

Introduction

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The following essays are based on "Catholic Worker Positions," which were written by Robert Ludlow and first published in The Catholic Worker in the 1950s. Richard Cleaver, with input from other members of the Des Moines Catholic Worker Community, revised and published them in five installments in the Des Moines (Iowa) Catholic Worker paper, via pacis, from the Autumn 1981 through the May/June 1982 issues. Ten years later, Richard has revised and updated the essays, inserting material to bring them in line with events of the intervening years.



These Catholic Worker Positions are intended to give a quick summary of our thinking on the injustice we see in the society in which we live and of our vision for the new society we are trying to build in the shell of the old. Fifty years of tradition within the Catholic Worker movement and 2,000 years of tradition in the Church have given us a distinctive viewpoint on society. This viewpoint is at odds with much of

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the established wisdom of our time, and it is often condemned as impractical for this day and age. We believe that although it is visionary and idealistic, it is thoroughly practical (as most Scriptural teaching is) in the sense that it can be practiced, by ordinary people, right here and now. We know because we practice it ourselves. It is difficult, we admit, but if we can practice it, anybody can. As to its effectiveness, we leave that to God. We do not care one way or the other about the world's standard of effectiveness. We are told not to conform to the world. Instead we want to inform the world with the Gospel and reform it by love.

The general aim of the Catholic Worker Movement is to realize in the individual and in society the teachings of Christ, especially as found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) and in the call to solidarity with the needy (Matthew 25:31-46). We must begin with an examination of our present society to determine how it meets the requirements of those teachings.

The society in which we live and which is generally called capitalist (because of its method of producing and controlling wealth) and bourgeois (because of its prevailing concern for acquisition and material and its emphasis on respectability and mediocrity) is not in accord with justice and charity in the following ways:

IN ECONOMICS because the guiding principle is production for profit and because production determines needs. In addition, there is a non-producing class which is maintained by the labor of others. In order to live over and above what is needed for their bare maintenance, this class systematically robs the workers of the wealth they have produced.

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A just society would provide the necessities of life for all, and the common good rather than profit would determine what is. Furthermore, the workers would control the fruits of their labor: "from each according to his or her ability, to each according to his or her need."

IN PSYCHOLOGY because capitalist society fails to consider the whole nature of the human being. Rather, it regards people solely as an economic factor in production. They are items in the expense sheets of employers. Profit alone determines what kind of work they will do, hence the deadly routine of assembly lines. More and more we see that women are placed in the lowest rungs of this ladder. Even for those middle-class women who adhere to the traditional homemaker role, this dehumanization causes them to be seen as sexual commodities and as consumers of unnecessary articles, rather than as full human beings capable of independent lives.

In a just society, the question would be whether a certain kind of work is in accord with human dignity and wholeness, not whether it will bring a profit to the exploiters of labor.

IN SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS because capitalism is maintained by class warfare. Since the aim of the capitalist employer is to obtain labor as cheaply as possible while the aim of labor is to sell itself as dearly as possible and buy what is produced as cheaply as possible, there is an inevitable and persistent conflict between them which can only be overcome when the capitalist class ceases to exist. Furthermore, the capitalist class fosters division among people along lines other than purely economic ones in order to maintain its dominance. Thus, races are pitted against one another; the old and

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(increasingly) children are kept out of sight; and lesbians and gay men are denied any place whatever in church or society. Throughout, men hold power over women. Thus, rich and poor alike suffer increasingly from isolation, from madness, and from growing individual violence, this last abetted by the State's emphasis on implements of war instead of on human well-being.

In a just society, there would be no classes. People would perform different functions, but there would no longer exist an employer/wage-earner relationship. We would rejoice in God's gifts, those given to us all to share and those given to individuals and groups to demonstrate our infinite variety.

IN ITS RELATION TO NATURE because it exploits natural resources for profit rather than practicing the Biblical ideal of stewardship. In this we have failed to learn from the First Nations who preceded us on this continent. Our misuse of fertile agricultural land, our poisoning of the environment, our selfish insistence on depleting non-renewable resources, and in particular, our folly in continuing to ignore the dangers of nuclear power (chiefly because of its intimate connection with the war industry) are grave offenses against God's creation.

In a just society, human beings would live in harmony with the rest of nature, and all would join together in praise of their Creator.

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We see the proliferation of nuclear power and weapons the clearest sign of the direction of our age. It is a denial of the right of people to life itself and, by implication, a denial of God. There is a direct economic and moral

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connection between the arms race and destitution. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, "The arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree."

Neither the capitalist democracies, the social democracies, nor the bureaucratic centralist (so-called socialist) states pursue the common good, since as a consequence of their basic principles, they either economically sanction or legally impose violations of justice and charity. Each fosters the ever-increasing power of the State; as a result, there is a genuine lack of control over any consistent movement toward even a human, much less a Christ-centered world.

Therefore, to achieve a just society we advocate a complete rejection of the present social order and a nonviolent revolution to establish an order more in accord with Christian truth. We envision a social order based on St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the common good, one in which the freedom and dignity of the whole person is fostered, and the good of each person is bound to the good of the whole community.

This can only be done by direct action, since political means have failed and will continue to fail as a method for bringing about such a society.

We believe, therefore, in **personalism**, in taking upon ourselves responsibility for changing conditions to the extent that we are able. By establishing houses of hospitality we take care of as many of those in need as we can by ourselves rather than turning them over to the impersonal *charity* of the State. We do not do so in order to patch up the wrecks of the capitalist system, but rather because there is always a shared

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responsibility in such things, and the call to minister to our brothers and sisters transcends any consideration of economics. We feel that what anyone possesses beyond basic necessities does not belong to him or her, but rather to those who are without it.

We believe in **community** as a potent remedy for the isolation and spiritual destitution that is prevalent today. We try to live together simply, striving for a voluntary poverty and dispossessing ourselves of superfluous goods to witness against the consumerism of industrial society. We recall the early Christians, who lived in common, shared their goods, and followed St. Paul's dictum, "Let your abundance supply their want (II Corinthians 8:14)." We have both responsibilities and limits in our use of material possessions. Christ comes to teach that the spirit of poverty is the way to the Kingdom (Luke 18:24-25). Indeed, we have found that much joy and freedom can be found in living simply and in sharing. Such a life can open opportunities for personal liberation that serve as a basis for our efforts toward liberation on a larger scale (I John 2:15-17).

We believe in separation from the capitalist system so far as each is able. We reject the State, the parties and prisons, flags and armies that maintain it; we reject its dehumanizing effects, such as mass production in industry and education, large hospitals, agribusiness, and impersonal bureaucracies. Thus, we favor establishment of a **distributist** economy wherein those who have a vocation to the land will work the land surrounding the small towns, and those who have other vocations will work in the small towns themselves while remaining in close contact with the land. We see this as possible

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in urban neighborhoods as well by the conversion of wasted land into community gardens. In this way we will have a decentralized economy which will dispense with the State as we know it and will be federationist in character as was society during certain periods preceding the rise of nation-states.

We believe in **worker control** of the means of production and distribution as distinct from nationalization. This is to be accomplished by decentralized cooperatives and the elimination of a distinct employer class. It is revolution from below and not, as political revolutions are, from above. It calls for widespread and universal ownership of property as a steppingstone to a **communism** that will be in accord with the example of the Apostles (Acts 2:42-47) and with the Christian teaching of detachment from material goods. When realized, it will express itself in common control, and the concept of ownership as we know it will be meaningless.

We believe in complete **equality** of all women and men as sisters and brothers created by a loving God. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, classism — all of these are blasphemy against God whose image is incarnate in us all and whose death has redeemed us all (Galatians 3:28). We come to God freely or not at all, and it is not the place of anyone or any institution to force the faith on anyone else. Persecution of any person or group is therefore a serious sin.

We believe further that the revolution that is to be pursued in ourselves and in society must be **pacifist**. Otherwise it will proceed by force and use means that are evil and which will never be outgrown. The means will then determine the end of the revolution, and that end will again be coercion and tyranny. We reject the use of evil means for any end

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whatsoever, for we believe that Christ went beyond natural ethics in matters of force and war and taught nonviolence as a way of life (Matthew 26:52). When we set ourselves against tyranny and injustice, we must do so by spiritual means and by noncooperation. Refusal to pay taxes; refusal to register for the draft; and refusal to take part in civil-defense drills; as well as nonviolent strikes, boycotts, nonviolent occupations, symbolic actions and prayers are all means that can be used in this pursuit of justice.

We see this as an era of great doubt and anxiety. In response, we, as a lay movement, seek our strength and direction in the beauty of regular prayer and liturgy, in studying the traditions of Scripture and the teachings of the Church, and in applying them to the modern condition. Thus directed, our efforts to perform our duty as Christians range widely from visiting the sick to occupying nuclear power plant sites.

We believe that success, as the world determines it, is not the criterion by which a movement should be judged (Romans 12:2). We must be prepared and ready to face seeming failure. The most important thing is that we adhere to Christian values which transcend time. On the last day we will be asked for an accounting, not as to whether those values succeeded as the world judges success (though we hope and trust that they will), but as to whether we remained true to them even against the world.