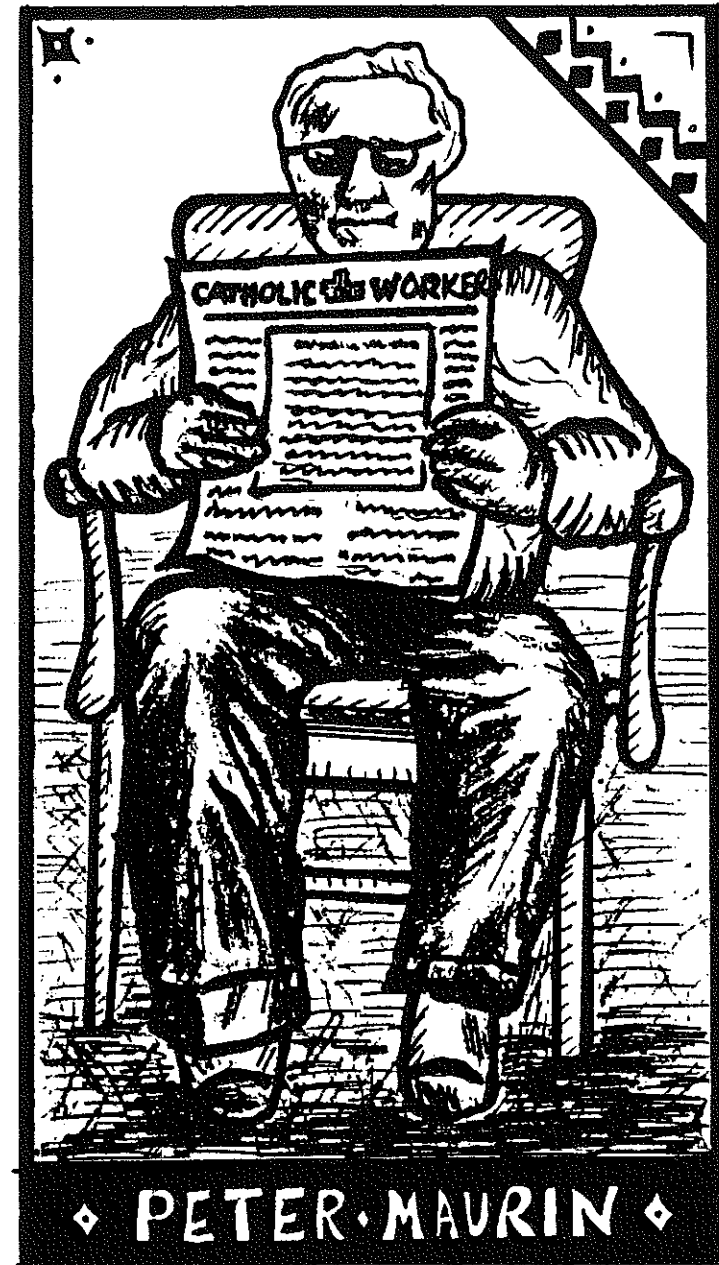
In fact, what has collapsed is not Communism but the ability of State control to work meaningfully. If we look past the rhetoric, we can see this clearly, and not only in Eastern Europe. State socialism failed to resolve ethnic divisions in Czechoslovakia, the U.S.S.R. or Yugoslavia. The restoration of a unified State in Germany failed to resolve ethnic hatred there as well. Racism of all kinds is becoming more vicious in this country, despite 40 years of (admittedly half-hearted) attempts at legislative and judicial — that is, State — remedies. And the harder we work at crafting solutions that do not at the same time repeal the Bill of Rights, the worse matters seem to get.

People have not turned to anarchism as the alternative, however. This is no surprise. For one thing, too many on the Left, however clearly they saw the evils of the Soviet system, have nevertheless harbored a romantic attachment to it. This

was only natural in a country where sensible conversation about Marxist-Leninism was made impossible by the purges of the late 1940s and 1950s. Many of us, and I include myself, could not bring ourselves to raise more than the mildest criticism of the Soviet Union or China or Cuba as long as doing so might help the militarists in the United States. It felt like handing the bullets to the murderers of Cubans and Congolese, Vietnamese and Koreans, Angolans and Nicaraguans and Chileans and so many others. The dead, notice, were rarely white, much less Russian.

So the collapse of "really existing socialism" has left many progressives jumpy about any political theory that seems to have a past. Instead, they say, we need to start from scratch. It is a good time for anarchists to remind them, tacky as it is, that we told you so.

Indeed, one of the things that sent anarchism to that famous dustbin of History may have been our inconvenient way of pointing out that Marxist-Leninists, where they have come to power, have done as much harm to the toiling masses as the capitalists have. We should recall, and honor, the courageous and persistent voice of Emma Goldman, who denounced what she called "the crushing of the Russian revolution" by Lenin, was shunned for it by her comrades on escaping to Western Europe, and finally, with her Spanish comrades, was denounced herself as divisive for exposing the intrigues of Stalin's agents in Catalonia who divided the revolution there and handed Spain to Fascism. We should recall too the more recent and rather less edifying spectacle of the prominent activists who in the sixties loudly called themselves revolutionaries, but in the eighties had what they called "second thoughts" and became well-paid professional apologists for the Reagan



administration's crimes. These characters' easy passage from Trotskyism to Thatcherism tells us how short the distance between them is. Both, after all, claim perfect knowledge of what's *really* best for the poor.

We cannot shove all the blame for the submergence of anarchism onto others, though. There are questions raised by the experiences of the last fifty-odd years that anarchists have not yet succeeded in answering, at least not to the satisfaction of non-believers. I don't propose to answer them, either, but I want to look at them long enough to estimate the size and shape of the task they pose.

Most fundamentally, we haven't really come to grips with the nature of structural oppression. We don't like being classed with the kind of "scientific" socialist who seems to attribute everything to impersonal forces of history and ends up taking away from individuals the ability to change themselves or their surroundings — not to mention the responsibility to try. Even the language puts us off: speaking of "structures" seems to have a moldy smell of abstraction. But structures of oppression are far from abstract for those who suffer under them. It may make things clearer for us if we take a concrete example: racism.

Most public debate about racism in the United States these days suffers from the assumption, strongly reinforced by our culture, that like other forms of injustice, it is a matter of personal wickedness in individuals. We Catholic Workers are as prone to this fallacy as anyone else, since our daily work is mainly with individuals. We need to remind ourselves of the difference between racism and prejudice, commonly expressed in the equation "racism = prejudice + power." When we say racism is a *structure*, we mean it is built into the way power is organized in this country.

This is why it's possible for people to say things like "George Bush (say) doesn't have a racist bone in his body." The statement is perfectly true, and perfectly beside the point. Racism is not a physical condition. It cannot be located by looking at the bones. Its residence is not in our hearts, but in our laws.

This, in turn, is why groups like the Ku Klux Klan are so dangerous. They must be opposed not so much for the harm they do to persons, although that is grave enough, but for the harm they do to our customs. The existence of the Klan allows the rest of us to make racism a personal failing and then to locate it in the behavior of a few individuals. It is no accident that the individuals so singled out are usually members of despised classes in our society, while those with power to dismantle racist arrangements of power in our society go unnamed.

We cannot take comfort in how much less power we have than George Bush. The fact that racism is a structure of oppression does not relieve us of personal responsibility. We all have privilege, of different kinds and to different degrees in different situations. For example, I have privilege based on being white and being male, compared to gay men of color and compared to all lesbians. This privilege gives me no power, however, in situations where I am the only gay man among straight white men. If I am among straight people of color, the situation is correspondingly more complex, but its complexity does not absolve me of my responsibilities to be aware of my privilege, to use such privilege as I have responsibly, and when possible to refuse to claim it at all.

We must continue to see our exercise of personal responsibility, a hallmark of anarchism as much as of Christian

ethics, not so much as a way of getting along in an oppressive society as it is a tool for overthrowing it. We must take responsibility by organizing alternatives. On a more daily level, our sense of responsibility can only be cultivated by according dignity to all, not (as pointed out in the preceding series) by standing on our rights.

It is in according personal dignity to the least among us that our Catholic Worker approach to injustice differs from others, and particularly from those that look to the State for solutions. We are against State ownership of the poor for exactly the same reason we are against slavery: because no human being can ever own another. This is as true when the owners are collectively called the State as it is when they are individuals. Thus we cannot count on the State for real solutions. By its nature, no bureaucracy can provide for the needs of those under its care by treating each person differently according to her individual circumstances, and still be accountable to those whose taxes pay for State programs. Accountability means control; that's what Dorothy meant by State ownership of the poor.

Furthermore, too often that control is exerted in trying to *fix* the poor by remaking them in the image of bourgeois respectability. This is not a matter of style only, or a form of unthinking sentimentalism. It serves the needs of bourgeois capitalism by promoting self-restraint and deferred gratification (in the case of most poor folks, deferred until eternity). These are the virtues of capital. Even if certain individual poor folks are successfully *fixed* enough to advance, the method prescribed can only produce individual advancement, not collective harmony or shared social progress.

If we do not believe in State ownership of the poor, however, neither do we believe in State production of the poor, which is

what contemporary capitalism in the United States amounts to. This is what separates us from the pushers of "a thousand points of light." We practice the works of mercy; but our personal responsibility does not end with comforting the deprived. We must see to it they are not robbed of what is theirs in the first place.

Just as State solutions for the structural oppression of poverty will not bring freedom, so we must admit that they won't bring an end to racism. At best, the result will be an attempt to *fix* people of color by allowing those willing to abandon their cultural heritage to advance as individuals.

We must also admit, however, that Christian anarchists haven't yet come up with any strategies to move beyond individual conversion to dismantle racist power in our society. The reason many of us turned to the State in the first place was that African-Americans in the United States needed protection from their neighbors, from the very communities to whose values anarchists have traditionally looked to replace the rule of force and coercion. When community values are so deeply corrupted by structural oppression, how can we claim, as we usually have, that they will act as a just guarantee of personal freedom and safety in a Stateless society?

A Violent Moment

Before I move on to the challenges facing us as members of the Body of Christ, I would like to linger briefly along the way to raise a challenge that spans both realms: our response to militarism and violence. The powers that be are using shocking levels of violence to avoid the collapse of an essentially unworkable system. For Catholic Workers, pacifism

Catholic Workers, pacifism is a matter of religious conviction; we believe it is an essential element of Christian faith. We base our belief on practical experience as well as on Scripture.

The amount of violence in this changing world is leading many of our allies in the struggle against war to consider whether there are limits to their commitment to opposing military force. The fact that much of the military intervention now being proposed and carried out is disguised under humanitarian purposes should not delude us. The contention (the facts are not so simple) that military action is carrying out the consensus of "the international community," represented by the United Nations is even more doubtful, and demands a very close look. Such a look might begin by distinguishing between the Security Council, where the former colonial powers have vetoes, and the General Assembly, where member states have equal votes. The unquestioned assumption that States represent the real interests of "the international community" deserves even more searching examination. Looking at this problem as the manifestation of yet another structure of oppression, militarism, may help.

In any case, it is our responsibility to speak firmly against the sentiment that military violence can achieve humane results. This is especially true because we have to counteract the effects of a half-century of sweeping, and usually unchallenged, claims for the miraculous ability of military violence to solve political and social conflict. These claims, as I mentioned, have apparently worked their way into the minds of some anti-war folk. (The times the claims proved baseless are explained away by asserting that not enough violence was allowed.) In fact, the warfare of today can best be explained as the end-product of just such forced "solutions," whether imposed by the victor's

settlements after the two World Wars or by the internal violence of dictatorships.

Our political and religious duties to speak out on this matter are blended so fully we couldn't separate them if we tried. We have an equal duty to speak in words that those who do not share our religion can hear and understand. Anything less is merely self-righteousness.

This leads me to a digression on the complexity of remaining true to our Catholic heritage and at the same time being heard in a secular society. There is a very specific reason Catholic Workers need to face this. When I lived in the Des Moines house we regularly received mail from anti-Semites assuming that we shared their views. This was largely, I suspect, because we have always denounced the practice of moneylending at interest. Opposition to usury in particular, and in many cases to capitalism in general, has gone hand-in-hand with hatred of Jews. (By a bitter paradox, so has anti-Communism, as we can see in Central and Eastern Europe today.) It was particularly present among those who shared the Catholic Worker's opposition to the theft of family farms by lending institutions that was so widespread in the 1980s.

This superficial convergence means that we have an obligation to be perfectly clear how our positions differ, and avoid working alliances with purveyors of hate. The fact that the charge of anti-Semitism is sometimes used cynically, for unworthy political ends, does not free us from the responsibility to examine our own history. We will not be able to make our position clear to others, however, if it is not clear to us. We have plenty of work to do here.

A similar problem arises when we speak of building God's Commonwealth, because it sounds so much like the program of

the most reactionary and repressive groups in the so-called Religious Right (which is really almost entirely Christian). When I first wrote these essays, the problem was fairly new since fundamentalists had traditionally shunned involvement with "worldly" politics. In the last decade they have gone from strength to strength in U.S. politics. Furthermore, because we are Catholics, it is easy for people to associate us with all the reactionary alliances the institutional Church has made in pursuit of worldly power. It is getting harder to tell the difference between Catholicism and fundamentalism, even for Catholics. We have a duty to clarify the difference.

One obvious difference is our attitude toward the use of force, which brings us back to the topic at hand.

Nonviolence is a revolutionary practice and a way of life that at its best make politics and religion the same, neither ignoring the ugly realities of unequal power in the society nor the needs of human beings to relate to one another respectfully, lovingly. I fear we are entering a period when nonviolence will seem naive and out-of-date, especially between nations. This means we must practice nonviolence more intently than ever, and with such effect that doubters are drawn by our example.

It must help us to recall that the Catholic Worker movement faced much the same situation during the Spanish Civil War. We should review the history of those times and of the dreadful general war that followed. Might our witness to pacifism have helped bring on World War II rather than prevent it? In answering this question, we should remember that the arms embargo the "international community" imposed on all parties in Spain — the legitimate, if revolutionary, Republic as well as the Fascist plotters of its overthrow — was in practice a way of favoring the Fascists. Arms embargoes, in theory, seem like

good ways to reduce violence. What do they mean in practice, and how should religious pacifists react toward them? This is not an easy problem.

I would like to suggest a corollary as well: we must make sure the way we practice nonviolence suggests not austerity and self-denial, but joy. This is part of our Christian vocation; as St. Augustine said, "We are Easter people, and alleluia is our song." But it will also help dispel the widespread image of activists as stern, even addicted to martyrdom.

Of course we must continue to say that building a just world means North Americans will have to stop consuming more than our share of the world's resources. But we will only be able to get through with this message if we can show how to live without excess consumption but with pleasure. This ought not to be hard, given how little pleasure most of the delights of the consumer world actually bring. Still, we need to be careful not to fall to the temptation, ever-present in U.S. culture, to think all pleasure is evil. This is blasphemy against the Incarnation. G.K. Chesterton was not far wrong when he said we will be improved not by plain living and high thinking but by high living and plain thinking.

An exodus moment

Such a point of view is thoroughly Catholic. That's why it is uncommon among modern Catholics in the United States. One of the most persistent charges against Catholics in U.S. history has been that we are too fond of physical pleasure. The historian Richard Hofstadter put it beautifully: "Anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan."

At the end of the twentieth century, however, the Catholic Church is politically powerful, and we have too often used that power in ways that oppress others. I say we, because Catholic Workers have not always made our opposition to the repressive political activity of the hierarchy clear enough.

This is especially the case on the issues of lesbian and gay civil rights and AIDS education. It is not surprising, given the dynamic Hofstadter described, that we should be touchy about sex. By contrast, genuinely Catholic countries like France and Italy have been traditional havens for lesbians and gay men persecuted in Protestant countries. There are economic and political reasons for this besides the cultural ones; but nevertheless the social situation sexual dissidents find ourselves in here and now cannot truthfully be called consistent with organic Catholic culture.

Still, Catholics in the United States seem incapable of having any direct or intellectually convincing discussion of sexuality. Catholic Workers, dedicated to both freedom and clarification of thought, must participate fully in changing the state of affairs. It is not only of concern to lesbians, gay men and bisexual people among us. It hinders our struggles for women's ordination and for a married priesthood. Underlying all arguments against these is an attitude about ritual purity that implies that sexual activity and menstruation are so polluting that no one who does either — meaning just about any human being — is fit to touch the Host.

We will not be able to have any helpful discussion of sex unless, as the liberation theologians have taught us, we are guided by the voices of the sexually oppressed. This means the voices especially of lesbians and gay men. We are the ones "on the other side of the Gospel;" we are the ones still being

denounced as a threat to society, Church and family. What's more, we must listen hardest to the voices that tell us most sharply what oppression has meant for them. This means not relying just on those lesbians and gay men who have found ways of continuing to live with the Church, but listening to those who may have renounced any connection to the Church. The true liberation theologians among lesbians and gay men of today may not be Christians at all.

Such a course will mean moving beyond some of the habits of our Catholic Worker past. Dorothy's discomfort with sex talk can't stand in our way any more. She, after all, is now free of the limitations created by her personal history. We should be too. Our ability to move on is a measure of our love for her. We don't dare tell the truth to idols. We don't dare fail to tell it to those we love.

Speaking of idols brings me to a related but somewhat separate problem: the idolatry of the nuclear family. Many of the pronouncements of the reactionaries (some of them bishops) speak of the need to defend "the family," and go on to say that without it society cannot survive. In fact, the modern family is a very new thing — probably only a century old or so, though historians differ — and of course the pronouncements all assume that patterns found only in white Europe, Canada and the United States are somehow God-given.

This idolatry of the bourgeois family, which unfortunately many Catholic Workers seem to share, is as dangerous as any other kind of idolatry. There is not space here to go into detail on the subject, but very briefly, the modern family is a device that permits Christians to avoid their responsibilities for anyone outside the narrowest circle of blood relations. It allows us to narrow the definition of "love," rather than expand it as Jesus

New Heaven, New Earth

taught. In some sense it serves as the private counterpart of the slogan "national security" in public policy. As such, it is hardly an institution that serves the demands of the Gospel life.

Two steps will help us build a more authentically Christian theology of family.

First, we must listen to the voices of those who have been harmed by the idolatry of the bourgeois family. Once again, lesbians and gay men will be important witnesses. So will divorced people, those with custody of their children and those without it. So will survivors of domestic violence, including incest.

Second, we should meditate on the real nature of the Holy Family. Behind the image created by Christmas cards it was a profoundly un-American gathering of persons, including a child not born of both parents as well as other brothers and sisters who may or may not have been blood relatives. Very likely it was left fatherless early. This family lived its life in territory under military occupation and in a backwater whose population was suspect among other Jews because of intermarriage and strong foreign influence. It has even been suggested that Mary's account of Jesus' conception may have been to cover up a rape at the hands of a Roman soldier. Whether or not this was so, contemplating the possibility gives the Holy Family a vivid immediacy that is very different from the use that reactionaries have made of it.

As we engage in this theological task, Catholic Workers have in our daily experience a powerful counterexample to the bourgeois family: our Houses of Hospitality. Here we not only offer temporary hospitality to families with a wide variety of compositions, but also come to replace the original families of blood and marriage for many who live with us — even to the

Afterword

hour of death and beyond. We should make full use of this aspect of our lives to help the whole Body of Christ discern what family is and what role it plays in our lives as Christians.

Of course, we will only be able to do so as long as our houses avoid becoming like homeless shelters. How to keep that from happening is a fundamental challenge: it goes to the very life of our movement. The key will be found in the advice I received my first day at St. Joseph's House in New York: "Just be personal."

At the time, and for quite a while after, I thought it was the most worthless advice I'd ever gotten. I wanted rules instead, or at least some instructions about what to look out for. Only much later did I come to realize that rules and prohibitions are ways of avoiding having to deal directly with individuals as people rather than symbols. We face the same challenge in nonviolent direct action too: how are we to engage the officials we come into contact with? How do we get past the badges, uniforms and courtroom protocol to engage those we encounter on a personal basis? There is no single answer; but at the very least it means being honest about our own feelings toward others. Especially when our feelings involve anger or dislike or prejudice or even hatred.

In the end, this aspect of personalism is the most precious tool we can bring with us as we face the challenges I have posed in this essay, and the many others I might have posed but didn't. Christian Rossetti's Christmas carol puts it more simply that I am capable of:

What shall I bring him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would to my part.
But what I can I give him — give him my heart.