

Politics

It appears that the State doesn't "work," but we are so used to that, we don't question it.

As King he claims dominion over all creation, that he may present to you, his almighty Father, an eternal and universal Kingdom—a Kingdom of truth and life, a Kingdom of holiness and grace, a Kingdom of justice, love and peace.

—Preface of Christ the King



Every year on the feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, Catholic Workers, and all who place their lives in Christ's hands, offer once again our allegiance to the One whose "dominion over all creation" makes any earthly allegiance a sin. This feast is a time to consider whether we truly act as if we believed that Jesus Christ is Lord and to examine what we have done to bring about the Kingdom we pray for in the Lord's Prayer: "A

Kingdom of truth and life; a Kingdom of holiness and grace; a Kingdom of justice, love and peace."

Most people today take it for granted that this Commonwealth is to be achieved either by participating in what is commonly (if absent-mindedly) called "the democratic process" or else, in countries where that does not exist or has become a mockery, by overthrowing one regime and replacing it with another where it is assumed (rather naively) that "the democratic process" will come into play. No amount of studying the history of political revolutions seems to be able to convince people how baseless this assumption is.

We don't even really examine that phrase, "democratic process." Presumably it means the rule of the majority, tempered, we hope, by a concern for the rights of minorities and free access to what is now referred to as "the marketplace of ideas." (What is the going rate for an idea these days? And what is the percentage of inflation compared to last year's ideas?) "The Kingdom" then becomes the Jeffersonian republic, or the classless society, or even the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In spite of the fact that the churches have gone along with this notion in greater or lesser degrees ever since Constantine, Catholic Workers are among those who denounce this view as blasphemy. For us, all complicity with states is a kind of idolatry, putting human institutions in the place reserved for the Sovereign One, the risen Lord. Not only that, but we see states as the chief supporters and agents of violence and injustice, established and maintained to protect wealth and privilege. Even the most "democratic" of states is guilty of this. As Thoreau wrote, "A government in which the majority rule in

all cases cannot be based on justice." But for a Christian, establishing justice is, as the Synod of Bishops proclaimed in 1974, "a constitutive dimension" of preaching the Gospel. So for us the struggle for justice must take precedence over any governmental system.

This position is often called Christian anarchism. There may be other words that describe our position more clearly and carry with them less emotional freight. Still, since we often use the term to describe ourselves, let's look at what we mean by it.

This is easier said than done, because unlike some political theories, anarchism is not one thing. There is no single "line," no founder whose works can be pored over by devout disciples to produce some dogma. If there were, Christians, who can only be disciples of Christ, could not subscribe to it. But anarchism is really just a tendency to be suspicious of big institutions and of the domination of one person by another; it is a belief that what holds societies together is not force and fear of punishment, but the cultivation of an ever-increasing disposition to be servant to all, a belief that mutual assistance and not competition leads to a better life for everyone.

Emma Goldman described anarchism as "the philosophy of a new social order based on the released energies of the individual and the free association of liberated individuals." For her, anarchism, far from being a dogmatic system, was simply a "beautiful idea." For the Spaniards who died for it before and during the Civil War, it was "the idea."

Compare all this with Jesus' constant teaching that the one who wishes to be greatest must be the servant of all, a teaching he considered so central that at the Last Supper he gave his friends not only the Eucharist, but also the example of

New Heaven, New Earth

the Teacher washing the feet of his students. Recall the triumphant cry of the prophet Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king come to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the war horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off (Zechariah 9:9-10).

Christ is our King, no earthly ruler — but Christ is no commander of armies. Instead he is "humble," the suffering servant who "has borne our griefs." "And with his stripes we are healed."

It is often claimed that Paul's instructions in Romans 13 and elsewhere require us to be "good citizens" and support our government. We reply that we are citizens of the Commonwealth that is limited to no nationality. If we truly have rendered to God what is our due as citizens, there is no room left for allegiance to Caesar. In any case, *submission*, recognition of another's greater power, is a far cry from *support*, an active approval of and complicity in that power.

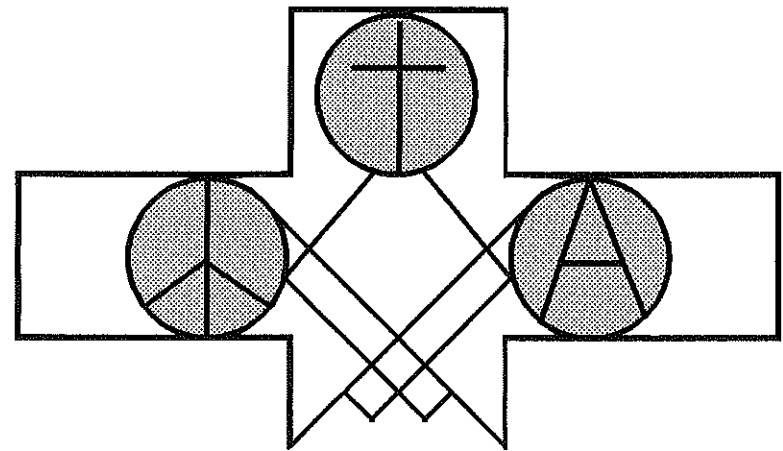
In fact, God made it plain to Samuel that Israel's demand for a central government was apostasy, a defection from trust in God to follow the corrupt customs of "the nations." In I Samuel 8, the people are clamoring for a king. Samuel turns to God for guidance and receives the reply, "They have rejected me from being king over them." God instructs

Politics

Samuel to warn them what they are in for: "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots. . . . He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks. . . . He will take the tenth of your grain" and the best of everything, and the result? "You shall be his slaves." Still the people demand a king, partly to be "like the other nations," partly (it seems) from sheer laziness. It is getting harder to live justly, and the memory of God's liberating work is fading.

We too feel this way. What it boils down to is we consider it impossible to live in justice as Christ asks, so we give up — the deadly sin of sloth.

Maybe one reason we give up is a sense of hopelessness. But Paul reminds us that we have been baptized into Christ and thereby have become members of Christ's body. We are no longer alone, left to our own devices. Belief in the Mystical Body of Christ is central to our lives as Catholic Workers. Because of it we can continue year in and year out opening our homes to strangers. Because of it we can confront those who



are preparing for war and do our duty in love to convince them of their error. And because of it we can trust that beneath the brokenness of the people we meet, the brokenness that makes them hard, greedy, selfish and violent, there too is a limb of Christ's body. Like the Russian Orthodox, we see the Church, indeed the whole of humanity, not as a hierarchy ruling a passive people, but a *sobornost'*, that is an organism, a unity, an ingathering of varied, even contradictory, personalities, formed through joint struggle into a harmonious whole.

Since we talk about the Body of Christ so much, folks often think we are limiting our belief in the goodness of human beings to Christians or else simply replacing the State with the Church as some medieval Popes tried to do. On the contrary, we see that throughout history the recognition of God's love has spread ever wider from particular individuals like Abraham, to whole nations like Israel, and finally to the whole world. When the Church tries to take on the role of Authority, it loses its resemblance to the suffering servant whose Body it is. We look instead to the Church where it takes up the Cross again, especially in Latin America, the Philippines, South Korea and South Africa, and refuses to serve the powers of this world by explaining away God's liberating acts and Christ's promises of justice.

We live as we do precisely because we believe those promises. We believe that joy comes from giving, not hoarding — thus we have no need of protection for our things. We believe that joy comes from loving actively — thus we have no need to hire others to "do charity." We believe that joy comes from letting love cast out fear — thus we have no need of violence and no need to hire others, police or soldiers, to do our

violence for us. A verse of Woody Guthrie's "Hobo's Lullaby" comes to mind:

"I know the police cause you trouble;
They cause trouble everywhere.
When you die and go to heaven
there'll be no policemen there."

But we believe "the Reign of God is at hand" — not something you get only after you die, but "at hand;" all you have to do is reach out for it. We live in God's Commonwealth already, and that makes us strangers in all the kingdoms of the earth.

"That's all very nice," I hear you say, "but the real world doesn't work that way." This is a very common objection but it has never made sense to me. It is plain to see that the *real world* as it is now governed doesn't work at all. As states get stronger, violence increases everywhere. We have no safety in our persons or our goods. We have no security from the utter destruction of nuclear warfare or ecological disaster. We have no assurance of adequate food or clothing or shelter unless we are rich or powerful enough to thumb our noses at the State anyway. What else is the State supposed to be for but to guarantee these things? Yet as it takes on more and more power, and takes away more and more money, it performs its functions less and less. It appears that the State doesn't "work," but we are so used to that, we don't question it.

Oddly enough it seems to be those most concerned for peace and justice who turn most quickly to the State for solutions. Legalize this, outlaw that, and all will be well. What has become of Paul's teaching: "All who rely on the works of

the law are under a curse?" Law cannot cover all cases, so it's bound to become a source of injustice, a "curse." The true law is written on our hearts; that law is the law of love, and because of it James can tell us, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty, for judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment." Thoreau put it more simply: "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right."

Of course for those who believe (back to Part I again!) that economic prosperity is the answer to everything, perhaps the benefits of a strong State to run the economy seem clearer; but while a decent living is necessary to human dignity, it is not the goal of life.

"Hearts starve as well as bodies;
Give us bread, but give us roses."

"Well, then, if you don't think the system works as it is, what will you put in its place?" First off, we would not, even if we could, "put" anything anywhere. Imposing a new system will not change anything. And nothing will change if we continue to teach people not to trust themselves, but to leave it to Big Brother. Once we learn to trust ourselves, we can begin to trust one another.

If laziness is the kindling of the State, fear is surely the fuel. The reason wars and insurrections have played such a big part in the history of revolution is that in times of crisis, people must put fear aside and trust themselves and each other to take care of the necessities of life. At such times it is clear what the common good requires, and initiative comes forth to serve it.

This is not only true in times of social dislocation, though. If we look around us we see everywhere examples of decentralized, voluntary groups fulfilling important social functions. Volunteer fire departments, symphony orchestras, service clubs, and church schools are all such groups. Labor unions are very powerful groups that arose not only independent of the state, but also in the face of active resistance from it. They could perform many of the economic functions of a society composed of free associations. Neighborhood and block committees, such as many cities already have, could take over many other tasks.

The beginnings of a society free of state tyranny are already everywhere. It is enough to strengthen them, to rely on them and on individuals to do what needs to be done. The Popes since Leo XIII have admonished us to let intermediary groups perform all possible functions of society. Pius XI wrote of this principle of "subsidiarity:" "It is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies."

To be sure, this is a risky path to take — but no more so than the path to global destruction the States have brought us to. And in any case, it is a risk that Christians find in the very act of proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. In giving ourselves up to God, however; in trusting God's promises; in knowing that God's faithfulness will prevail; in this we find freedom. As Pope John XXIII taught us, "Human society is realized in freedom, that is to say, in ways and means in keeping with the dignity of its citizens, who accept the responsibility of their

New Heaven, New Earth

actions, precisely because they are by nature rational beings."

We don't promise a world without suffering. We don't even promise a world without injustice. But we do promise a world where injustice is not the grease that makes the wheel turn. And Christ promises us in return "a Kingdom of truth and life; a Kingdom of holiness and grace; a Kingdom of justice, love and peace."