

The Radical Next Door:

The Los Angeles Catholic Worker during the Cold War

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On September 9, 1980, eight people broke into the General Electric missile factory in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania and proceeded to attempt to hammer missile nose cones into plowshares. The group, which became known as the Plowshare 8, consisted of four priests, a nun, a lawyer, a college professor, and a housewife. The organizers of the activity, Philip and Daniel Berrigan, and the housewife, Molly Rush, were members of the radical pacifist organization the Catholic Worker and associated closely with the organization's Los Angeles chapter. Philip Berrigan remarked in a later *New York Times* interview that he felt that America was on the cusp of a resurgence of peace activism like that seen during the Vietnam War. He pointed out that although Americans had recently elected a president who promised to increase military spending, police arrested 1000 people for protesting at the Pentagon in that year alone.¹

But what prompted people to agitate and be arrested for peace? Why did Molly Rush, who had six children, put herself in a position to go to jail for several years? Although much literature dealing with nuclear disarmament movements exists, the general historiography of America's Cold War era does not answer these questions. Lawrence Wittner's *Cold War America* studies the time from a national perspective, providing statistics of employment and poverty rates while explaining several presidents' foreign and domestic policies. Ronald Powaski's *March to Armageddon* delves deeply into the diplomatic challenges of the Cold War, providing great detail about presidents and their strategies for negotiating international agreements such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties. To move away from a strictly political study of disarmament, Jonathan Schell's *The Abolition* offers a compelling philosophical challenge to the doctrines of mutually assured destruction and deterrence. Lawrence Wittner also studied the Cold War anti-nuclear movement with an emphasis on grassroots organizations, such as SANE and the Committee for Nonviolent Action. In *Resisting the Bomb* (1997), Wittner claims that nuclear disarmament groups around the world suffered a decline in membership and status in the

¹ William Robbins, "Berrigans See a Reawakening for Antiwar Activists," *New York Times*, December 13, 1980, 8.

1960s and 1970s partly due to distraction from the Vietnam War and partly due to Soviet-American Détente.² However, in his 1984 book *Rebels Against War*, Wittner emphasizes that despite diminishing numbers, peace groups remained active throughout their less popular decades and emerged once again as viable resistance organizations in the Reagan years. Wittner claims that by 1983 nonviolent resistance had become a primary tool of Americans' efforts to achieve peace.³ The Catholic Worker, and especially the Los Angeles chapter, belongs in this category of grassroots organizations that maintained their commitment to peace even during difficult years. But because the Catholic Worker did not focus solely on anti-war activism, as will be explained, it played a unique role in Cold War American history.

Several scholarly studies of the Catholic Worker also exist. Nancy Roberts' *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* and *Breaking Bread* by Mel Piehl supply insights into the beginnings and functions of the Catholic Worker and its outspoken co-founder Dorothy Day. Biographies of other Catholic Worker notables such as Peter Maurin and Ammon Hennacy add to the store of knowledge about the Catholic Worker and the Cold War peace movement. But Day, Maurin, and Hennacy were the figureheads of an organization that gained nation-wide notoriety and membership within only a few years of its creation. Who were the thousands of people who heard Day and Maurin's appeal to personal action against injustice and war? What compelled them to embrace voluntary poverty and at times sacrifice their freedom for a goal that they might have admitted was next to impossible to achieve? And what do these people's actions suggest about America's Cold War peace movement and America's Cold War culture as a whole?

In order to ascertain who these people were and the nature of their personal motivations and consternations, one would need to examine them on an individual basis. Personal writings, such as correspondences, when available, deal both with broad, international issues such as war and peace and personal issues such as hopes and fears— both of which are pertinent to this study. The most important

² Lawrence Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb: Resisting the Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 444.

³ Lawrence Wittner, *Rebels Against War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 293.

source that I use to reconstruct individual experiences and convictions on this issue is the Los Angeles Catholic Worker's monthly periodical *The Catholic Agitator*. In it, many LA Catholic Worker members contributed articles describing their lives in the organization with a sometimes-surprising amount of autobiographical detail, such as family histories, private fears and insecurities, and personal motivations. To supplement this source I will also draw upon a recent interview of a member of the LA Catholic Worker who has been with the organization almost since its beginnings.

After a brief history and explanation of the philosophy and structure of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, the paper will focus on the LA Catholic Worker's actions in anti-war and poverty actions during the Cold War, with an emphasis on individuals and their personal experiences. I believe that America's Cold War historiography has unduly overlooked the actions and role of organizations such as the Catholic Worker in the American consciousness and will, in conclusion try to define the organization's unique role in and contribution to this era of American history.

Background of the Catholic Worker

The Catholic Worker, which first emerged in New York City in 1933, can trace its origins to several broad and distinct but related philosophical ideas or movements from the past few centuries. As a religious organization it drew from the teachings of Jesus and Christian teachings of the unity of humanity, the French Christian personalist understanding of the connection between personal salvation and universal redemption – which hinged on individual's decisions – and the pacifist groups of the radical Reformation in Europe. As an action-oriented radical organization, the Catholic Worker emerged from the anarcho-syndicalist visions of individual-to-group relationships, the social paradigms proposed by the Russian Prince Kropotkin, and the distributist philosophies of English Catholics such as Chesterton, Belloc, and McNabb.⁴

⁴ Larry Holben, Introduction, *Reluctant Resister* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1983), 8.

The co-founders of the Catholic Worker, Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, studied the ideas espoused by those sources, as well as others, and formed a new social model that rejected both capitalism and communism as inadequate to serve each human as a body and soul. Maurin envisioned a society where small, self-sustained groups of people would grow and make everything they needed, and eschew materialism and consumerism. Ideally, people would work for each other with a strong sense of religious purpose and blur the line between secular and religious activity. Because he imagined a society that produced only what it needed, Maurin called his corporate personalist idea the “Green Revolution” (in contrast to the popular “Red Revolution” of his day). Dorothy Day lived in New York City in the early part of the 20th century, and as a progressive-minded bourgeois woman, she worked and socialized with some of the major personalities of the time, such as Emma Goldman, Eugene O’Neill, and Max Eastman, among others. But Day struggled internally for years trying to find a connection or reconciliation between the socially-conscious yet spiritually-void work of her peers, and the spiritually rich but socially-oblivious teachings of religion. Early in 1933 she met Maurin in Washington DC and the two spent the next four months talking with each other and formulating a new philosophy that employed humans’ spiritual and physical capacities.⁵ In her discussions with Maurin, Day discovered what some Catholic Workers call “the well-kept secret of the [Catholic] Church’s social teaching.”⁶ This discovery led Day into a partnership with Maurin, and the two began designing an organization that would provide spiritual and physical help for the poor.

Maurin and Day designed the organization to abstain from the typical condescension and patronization of most charity organizations. Workers demonstrated solidarity with the poor by adopting voluntary poverty, thus blurring the distinction between servers and served.⁷ Furthermore, the Catholic Worker rejected elements of American capitalism that it found to increase the suffering of the poor, among those elements were consumerism, nationalism, and security derived from force or militarization.

⁵ Ibid..

⁶ Interview with Catherine Morris by Leonardo Covis, February 14, 2007, Los Angeles, CA.

⁷ Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 14.

The first facet of Catholic Worker philosophy – solidarity with the poor and refusal of hierarchies and titles of authority – informed the anarchistic aspect of the group. One should not, however, confuse this anarchism with terrorism, nihilism, or the belief that one could and should do whatever he desired without regard for the effects of his actions. Day and Maurin espoused the classical definition of anarchism which proposed that power should not be concentrated into detached governmental bodies which formulated rules and regulations for the population at large, but rather that power should be diffused among small groups of people who would arrive by consensus at decisions which would affect only those within the group. Capitalism and communism (and terrorism, for that matter) were antithetical to Day and Maurin’s anarchism in that they subjugated the individual to society’s goals.⁸ Every person, Day and Maurin proposed, owed allegiance to the common good, not to any political entity.⁹

The second facet of their philosophy – rebuffing of militarism – supplied the pacifist ideology. Overriding through both was the Catholic dogma of the membership of all people in the mystical body of Christ.¹⁰ Therefore, in each person, Catholic Workers strove to see Christ and thereby treat every person as if he or she was Christ. That is not to say that they worshipped people, but more accurately, they took to heart and action the admonition of Matthew 25:40 that “What you did for these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”¹¹ Day and

Maurin’s Christian beliefs permeated and defined their anarchism and pacifism. Catholic Workers came to identify this melding of



Fig. 1

The engraving “Christ of the Breadlines,” a popular image in Catholic Worker literature, exemplifies the philosophy of Christ’s presence in all people.

⁸ Ibid, 9-10.

⁹ “Aims and Purposes,” *The Catholic Agitator*, May 1985, 3.

¹⁰ Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 9.

¹¹ *The Catholic Answer Bible* (Wichita, KA: Fireside Catholic Publishing, 2002), 1054.

philosophies as *personalism* – the understanding that every person is at once the presence of Christ and the vehicle for revolution; each moment is the immediate focus of revolution and simultaneously, because all are members of Christ’s mystical body, each moment is the Kingdom of God on earth.¹² In short, each Catholic Worker took on the personal responsibility to promote justice in any available manner to the best of his or her ability.¹³ The Catholic, anarchist, pacifist ideology of the Catholic Worker was born.

At a May Day rally in New York City in 1933, Day and Maurin distributed the first issue of their newspaper, *The Catholic Worker* and shortly thereafter used Day’s apartment as a house of hospitality, in which volunteers could live and from which they could distribute food and services to those who needed them.¹⁴

Throughout the Depression of the 1930s, the ubiquitous need for amenities fed the popularity of the Catholic Worker, and houses of hospitality, requiring no special permissions or qualifications apart from adherence to Catholic Worker philosophy (this included voluntary poverty, works of mercy for the poor, and, if at all possible, the regular publishing of a community newspaper) opened in cities across the US.¹⁵ But in the early 1940s, after the Pearl Harbor attack and faced with the prospect of global fascism, the Catholic Worker’s popularity, especially because of its staunch pacifism, began to wane.¹⁶

Around that time Ammon Hennacy, ex-convict and former socialist, joined the Catholic Worker. Hennacy contributed to the Catholic Worker a new emphasis on personal resistance to injustice manifested in symbolic protests such as public fasting and non-violent civil-disobedience. Acting upon their knowledge of the truth, Hennacy said individuals had a responsibility to display their disapproval of unjust laws and practices. Although some doubted Hennacy’s faith (he famously spelled “god” with a small “g” and two “o’s”) or disagreed with his bombastic personality, he infused into the Catholic

¹² Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 10.

¹³ “Aims and Purposes,” *The Catholic Agitator*, May 1985, 3.

¹⁴ Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 14.

¹⁵ Interview with Catherine Morris.

¹⁶ Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 16.

Worker a method of resistance to state militarism at precisely the right time. The Cold War and its accompanying issues – nuclear weapons, the police action in Korea, an intractable war in Vietnam – reenergized the Catholic Worker’s popularity at the same time that it developed a proactive anti-war agenda.¹⁷ Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the Catholic Worker expanded once again into cities across the US. Because there are no official regulations detailing how, why, and where someone may open a Catholic Worker house of hospitality, no one knows exactly how many exist today, but most estimate the number nationwide at around 180.¹⁸

Origins of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker

In Pasadena in 1969 former priest Dan Delany and his wife Chris, a former nun, sensed that they were not living their Catholic faith to its fullest potential and decided to speak to Ammon Hennacy in the hope of finding a way to more practically live what they believed.¹⁹ To them, the Catholic faith required love for God and active love for one’s neighbors. They visited Hennacy in Salt Lake City, and upon their return home stopped paying income taxes which they reckoned did little more than help fund militarism.²⁰ On Easter morning in 1970, the Delanys, calling themselves Catholic Workers, served their first meal outside of St. Vibiana’s Cathedral in Los Angeles.²¹ They served spaghetti that they made in their own kitchen out of the back of a van that they purchased with the money that they saved from their income taxes. Unlike the missions that existed around the downtown cathedral, the Delanys preached no sermons and required nothing more than a hungry stomach from the people they served.²² Soon thereafter, the Delanys, and two others who had joined them, met Jeff Dietrich who had recently returned from a four month trip through Europe where he had gone to avoid the draft for the Vietnam War.²³ Delaney recruited Dietrich, who not long before had earned a bachelor’s degree in English, to edit the fledgling LA Catholic Worker’s newspaper, *The Catholic Agitator*, which became its most important

¹⁷ Ibid, 15-17.

¹⁸ Interview with Morris.

¹⁹ Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 17.

²⁰ Interview with Morris.

²¹ Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 17.

²² Ibid.

²³ Interview with Morris.

communication and organizational tool.²⁴ The Delanys also purchased a house on Cummings St. in Boyle Heights and fashioned it into a house of hospitality.²⁵ In December 1971, after the city's health department forced them to move their operation off the street, the LACW began renting an empty hotel café on the corner of 6th Street and Gladys Street in downtown Los Angeles for \$100 per month. The Worker called it Hospitality Kitchen and on March 24, 1972 began serving free meals to the area's hungry and homeless everyday.²⁶ Because the organization was so young and because it did not accept government grants or money from the institutional Catholic Church (the Catholic Worker only accepted donations from individual parishes) a certain amount of austerity marked the first years of its existence.²⁷ At the time, the purchase of a 100 lb bag of beans and a 50 lb bag of onions constituted a significant investment, and things would not soon get easier for the new radicals of Skid Row.²⁸ Later that year, after some disputes over how to spend their meager funds and how to organize their small group, the Delanys left the LA Catholic Worker and thrust the young Dietrich into the role of the group's organizer – or at least as much of an organizer as the anarchists would allow themselves.²⁹

Then, in February 1973 the LA Worker organized its first notoriety-building action. Homeless people on Skid Row had for years sold their blood to commercial blood banks, but because it was the only source of income for so many Skid Row residents, many sold dangerous amounts of blood simply to be able to eat or have a place to stay. The LACW organized Skid Row's poor residents and began protesting the area's blood banks' negligence of people's health. After receiving nation-wide press for their "blood strike," the LA Catholic Worker secured a state law restricting the sale of whole blood and imposing stricter guidelines for the treatment of donors.³⁰ This success attracted attention of various people and organizations. *The Catholic Agitator's* subscription list grew dramatically, more people volunteered and joined the group (that is, they lived in Hospitality House and worked daily in the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 17.

²⁶ Ibid, 18.

²⁷ Interview with Morris.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 18.

³⁰ Ibid, 19.

kitchen) and the Cardinal of Los Angeles, Timothy Manning, said Christmas Eve mass at Hospitality Kitchen.³¹

The LACW expanded rapidly according to the community's needs in the next five years. In mid 1975, with the help of a doctor and several medically trained volunteers, the Worker opened Hospitality Free Clinic in a back room of its soup kitchen.³² In 1976, the Worker rented the hotel rooms above their kitchen and opened them for use for no charge to volunteers and Skid Row residents who needed a place to stay; they named the space Zedakah House, from the Hebrew word for righteousness. The next year however saw a change in ownership for the kitchen and Zedakah House's hotel, and the rent increased from \$100 to \$425 per month. Negotiations between the LA Catholic Worker and the building's new owner yielded a deal to allow the Worker to buy the building for \$64,000. After a visit from Mother Theresa of Calcutta and a lot of prayers to Saint Joseph, the LA Worker raised \$100,000 in 30 days. The extra money purchased a building across the street from the kitchen which became the new permanent home of Hospitality Free Clinic.³³

In early 1978, citing an influx of new families into the Skid Row neighborhood and the absence of a nearby grocery store, the LACW founded the at-cost membership food store *Nuestra Tienda*. Later that year Tony and Joan Trafecanty, who had supported but not joined the LACW, purchased an almost 100 year old Victorian house and two adjacent homes on Britannia St., one block from the Cummings St. house. The Trafecantys moved into one of the adjacent homes with their five children and the Catholic Worker occupied the Victorian, making it their new house of hospitality and naming it Hennacy House. Shortly thereafter Tony Trafecanty opened Justice Bakery which was meant to offer dignified work at decent wages to Skid Row residents who could not otherwise find jobs.

As more college educated people joined the Worker, they offered specialized services. Not long after the Trafecantys bought Hennacy House, for example, a legally trained volunteer began offering free

³¹ Interview with Morris.

³² Holben, *Reluctant Resister*, 20.

³³ *Ibid*, 20-21.

legal advice for a few hours a day in one of its bedrooms which the LACW converted into an office. By 1979 the LACW owned and operated seven buildings in Los Angeles.³⁴

Not satisfied with typical charity organizations' efforts, the LA Worker sought to attack the roots of poverty. Throughout the late 1970s the LA Worker continued to protest and resist the militarist culture that they saw as exacerbating the problems of poverty in America. In 1975 Dietrich went to jail for the first time after attempting to dig a bomb shelter into the Pasadena City Hall's front lawn to mock the city's plan to move people into abandoned mine shafts in case of a nuclear attack.³⁵ In a fit of comedic creativity, the LACW began street theater performances in 1977, the pinnacle of which was a chorus of skyscrapers who satirically praised the neutron bomb as a "weapon that protects valuable buildings and machines."³⁶ But as will be described later, the Worker's actions did not always have such a comical tilt which sometimes defused the ultimate seriousness of their actions, and the results of those actions brought with them consequences and complications that tested the mettle of all involved.

Over the years, the size and scope of the LACW fluxed and waned based on the needs of its community and the abilities of its members. At its peak, 20 people called Hennacy House home and the LACW directly involved itself in 13 simultaneous projects.³⁷ Whatever the projects they volunteered for, Catholic Workers had to volunteer at Hospitality Kitchen, which always remained the LACW's focal point. The LACW never actively asked for donations more than once per year, at Christmas through an ad in its own paper. Whatever it received from that fundraiser, plus a few thousand dollars that came in sporadically made up the LACW's entire fiscal year.

Throughout the LACW's existence, its volunteers themselves have been mostly white, middle class, and either retired or recently out of college. In the early years Hennacy house residents earned a

³⁴ Ibid, 21.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Interview with Morris.

weekly stipend of \$3. Typically, volunteers stayed for two or three years before moving on to other endeavors; some retirees spent the rest of their lives with the group.³⁸

Religious affiliation was never a qualification for those who wanted to join the LACW as long as they could work under the “Catholic Worker” moniker – only during a short period in the LACW’s history were all of its members Roman Catholic. In the 1970s, despite the fact that the Hospitality Kitchen involved mainly what many would have called “women’s work,” most LACW volunteers were male. By the 1980s, because most of the nurses and secretaries at Hospitality Clinic were women, the gender ratio of the LACW volunteers reversed.³⁹

Aggregate data on the type of people who voluntarily embraced poverty to work for the poor and fight war are important, but they can only divulge general conclusions about who volunteered and why. In order to fully understand who, why, and how people worked to fulfill what they regarded as God’s Kingdom on earth one must examine the volunteers individually. By examining them individually, their fears, foibles, and lapses of faith present themselves for study along with the hope and charity broadly visible in an organization such as the Catholic Worker. Furthermore, by exploring personal trials and mentalities of those involved, it becomes clear that the LACW occupied a unique niche among American Cold War dissent groups.

The LACW’s Anti-Nuclear Activities

WWII ended more spectacularly than any war in history. The incineration of two Japanese cities which compelled Emperor Hirohito’s order for Japan to surrender was not an hours-long campaign of firebombing like that which destroyed Dresden, but an instant flash of mortal fire - the work of only two bombs, in two instances, that killed hundreds of thousands of people. At the time only the US had nuclear weapons and many have since argued that President Truman’s willingness to use them was meant not only as a deathblow to Japan, but as a warning shot to Soviet Russia in the context of an incipient

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Cold War as well.⁴⁰ Shortly thereafter the Soviets too developed a nuclear weapon and the United States lost undisputed supremacy over Russia, or what Truman called “a hammer on those boys.”⁴¹

Disagreements over how to arrange post-war Europe were henceforth colored by the prospect that a war between the two giants could be disastrous on an unprecedented scale. Both sides soon began a build up of nuclear weapons which spawned the world’s first nuclear arms race, and in short time both had deployed enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other many times over. Without having planned it, Mutually Assured Destruction led to a policy of deterrence through a greater arms build up on both sides.

Throughout the world, many people feared and abhorred the implications of the arms race. In America, critics argued that military spending exceeded the government expenditures in most services and used tax dollars for programs which many found immoral, especially while many Americans wanted for basic amenities. In 1982, for example, the US Department of Energy spent \$2-4 million dollars each time it tested a nuclear weapon at its site in Nevada, an activity it did on an average of once every 20.3 days.⁴² In 1983 the College of American Bishops of the Catholic Church published a pastoral letter specifically denouncing any use of nuclear weapons and proclaiming deterrence acceptable only as a temporary policy preceding full nuclear disarmament.⁴³ But as the voices of opposition grew louder and the arms race continued to expand, the US and USSR decided to open negotiations to work towards nuclear disarmament.

Some of the most important treaty negotiations began with the era of Nixon, the same time that the LA Catholic Worker began its services for peace and alleviation of poverty. As an ardently pacifist organization, the Worker cast a suspicious eye on agreements, such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement, because they often did not make meaningful progress toward disarmament or merely maintained the status quo. The cover of *The Catholic Agitator* issue from October 1979 pictures a B-1

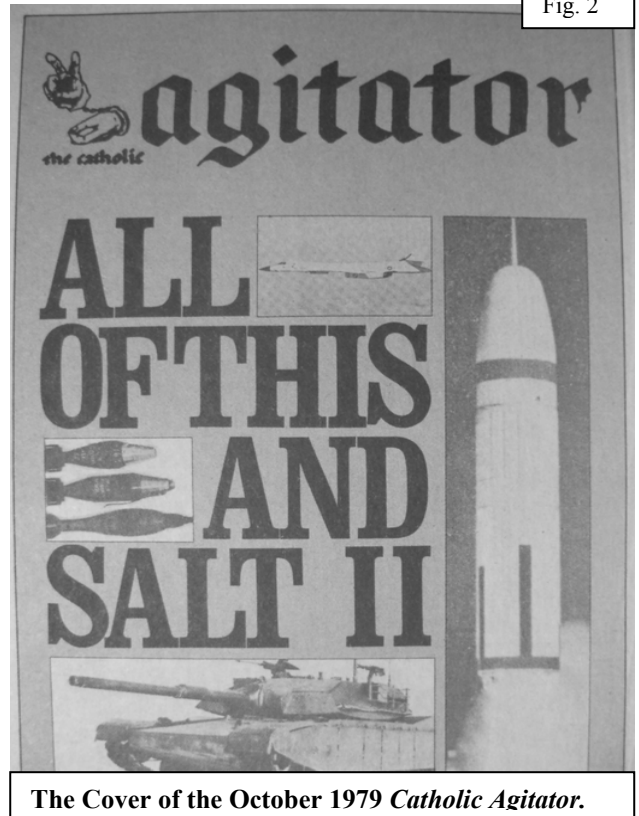
⁴⁰ Lawrence Wittner, *Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate* (New York: Praeger Publishers), 11-13.

⁴¹ Ibid, 11.

⁴² Ann Bucher, “Voices Crying in the Wilderness... At the Nevada Test Site,” *The Catholic Agitator*, August 1983, 4.

⁴³ Philip Murnion (ed.) *Catholics and Nuclear War: A Commentary on the Challenge of Peace, The US Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on War and Peace* (New York: Crossroad Press), 251-252.

Fig. 2

The Cover of the October 1979 *Catholic Agitator*.

Bomber, a nuclear missile, and a tank under the headline “All of This and SALT II.”⁴⁴ (See Fig. 2) In the issue, under an article titled “The SALT Monster,” the *Agitator* denounced the SALT treaty because it in effect did not require the destruction of any nuclear weapons, but did allow the development and deployment of the MX missile, the Trident Submarine and its missiles, and several other nuclear weapons.⁴⁵ (See Fig. 3) *The Agitator* recognized that SALT II would cap the number of permissible nuclear weapons in the world, but equated this with a cap on the number of torture chambers permitted to governments.⁴⁶ In the LA Catholic Worker’s eyes, SALT was off target. Rather than admitting that nuclear weapons posed a grave threat to the world, SALT exemplified “political leaders . . . still trying to convince us that we can have security and peace through nuclear arms.”⁴⁷

Indeed, analysts have asserted that all American presidents in the Cold War approached arms limitation negotiations with an air of suspicion for the Soviet Union. Rather than leading by example by reducing the US’ nuclear arsenal, presidents presupposed that Soviet Russia would only reduce its arsenal if it was intimidated into doing so by American military potential.⁴⁸ This led inevitably to the creation of greater numbers of more deadly weapons designed to be used as bargaining chips in treaty negotiations.⁴⁹ This attitude’s major flaw of course was that whenever the US increased its military might, the Soviet

⁴⁴ *The Catholic Agitator*, October 1979, cover page.

⁴⁵ Bob Aldridge, “The SALT Monster: SALT II Legalizes the Arms Race,” *The Catholic Agitator*, October 1979, 1.

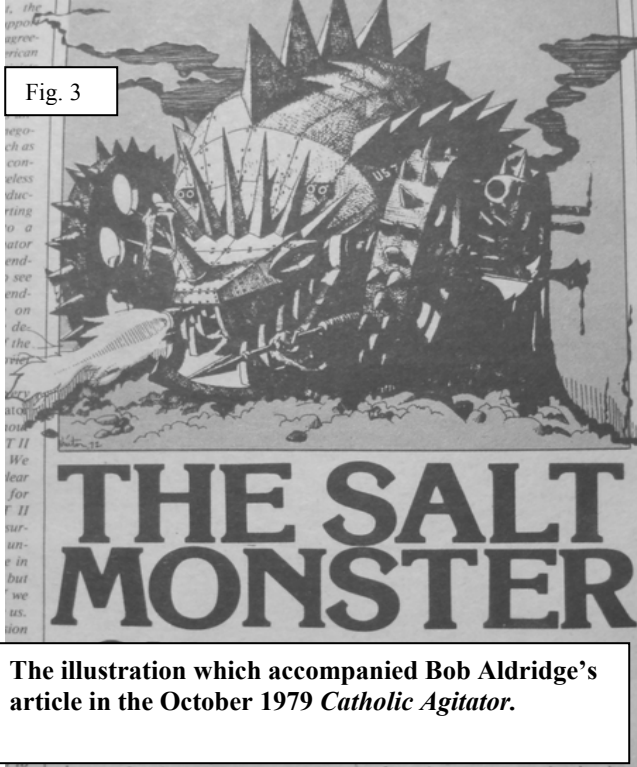
⁴⁶ Thomas Gumbleton, “SALT II: Treacherous Pastures,” *The Catholic Agitator*, October 1979, 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

⁴⁸ Ronald Powaski, *March to Armageddon* (New York: Oxford University Press), 228.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 194.

Fig. 3



The illustration which accompanied Bob Aldridge's article in the October 1979 *Catholic Agitator*.

Union responded in kind. Later, when negotiations began to take place, both sides were reluctant to un-deploy even their new “bargaining chip” weapons.

In the midst of this self-perpetuating cycle, Americans' distaste for nuclear weapons grew. A 1972 poll by *The New York Times* showed that 72% of Americans supported a nuclear freeze; in 1982 voters passed freeze initiatives in 8-out-of-9 states that voted on the issue.⁵⁰ Such numbers indicate that

Americans truly contemplated the prospects of nuclear war that might be started by insidious minds or even by accident. For years, pop-culture reflected and fed that fear through films such as *Fail Safe*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Dr. No*.⁵¹ In 1981, an NBC/Associated Press poll found that 76% of Americans felt that nuclear war was likely to occur within the next few years.⁵²

The LA Catholic Worker took an impassionate stance on the issue. *The Agitator* asserted that nuclear war before the year 2000 was not only a possibility but a probability.⁵³ The question then was what to do about it. While some suggested that the US should take a harder line to the Soviet Union, the LA Catholic Worker encouraged people to act on a personal level against any government's pro-nuclear policies. Some Workers, having grown doubtful of the average protests' effectiveness, decided to refuse to pay taxes. Because, as *The Agitator* reported, 51% of the federal budget paid for defense programs, Catholic Workers equated paying taxes with supporting militarism.⁵⁴

Others chose more active civil disobedience actions. Molly Rush, the housewife who joined the Plowshare 8, explained in a June 1981 *Agitator* article how she converted from a passive supporter of

⁵⁰ Ibid, 193.

⁵¹ Spencer Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 275-280.

⁵² Powaski, *Armageddon*, 193.

⁵³ Gumbleton, “Traacherous Pastures,” *The Catholic Agitator*, October 1979, 3.

⁵⁴ Phillip Zwerling, “Blood Money: We Don't Have to Pay for Death and Destruction,” *The Catholic Agitator*, October 1979, 6.

peace to a radical pacifist activist. Her article, “Confronting the Bomb in Our Midst,” featured a drawing of an average-looking suburban neighborhood with an enormous but otherwise unspectacular nuclear bomb in the street. (See Fig. 4) She began her article with a wakeup call, warning that the Cold War grew more dangerous everyday, especially with the Reagan administration’s new efforts at developing a limited nuclear war strategy.⁵⁵ Rush explained that before she joined the ranks of the anti-war activists, she often admired those who sacrificed themselves for a cause in which they so ardently believed, but she also remained skeptical of the effectiveness of their efforts. With time Rush became more interested, especially in the efforts of Phillip Berrigan, a Catholic Worker who caught her attention through such acts as spilling his own blood on the steps of the Pentagon. Yet, at least initially, Rush could not imagine herself breaking the law to promote peace; in her words: “I couldn’t be traipsing down to the Pentagon, getting arrested. What about my children?” Eventually, Rush’s intellectual conversion came by way of a spiritual revival. In the Book of James, chapter 7 verse 22, she read that only hearing the message of Christ profited nobody; Jesus demanded that believers act upon his words. Rush also noted that for all

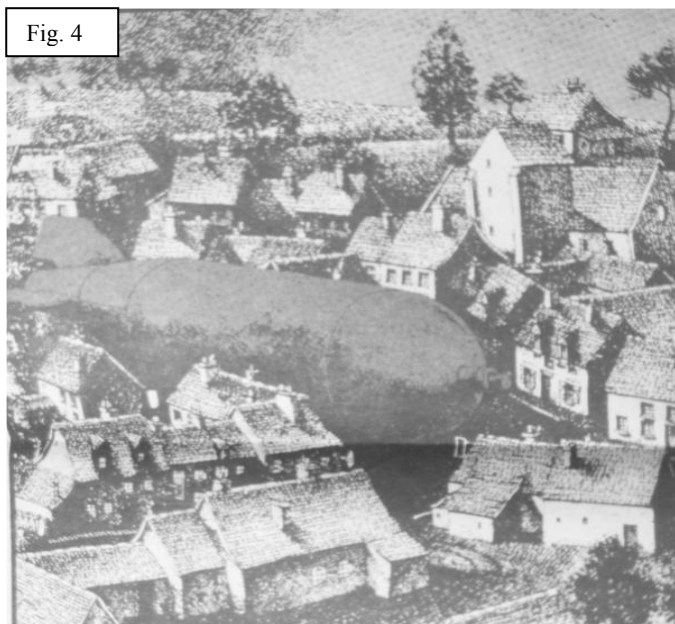


Fig. 4

The picture that accompanied Molly Rush’s article in the June 1981 issue of the Catholic Agitator.

the talk of action, the Bible guaranteed no results, those were left to God. There was no assurance beyond faith that her actions would bring about any positive change, and the Bible did not promise to take care of her children in case of her arrest, but nonetheless the message reached Rush clearly – faith requires action. As she wrote her article, Rush sat in a jail cell awaiting the result of her trial for breaking into the GE missile factory in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania and literally trying to beat a metal nose cone into a plowshare. She wondered

⁵⁵ Molly Rush, “Confronting the Bomb in Our Midst,” *The Catholic Agitator*, June 1981, 1.

about her six children ranging in age from 12 to 25, and about her husband who struggled to understand her choices.⁵⁶

But not all LACW activists were motivated primarily by religious beliefs. Another Catholic Worker who had to overcome personal obstacles on her way to radical activism was Toni Flynn who worked as an editor for *Catholic Agitator* in the 1980s. One of her articles from 1987, “Finding My Way,” like Rush’s, sought to explain how and why Flynn, a seemingly ordinary woman, would block traffic to prevent people from entering the 1987 Winter Convention on Aerospace and Electronic Systems (WINCON), a meeting of military personnel and weapons manufacturers who charted the future direction of military weaponry. But rather than detailing the spiritual aspects of her actions, Flynn volunteered her own psychological reasons for putting herself in such a situation. In her article, Flynn revealed the lasting emotional scars that growing up in a violent home left her. She explained that she was often absent-minded and had trouble following simple directions because her experiences left her extremely introverted.⁵⁷

In an article for the May 1985 *Catholic Agitator*, Flynn explained that her own children, particularly her second son who was born with epilepsy, brain dysfunction, and minor deformities, compelled her to reassess her life’s priorities. Flynn wrote in the article titled “Stained Glass” that as she nursed her son his mal-formed mouth would often spill her breast milk and his small body would spasm sporadically.⁵⁸ Until then Flynn believed that notions of middle class propriety (luxurious cars, condominium living, and a seemingly perfect family) would redeem her from her insecurities. Flynn noted that through her relationship with her son she learned to love and respect the misunderstood, and became drawn to forgotten and neglected members of society.⁵⁹ As such, her civil disobedience at WINCON became a form of therapy and emancipation for her. Being “experientially expert in the

⁵⁶ Ibid, 1-2.

⁵⁷ Toni Flynn, “Finding My Way,” *The Catholic Agitator*, February 1987, 3.

⁵⁸ Toni Flynn, “Stained Glass,” *The Catholic Agitator*, May 1985, 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid

futility of using violence as a means of bringing about peace,” Flynn had a predisposition to join the anti-war movement.⁶⁰

But Flynn’s protest at WINCON was as much about facing her own demons as it was about preventing a nuclear war. Flynn wrote that WINCON was a moment of risk for her, not because of the prospect of going to jail or being hit by one of the vehicles that she blocked at the entrance way, but rather because she risked exposing to authority figures the part of herself that had for years withdrawn timidly when confronted.⁶¹ Flynn did seek God’s help during her protest, praying “for the courage to act within the context of [her] own powerlessness.”⁶² But hers was not an action inspired by religious revelation as was Rush’s, instead Flynn’s revelation came from cumulated life experiences and she found in activism a path to sanity. Whereas Rush sought to fulfill her interpretation of God’s word, Flynn sought to confront and conquer her own fears and insecurities. This is not to say that Flynn’s only or primary goal was selfish – certainly she ultimately desired universal disarmament – but her motivations were her own.

Dietrich and the Anaheim Anti-Militarism Protests

Perhaps the most dramatic protest experience belonged to Jeff Dietrich. In October 1978, Dietrich was arrested for trespassing during a protest at the Military Electronics Expo at the Anaheim Convention Center. A year later, as the Convention Center prepared to host the Expo again, Dietrich and other Catholic Workers decided to circulate a petition seeking signatures from Anaheim residents who opposed having the Expo in their city. Certainly the Workers who volunteered to collect signatures for their petition expected to find resistance and reticence to their cause in Anaheim, the heart of

⁶⁰ Flynn, “Finding My Way,” *The Catholic Agitator*, February 1987, 3.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

conservative Orange County, California.⁶³ Many citizens favored having an arms exposition in their city, but, to the surprise of Dietrich and his supporters, many more residents were also open to the Catholic Workers' perspective and found their arguments compelling. After all, this was not just another gun show; this was a military weapons convention with representatives from various nations who would be looking to buy the latest and deadliest war machinery from US companies. And the industry representatives had a reputation for lapses in discretion, for example in 1978 both Israel and Egypt bought weapons from manufacturers at the Expo.

By the time they had finished asking for signatures, the Catholic Workers had collected over 7000 when they would have been happy with a few hundred. Apparently many more people were interested in and concerned about global peace than commonly thought at the time. Women with children often signed readily, but even one US Marine and a brawny tattooed man added their signatures to the petition. Anaheim's Mayor John Seymour, however, ignored the petition and went ahead with plans to host the arms expo. The Catholic Worker decided to peacefully protest against it.⁶⁴

After sending the Anaheim Police Department information about their plans to protest, the Catholic Workers arrived at the Anaheim Convention Center on October 23, and as they had done the year before, blocked the entrance and allowed themselves to be arrested for trespassing. Anaheim police arrested 36 persons for trespassing at the Military Electronics Expo that day, and the Court of Orange County handed to them all identical sentences of 13 months probation and a \$50 fine. Dietrich, however, along with another protester, Kenton Hoffman, also received charges for violating the probation that they had received for the same protest the previous year. The City Attorney of Anaheim recommended a sentence of 90 days in county jail, but the judge in the case, Justice Robert Fitzgerald, sentenced the two men to six month sentences which he said would be reduced to 30 days if they each wrote a letter

⁶³ Jeff Dietrich, "Pacifists Invade Orange County, and Cliché Falls Victim First," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1979, F5.

⁶⁴ Dietrich, "Pacifists Invade Orange County."

promising not to return to protest the next year. The judge explained that if Dietrich and Hoffman wanted to be martyrs for their cause, he would assist them by sentencing them.⁶⁵

“How devious! How demoralizing! Now the responsibility for remaining in jail was ours alone. All we had to do was write a simple letter and we would be out,” wrote Dietrich in the *Los Angeles Times* under the title “A Pacifist’s Fight to Keep the Courage of his Convictions.”⁶⁶ The word “conviction” carried a double meaning for Dietrich. By struggling to keep to his conviction of pacifism, Dietrich had to struggle to keep his conviction to a six-month jail term. At the start of his sentence, Dietrich found it easy to romanticize about himself as a modern-day Thoreau who refused to compromise his beliefs simply to stay out of jail.⁶⁷ But Thoreau only spent one night in jail, and it certainly was not Orange County Main Jail. In short time, the romanticism wore off as Dietrich daily faced danger which he gladly would have avoided. Beatings, stabbings, and rapes occurred not infrequently, and Dietrich spent much of his time praying not to be the next victim of such an assault.⁶⁸ In letters that he wrote to his wife Catherine Morris, also a Catholic Worker, he explained that being the smallest person in the jail frightened him, but more frightening was the prospect of witnessing a rape or assault. As a Christian Dietrich would have to stand up for the victim in such an attack, but doing so would mark Dietrich as a target and he did not know if he had sufficient courage and faith to expose himself in such a manner. He prayed that God would not test him so.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the jail’s guards and other inmates soon learned of Dietrich’s situation and assured him that his actions meant nothing, that he should write the letter and leave.⁷⁰ Even the jail’s chaplain recommended that Dietrich write the letter and then go to law school where he might acquire the skills necessary to precipitate real change in society. Dietrich found himself praying not only for his personal safety, but for the strength to remain incarcerated as well.⁷¹

⁶⁵Gary Jarlson, “Two Arrested at Military Show Get 6-Month Terms,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1979, OC – A1.

⁶⁶ Jeff Dietrich, “A Pacifist’s Fight to Keep the Courage of His Convictions,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 1980, E5.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jeff Dietrich, *Reluctant Resister* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1983), 38.

⁷⁰ Dietrich, “A Pacifist’s Fight.”

⁷¹ Ibid.

His time in jail taught Dietrich several lessons. The first, and most apparent, seemed to wither Dietrich's ideals. "How naïve I had been," he wrote in the *LA Times*, "to assume that love and nonviolence might ever prevail in the world. We need only go to jail to have such illusions shattered."⁷² In his letters to his wife, Dietrich specifically credited Reinhold Niebuhr's *Beyond Tragedy* for changing his perspective on religion and spirituality.⁷³ And through conversations with other inmates and guards, none of whom thought his pacifism was anything more than a queer anomaly, Dietrich began to see parallels between the survival-of-the-fittest jail life and the anarchy of international politics. In much the same way that inmates spent their time on calisthenics and perfecting their tough aloofness as a self-defense mechanism, so the US could not relinquish one missile or warship, lest that invite attack from a rival.⁷⁴ To say the least, Dietrich's pessimism grew and threatened to overcome his principles.

Dietrich learned another lesson about humanity at the Thanksgiving dinner that he received behind bars. The food, surprisingly, was of high quality and Dietrich could only complain of too much sage in the dressing and too much ginger in the pumpkin pie.⁷⁵ But for all the abundance, the sterility and regimentation of jail stripped the day of any cheer, of any reason to be thankful. Dietrich witnessed the epitome of materialist culture – great food, nominal celebration, and lack of human contact – and recognized it as an empty vessel. Society, Dietrich realized, placed all the importance on the physical ingredients of holidays (and indeed of life), while it disdained the spiritual aspects of celebration: sharing, communion, and brotherhood.⁷⁶

Dietrich's first lesson bruised his notions of humanitarianism, his second convinced him of brotherhood's necessity for spiritual fulfillment, and his third lesson demonstrated to him brotherhood's real power. When Judge Fitzgerald had handed down his sentence to Dietrich and Hoffman, he probably expected to receive their letters in short order. Instead, he received 700 letters from Dietrich and

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Dietrich, *Reluctant Resister*, 30.

⁷⁴ Dietrich, "A Pacifist's Fight."

⁷⁵ Jeff Dietrich, "The Jail Doors Slam Shut on Feeling of Celebration," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1980, D7.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Hoffman's supporters, including one from Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, asking the judge to rescind his sentence.⁷⁷ Fitzgerald could not ignore the letters and the Catholic Workers' resilience and experienced what Dietrich called a profound change of heart. 59 days after their ordeal began, Judge Fitzgerald released Dietrich and Hoffman on Christmas Eve, 1979. Dietrich admitted that his experience seemed to come directly from a nonviolence textbook: extensive media coverage and Dietrich and Hoffman's steadfastness inspired their judge to release them and increased the number of people willing to work against the arms race.⁷⁸

But global events tempered Dietrich's feelings of triumph. As he walked out of jail, Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan and the US seemed poised to engage in armed conflict with Iran. Dietrich wrote to Morris that before he became a Catholic Worker, Carl Jung, Henry Miller, Joseph Heller, Bob Dylan and ancient Greek tragedies informed his worldview. Through the Catholic Worker Dietrich learned of Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, Thomas Merton, and St. John of the Cross. In jail Dietrich learned of Niebuhr and the real world.⁷⁹ There he also lost his naïveté and saw what he called the "brutality and evil of the human heart."⁸⁰ But what he experienced firsthand did not disillusion Dietrich; rather it convinced him of the necessity of the struggle against war, and especially the certainty of the struggle's inevitable victory over violence.⁸¹ That certainty did not dilute his commitment to sacrifice; instead he emerged from jail more committed than ever to paying for peace and justice with his own freedoms and comforts.

In examining the work of America's Cold War protestors, it becomes apparent that shallow descriptions of them as Gandhian archetypes do not suffice. Married women with children such as Molly Rush and Toni Flynn, along with intellectual idealists such as Jeff Dietrich, each battled with their own flaws, skepticisms, and struggles of faith. More powerful than their uncertainties, however, was their commitment to self-sacrifice in the effort for peace. Without missiles and weapons systems to use as

⁷⁷ Jeff Dietrich, "A Pacifists Fight."

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Jeff Dietrich, *Reluctant Resister*, 85

⁸⁰ Dietrich, "A Pacifist's Fight."

⁸¹ Ibid.

bargaining chips, they could offer only themselves and their labor to their cause. In any peaceful way they could, they worked to obstruct the momentum of militarism. Some refused to pay taxes both as a matter of protest and to clear their consciences of support for militarism. Many more chose to obstruct militarism by announcing their disapproval of war and physically blocking access to arms expos and other militarist conventions.

This begs the questions, though, of why these people, to the exclusion of others, participated in the peace movement in the way they did. Certainly, the ominous specter of nuclear war seemed to loom near, and even if it never actually occurred, nobody wanted her or his children to inherit a world crippled by the threat of nuclear annihilation. For some, such as Molly Rush, combating militarism was a matter of faith. Through the Bible, God commanded action. In order to truly follow Christ, one had to bear his or her own cross and follow Christ's path. For those who devoted themselves to this notion, Jesus' admonitions to love thy enemy and bolster one's faith through actions constituted more than mere suggestions; they, in fact, demanded as much obedience as Moses' Ten Commandments. For others, such as Toni Flynn, protest provided a method to transcend the lingering effects of traumatic experiences. Flynn's abusive childhood left her an introverted and acquiescent adult. By placing herself in the path of cars trying to enter the Winter Convention on Aerospace and Electronic Systems, Flynn at once offered her vulnerability to the police officer who arrested her while facing and overcoming her fears of confrontation. Through protest, Flynn discovered and tested all the courage she could muster. And for some, such as Jeff Dietrich, protest was quite simply a necessary aspect of adherence to one's convictions. Many claimed to support world peace, but only some truly lived for it. By sacrificing himself, Dietrich tested the limits of his convictions. Dietrich tested also the compatibility of his beliefs with the real world. Had he never struggled through an ordeal such as his time at Orange County Main Jail, he might not have lost the naïveté that often hindered idealists and their causes.

Of course, each of the people examined above exhibited in different ways the characteristics of fear, faith, personal growth, and commitment to ideals. Each theme, in some ways, is a variation and

reinforcement of the others. Most importantly, each person's ultimate goal, despite the method or reason for protest, remained world peace. Without doubt they all knew how unlikely their small actions were to produce an end to global conflict, but inaction meant complicity, and complicity in war was as unacceptable to them as direct action in its execution.

Working on Poverty

For Catholic Workers, an inextricable link existed between militarism and poverty.⁸² Because government spending priorities focused on weaponry and war they neglected the needs of poor Americans. According to *The Catholic Agitator*, of the average \$5,767 that each American family paid in taxes for 1986, \$115 went to housing, \$126 for education, \$138 for food and nutrition, and \$3,105 went to defense spending.⁸³ The money that did make its way to social programs, inevitably, ended up spread thin between those who needed it. In 1980, 1.1 million residents of Los Angeles County alone relied on some type of welfare program.⁸⁴ From 1978 to 1979, the number of Americans nation-wide who joined the food stamps program grew by 4 million; but during this same period, new regulations lowered the maximum allowable income for participation and subsequently forced 600,000 people off of the program. Statistics from the early 1980s also demonstrate that impoverished persons spent on average 90% of their incomes on the barest necessities of food, shelter, and medicine. Moreover, the 24,000 subsidized rental housing units in Los Angeles did not provide nearly enough rooms for the city's poor families, and spawned a 10,000 person waiting list. 30,000 people crowded the waiting list for rent subsidies, but that number did not reflect the roughly 70,000 whose applications were suspended because the wait was so long.⁸⁵

Into this overburdened housing situation, thousands of undocumented workers (mostly from Mexico) crowded into Los Angeles throughout the 1970s and 1980s in hopes of working their way into a piece of prosperity. Without access to government programs, most took jobs in the city's garment

⁸² Kathleen Hendrix, "The 'Troublemakers' of Skid Row," *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1980, G1.

⁸³ "Your Tax Dollars at Work," *The Catholic Agitator*, October 1980, 7.

⁸⁴ Bob Specter, "Inflation a Double Threat for Welfare Recipients," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 1980, B1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

factories or worked at other low-level jobs. Without much money and with no hope of even joining a waiting list for subsidized housing, most immigrant families moved into downtown Los Angeles' various aging and decrepit hotels. There, a family could rent a 10'x10' room, and for three-times the normal rent could have a stove and a refrigerator.⁸⁶

It did not take long for Catholic Workers in LA to grow accustomed to the alcoholics, drug addicts, homeless, and derelicts of Skid Row; but in the late 1970s, with an influx of Mexican families into the area, substantial numbers of children of all ages emerged amid the squalor.⁸⁷ Without a park or even a schoolyard nearby, the children of Skid Row played in streets and alleys strewn with broken glass, garbage, and countless other health hazards. The teenagers in the area typically engaged in crimes that ranged from petty vandalism to setting small fires and beating up homeless people.⁸⁸ Jeff Dietrich noticed two young boys from the neighborhood whose activities, emblematic of the area, troubled the Catholic Workers and helped inspire a new Catholic Worker project. Dietrich wrote about the two young brothers, Juan and Raul, and about how they influenced Worker strategies, in an article for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1981.

Juan and Raul's antics, Dietrich explained, began as fairly innocuous ballgames in the street but soon grew into dangerous and somewhat sadistic games of throwing rocks at homeless people or trying to light cats on fire.⁸⁹ Few could miss how desperately Skid Row needed some type of safe, structured place for children to spend their time. When a vacant lot next to their soup kitchen became available for rent, the Catholic Worker immediately snatched it up. Right away the group began raising funds and seeking input and ideas on how to design an inexpensive but indestructible playground in the 50'x100' space.⁹⁰ Local Catholic parishes provided much of the needed funding, while the Southern California Institute of Architecture, which had experience building playgrounds in Tijuana, Mexico, provided the

⁸⁶ Jeff Dietrich, "There Are Children Lurking Within Even Skid Row's Savages in Training," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1980, G5.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Mehren, "Skid Row Playground: The Best Game in Town," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1980, G1.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Dietrich, "There Are Children."

⁹⁰ Ibid.

design.⁹¹ The design employed mostly recycled industrial leftovers, such as old automobile tires, 50-gallon oil drums, and telephone poles.⁹² When their delivery of 150 tons of sand arrived, Catholic Worker volunteers set out with only three wheelbarrows, five shovels, and a small red wagon to spread it into a usable foundation.⁹³ Six weeks after they began renting the property, the Workers opened Skid Row's first playground on Tuesday July 1, 1980.⁹⁴ That morning forty local children played on swings made from old tires and snacked on watermelons provided by the Worker. Structured activities supervised by volunteers kept the children occupied and out of trouble.⁹⁵ Juan and Raul, the boys whose delinquency provided part of the impetus for the playground, shifted their attentions from destruction to creativity and spent their time learning how to make hand puppets and butterfly kites.⁹⁶

Juan and Raul's antics aroused a series of emotions in the Catholic Workers who witnessed them everyday. Dietrich described the Workers' emotions as "Sympathy to anger to frustration – and then to action."⁹⁷ The action, building a playground, required a commitment from all involved. As with the case of the 150 tons of sand, the work could get done, especially with so few tools, only if everybody put in a share of the labor. Getting the labor did not require convincing as many people as possible to help, but everybody convincing her or himself to lend a hand. This attitude of personal responsibility helped give rise to the Catholic Worker's next, more ambitious project.

The problem for Skid Row's children did not constitute simply the lack of a place to play. With both of their parents forced to work everyday to pay for basic necessities, Skid Row's kids had no supervision or discipline; children not yet into their teens often had to forego school in order to take care of their younger siblings.⁹⁸ Before the playground existed, the Catholic Worker and other philanthropic groups in the area knew that Skid Row needed some type of daycare center. In 1980 a \$5000 grant from

⁹¹ Mehren, "Skid Row Playground."

⁹² Dietrich, "There Are Children."

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Mehren, "Skid Row Playground."

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Dietrich, "There Are Children."

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ "Para Los Ninos: A Vision on Skid Row," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1980, C8.

the Atlantic Richfield Foundation helped the Catholic Worker, along with the Missionary Brothers of Charity and others, to lease an abandoned warehouse on the corner of 6th and Gladys Streets for the purpose of converting it into Para Los Niños, “For the Children,” a daycare center in the middle of Skid Row. Within a few months the organizations raised over \$100,000, hired a staff, and opened the center. Although initial plans called for the enrollment of 100 of the area’s children, within a few years Para Los Niños served closer to 450 through its various programs. Los Angeles’ *Herald Examiner* reported on one woman, Eva Covis, a recent Mexican immigrant who learned about Para Los Niños from a priest at a local church. When she had work, Covis could earn \$20 per week and have a place to stay, but unmarried and with two kids, she often found it difficult to keep even basic housekeeping jobs. Without work, she often slept on the streets. Through Para Los Niños she came into contact with the Catholic Workers who offered her work in their Justice Bakery.⁹⁹ She also met her future husband through the Catholic Worker and with the organization’s help the couple raised a family and worked their way out of poverty.¹⁰⁰

It is difficult to assess how typical Covis’ experiences with the Catholic Worker are, but what is clear is how typical her case was among those who received assistance in some form from the Los Angeles Catholic Worker.

Poverty affected more than just people’s ability to find a decent place to live, it also limited their ability to maintain their health. If a family spent 90% of its income on basic necessities, an illness could pose the double threat of eliminating income while drastically increasing expenses. Furthermore, homeless persons suffered from their own set of dual threats which stemmed from distrust of medical establishments and the inability to obtain treatment for common illnesses. To explain the situation, *The Catholic Agitator* printed an article from the *Annals of Internal Medicine* by Dr. Phillip Brickner which listed and explained the most common diseases among homeless, such as trauma and pulmonary infections, and how those common and relatively harmless ailments often grew more dangerous through

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Eva Covis by Leonardo Covis, December 10, 2006, Ontario, CA.

neglect and the unsanitary conditions of life on the street.¹⁰¹ Brickner recommended that healthcare providers work to overcome homeless persons' alienation and fear of medical facilities in order to provide proper diagnoses and treatment, and to collect useful data.¹⁰² But Jeff Dietrich pointed out in an article in the same issue of *The Agitator* that "both in philosophy and actual practice, the medical profession has isolated itself from the needs of the poor with a complex, arcane bureaucracy and expensive, inappropriate technology."¹⁰³ In order to ameliorate the situation, the LA Catholic Worker opened Hospitality Free Clinic in 1976 in some spare rooms at the back of their soup kitchen. The clinic began with one doctor and several volunteers who twice a week scrubbed every inch of the clinic's space with disinfectant.¹⁰⁴ Through the years Hospitality Clinic's reputation grew in the medical and Skid Row communities by attracting what Dietrich called professionals with a desire to practice medicine in a context that invited the poor in, rather than one that excluded them. 10 years after it opened Hospitality Free Clinic had a robust, dedicated volunteer staff and its own building across from the soup kitchen.¹⁰⁵ By then, Dr. Rosemary Occhiogrosso ran the clinic and she, along with other members of the staff, shared her experiences and motivations in *The Agitator*.

Many of Occhiogrosso's experiences revealed the intrinsic shortcomings of the medical care system, especially in terms of meeting the needs of the poor. In *The Agitator*, she wrote about a man named Martin who, despite obvious signs of acute alcoholic liver disease, had been released by Harbor General Hospital and referred to a detox center. The detox center refused to admit Martin because he was so sick, and as a last resort he went to Hospitality Free Clinic, seeking nothing more than a place to rest. Occhiogrosso called the doctor in charge of liver service at Los Angeles County General Hospital and arranged for Martin to be helped through the system until he received the treatment he needed.

¹⁰¹ Phillip Brickner, "Homeless Healthcare," *The Catholic Agitator*, July 1986, 3.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Jeff Dietrich, "Compassion," *The Catholic Agitator*, July 1986, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Martin's story illustrated how the medical establishment could neglect its responsibilities through carelessness.

Another story, that of a man named Michael, illustrated how poverty made it difficult for Skid Row residents to receive proper medical care even when the system met its responsibilities. Three weeks before he showed up at Hospitality Clinic, Michael had been stabbed and robbed on the street, and treated for his trauma at County Hospital. But, still suffering from a collapsed lung, Michael missed his follow-up appointment at the hospital because he had no bus fare and the pain in his chest prevented him from walking the three miles to County General. Occhiogrosso assumed she simply had to reschedule Michael's appointment for a later time that day, but after several frustrating phone calls Occhiogrosso could not get an appointment scheduled for sooner than three weeks later. Unwilling to send him to the emergency room where he would no doubt spend several hours waiting to see a nurse, Hospitality Clinic treated Michael as best it could for a possible pneumonia while he waited for his next hospital appointment three weeks later.¹⁰⁶

Occhiogrosso recognized that her work at the clinic helped at least some of its clients, but many others came to Hospitality Clinic with ailments beyond the staff's ability to help. One such client was Lupe, who was seven months pregnant but had received no prenatal care. She came to Hospitality Clinic with an infection of her amniotic fluid and within five minutes of her arrival gave birth to a premature, 2 lb baby girl. A week after she was born, the baby died. Occhiogrosso admitted that the sheer number and magnitude of the cases at Hospitality Clinic overwhelmed its staff, yet they continued to work through numerous successes and setbacks. Like most of the volunteers, Occhiogrosso had a family and career beyond the clinic.¹⁰⁷ She continued with her goal of keeping Los Angeles' poor out of the overstretched and impersonal county system because of the moral imperative she felt to keep people from

¹⁰⁶ Rosemary Occhiogrosso, "In the Flesh," *The Catholic Agitator*, July 1986, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

“getting lost through the cracks.”¹⁰⁸ Certainly this commitment strained Occhiogrosso’s family and professional life, yet she persisted volunteering her time at the clinic. Like most Catholic Workers, Occhiogrosso lived with a firm faith that what she did with the organization constituted more than charity, rather it was an ethical imperative. Like Mother Theresa, Occhiogrosso believed that “What we give to the poor is what we take with us when we die.”¹⁰⁹

The other volunteers at the clinic developed personal and spiritual attachments to their work as well. These attachments at times led to the cultivation of close friendships, while at other times close relationships with Skid Row’s poor led to tragic experiences. One such experience happened to Bud Hubbard who worked as a therapeutic recovery physician at a large Los Angeles hospital. Through his volunteer work at the clinic Hubbard treated and befriended a local child named Martin (not the same Martin mentioned earlier). Hubbard took Martin into his home where he befriended Hubbard’s children and became like a member of the family. On a visit back to his old neighborhood one night however, Martin was stabbed and killed. Yet, despite that heartbreak, or perhaps because of it, Hubbard devoted himself more fully to the service of the poor. Hubbard explained in *The Agitator* that he continued to work for the poor because although he could not call it easy, he believed that as a Christian, God called him to put his faith into action.¹¹⁰

An examination of articles in *The Catholic Agitator* through the 1970s and 1980s reveals that personal relationships such as that between Hubbard and Martin commonly developed. Mostly through daily work at the soup kitchen, Catholic Workers met and befriended the people who came to collect free meals or used clothes. Workers often shared in rich detail the full spectrum of their sentiments in these relationships, from doubt to invigoration, from pain to love.

Meg Baum offered one such story in the May 1985 issue of *The Agitator*. Baum joined the LA Catholic Worker in 1983 hoping to find in it a venue for intellectual and spiritual stimulation, but after a

¹⁰⁸ Angela Jones, “A Dedicated Core of Compassionate Volunteers Are the Heartbeat of Hospitality Free Medical Clinic,” *The Catholic Agitator*, July 1986, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

short while she found that a life of serving the poor afforded little opportunity to wax philosophical with her colleagues.¹¹¹ Instead she found herself relishing opportunities to read *Ladies Home Journal* in the checkout line at the supermarket where she bought supplies for the soup kitchen. She admitted to moving through a “daily fog of exhaustion” which stifled her intellectual inclinations. As Baum drifted toward disillusionment however, she met and found what she called adventure with her “crotchety old friend” Sarah, one of the women living at Hennacy House. Baum haphazardly befriended the woman who, suffering from organic brain damage, spent most of her days complaining that she needed clean pants. Sarah’s delusions – her incessant demand for clean pants, coupled with hostility and abusiveness – often wore on Baum’s patience and led at times to ugly confrontations. But Baum explained that the difficulties in their relationship taught her how to love more bravely and less selfishly. As her illness worsened, Sarah became progressively more difficult to love, but that also made her lucid moments precious and Baum learned to appreciate their friendship on a deeper level. Baum described her life as fragments of a friendship pulled out of a day overfilled with work to do.

Baum’s experience fit squarely with the outlines of the Catholic Worker’s ideology. She had joined with a level of naïveté that one would expect in a young person willing to work for three dollars per week on Skid Row, but soon the realities of daily life in the soup kitchen wore on Baum’s ideals. Yet, like Dietrich before her, she rebuilt those ideals on sturdier foundations as she worked her way through hardships. Through her relationship with Sarah, Baum gained a more profound understanding of love and community. Baum wrote that rather than highlighting her shortcomings, Sarah’s friendship redeemed her from her failures.¹¹²

Catholic Worker life on Skid Row did not challenge only Baum’s ideals. The routines of endless work in the soup kitchen made it difficult for the volunteers to appreciate the fruits of their labors. In the February 1976 issue of *The Catholic Agitator*, Michael Dietzel shared her own struggles with the realities of Catholic Worker life. Working in the soup kitchen, Dietzel related that the nameless faces of

¹¹¹ Meg Baum, “A Bit of Painful Love,” *The Catholic Agitator*, May 1985, 5.

¹¹² Ibid.

the hundreds of people who came through each day, especially in winter, tended to dishearten her.¹¹³

Dietzel wrote that the anonymity and monotony of the work at times threatened to destroy her “hope of ever realizing the Kingdom of God on earth.” Even in the most desperate times however, Dietzel gained strength from the people she served. In their own ways, through their own sacrifices, the nameless and homeless of Skid Row helped Dietzel recognize the effect her actions had on the community. One man bought a rose with the last of the money he received from selling his plasma to a commercial blood bank and presented it to the workers at the soup kitchen. Dietzel also recalled her experience with a barefoot woman who one day gave her a ten dollar bill as payment for all the meals she had eaten despite Dietzel’s explanation that they were free. Dietzel knew the woman could not afford to give away ten dollars, but she could not convince the woman to keep it. Catholic Workers did not have a monopoly on self-sacrifice and altruism, Dietzel learned. The actions of those impoverished persons who gave so much from their meager resources inspired Dietzel to challenge herself and persevere through difficult times, and to give more of herself to her work.¹¹⁴

Through protests, Catholic Workers demonstrated their willingness to challenge their ideals and sacrifice their freedoms in order to resist militarism. Through their labor, Catholic Workers demonstrated their solidarity with the poor and willingness to share their hardships. By sharing their hardships, they developed a keen understanding of what the poor needed, and what they did not need. Homeless people did not need to confront endless bureaucracies when they sought medical care. Poor families did not need more empty lots and dangerous alleyways as they endeavored to build communities. Neither did the poor need empty pitying. They did all need a sense of responsibility and personal regard for each other. Catholic Workers often began their work with altruistic idealism, but that idealism soon diminished in the face of the realities of life on Skid Row. However, many Catholic Worker volunteers overcame disillusionment and attained a more profound understanding of what it meant to live among the poor. This pattern repeated itself throughout the Catholic Worker’s years in Los

¹¹³ Michaele Dietzel, “Journal,” *Catholic Agitator*, February 1976, 3.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Angeles as some volunteers moved on and others joined. Each time the pattern of emotions revealed different aspects of each person who experienced it. Clearly, some volunteers over the years have left due to such disillusion, but most developed a sense of virtue from their sacrifices.

For example, Jeff Dietrich, having spent time in county jail had a personal understanding of why children such as Juan and Raul needed help being children. In their increasingly sadistic games Dietrich saw the seeds of boys who would grow up with nothing more to look forward to than prison.¹¹⁵ Rather than give into discouragement however, Dietrich focused his efforts on securing a brighter future for Skid Row's children by providing them the tools and venues that allowed them to be curious, playful, creative human beings.

In some cases though, no amount of goodwill could reverse the effects of years of living in substandard conditions. Dr. Rosemary Occhiogrosso learned to understand this before long at Hospitality Free Clinic. In an area where few residents knew of the existence of prenatal care and where alcohol often provided the only respite from life's trials, cases like those of Lupe and Martin would commonly arise. Also common would be the tragedies of friendships forged and lost to violence, such as that between Ben Hubbard and Martin. Through it all the clinic's volunteers clung to an abiding spiritualism and faith in the ultimate triumph of God's will. Hubbard volunteered his time and sacrificed peace of mind because he believed God commanded him to do so. Occhiogrosso's statement of receiving in death what she gave the poor in life denotes an expectation of spiritual, not worldly, dividends for her work. Furthermore, because the Worker strove to break down distinctions between the server and served, because they embraced the poverty that they sought to alleviate, they inevitably formed friendships with the people of Skid Row. The personalism that they professed manifested itself in the form of a relationship between coequal peers, rather than charitable Samaritan and lowly receiver of goodwill.

The philosophy of service and voluntary poverty should have brought the Catholic Worker into a close relationship with the clergy of the Catholic Church which also vowed to embrace voluntary

¹¹⁵ Jeff Dietrich, "There Are Children."

poverty. Indeed, many priests (but not only Roman Catholics) cultivated a close relationship with the Worker; but the LACW did not endear itself to the ecclesia as a whole, which, to the LACW, spent an undue amount of resources to promote the image of its own grandeur. In 1985 the College of American Bishops of the Catholic Church issued a pastoral letter dealing with economic injustice in the US. The letter's rhetoric promoted fair wages and economic equity, but the LACW could not help but sense that the bishops did not intend to live out what they preached. A *Catholic Agitator* article from February of that year noted that the vast majority of the American Catholic Church's wealth supported the "sacramental cult" which lavished the clergy with silk vestments and housekeepers.¹¹⁶ The article's author, Bob Miller, went on to suggest that a genuine desire for economic justice by the clergy would yield profound and visible changes in the church. As he explained it:

Bishops might have to drive used cars or (dare I suggest it?) take the bus to work. (The very fact that the idea of a bus-riding bishop seems incongruous to us tells us something about our association of religious authority with wealth, despite Luke 16:13).¹¹⁷

In 1979 Pope John Paul II visited the United States and spoke bluntly and, to many like-minded Catholics, bravely about issues such as consumerism, abortion, family life, and disarmament, but he left Catherine Morris unimpressed.¹¹⁸ Anybody could speak about those salient issues, but if the new pope wanted to affect change, Morris suggested he begin with himself; perhaps he could sell the Vatican's treasures to feed Cambodians or fast until the world's super powers ended their hostilities.¹¹⁹

As the Catholic Worker saw it, poverty was not a necessary condition of society, or if it was, the suffering associated with it did not need to be so extreme. Unreformed governments and the church, in their detachment from the living realities of penury, could not hope to effectively end the problems of homelessness, poor nutrition, or the malaise of an unproductive life that led in many cases to substance

¹¹⁶ Bob Miller, "the Economics of the Bishops' Letter" *The Catholic Agitator*, February 1985, 2.

¹¹⁷ Ibid; Luke 16:13 states, "No man can serve two masters. He will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot love God and mammon." *The Catholic Answer Bible* (Wichita, KS: Fireside Catholic Publishing, 2002), 1120.

¹¹⁸ Catherine Morris, "Pope John Paul" *The Catholic Agitator*, November 1979, 3.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

abuse or crime. Although they provided a necessary service, government programs such as welfare, laden with bureaucracy and constantly under threat to have their budgets cut, could not solve the problems of the poor. In essence, as they were, government and church could do little to halt the cycle of poverty, especially when their spending priorities fed the cycle in many ways. Catholic Workers therefore put themselves in the midst of the cycle, not only through their labor, but with their complete lives. Unlike the work of some missionary organizations or charities, Catholic Worker work was not a day job, it was a way of life.

Conclusion

The Los Angeles Catholic Worker keeps an archive of back issues of *The Catholic Agitator* in the garage at Hennacy House. Dusty storage boxes, tucked away file cabinets, and stuffed-full bookshelves hold crumbling old copies of the newspapers that date as far back as 1970. The newspapers provide valuable information about LACW activities and how contemporary events shaped the Worker's priorities. But for a chronological history of events, developments, victories, and tragedies, the Los Angeles Catholic Worker relies on the memories and oral histories of its two longest tenured members, Jeff Dietrich and Catherine Morris, who have been with the group since 1972. *The Catholic Agitator* for instance, did not run a story explaining that by the late 1980s Hospitality Free Clinic, designed to serve people from the immediate area, had a reputation that reached and attracted people from as far away as Mexico. By 1992 the clinic had become a victim of its own success and the LACW shut it down. Now it opens as an unstructured clinic for a few hours five days a week. The playground on Skid Row also became a victim of success after a concerted effort in the late 1980s to empty downtown's rundown hotels of families. As the city enforced housing codes and children moved out of the neighborhood, the playground fell into disuse, and eventually became nothing more than another vacant lot on Skid Row.

The Justice Bakery did not become a victim of its own success. Rather, after years of running it without profit, health code violation fines forced Tony Trafecanty to close it down. *Nuestra Tienda* also closed in the 80s. One of the LACW's operating guidelines for any project is to not run it for longer than

it is needed. So as residents of Skid Row moved away or acquired cars and grocery stores began delivery services, *Nuestra Tienda's* need on Skid Row ran out.

Other LACW projects fared better, however. The daycare center *Para Los Niños* continues to offer hundreds of downtown Los Angeles' children a safe, constructive, and educational place to spend their days. And what began as a small legal advisory office in the late 1970s is now the Inner City Law Center, a fully independent law office that offers a range of free legal services to those who need them. In 1987, after an earthquake, the City of Los Angeles condemned and demolished Hospitality Kitchen and Zedakah House. Soon after, however, the LACW built a new kitchen on the site, and the group continues to serve hundreds of free meals per day out of its new Hospitality Kitchen. Today, the volunteers' weekly stipend has ballooned to \$15 per week.

The LACW also never lost its calling for civil disobedience, and world events ensured that the group would always have something against which to protest. As of this writing, the LACW is planning an act of civil disobedience at a local military recruiting station on March 19 to mark the fourth anniversary of the war in Iraq. Several, including Dietrich, expect to be arrested.

Interestingly, this dual sense of duty – for the poor and against militarism – makes the Catholic Worker unique among dissent groups, but has also caused many internal difficulties. Many members, or would-be members, could devote themselves wholeheartedly to one mission, but not see how it related to the other. Some would openly argue that it made no sense to close the soup kitchen to drive to a nuclear test site in Nevada and get arrested for trespassing. Others saw no inherent conflict, believing as Catherine Morris put it, that the Catholic Worker “works with the poor because they are the victims of the priorities of this country [i.e. militarism and war].”¹²⁰

Over the years *Catholic Agitators* periodically contained invitations and sign-up forms for acts of civil disobedience. In October 1979 the invitation to join the protest against the Military Electronics Exposition in Anaheim (which then precipitated the two-month saga in jail for Jeff Dietrich and Kent

¹²⁰ Interview with Morris.

Hoffman) proclaimed that “Responsibility has taken on a more difficult, frightening, and costly face. . . . The international trade in weapons is, quite simply, the wholesale merchandising of death. . . . Step Forth.”¹²¹ The form stated that demonstrators would almost certainly be arrested for blocking the entrance to the Expo. Other invitations to join other protest events made it clear to anyone who would join: participation means seriously risking jail time.

The Catholic Agitators featured the same blunt attitude when asking for volunteers in other areas. In 1986, needing a dentist at Hospitality Free Clinic, *The Agitator* stated: “Hospitality Free Clinic needs volunteer dentists to work in our extraction clinic. Please ask your dentist if he/she would be interested in helping to provide this much needed service on Skid Row.”¹²² This no frills attitude to asking for volunteers speaks to the Catholic Worker’s prevailing faith. They believed that God would provide what they needed, and they could do without the rest. The prevailing faith also provided the bridge between poverty and militarism, the Catholic Worker’s two main venues of work. By attempting to live out the belief that all people are members of the mystical body of Christ and therefore worthy of all dignity, it logically followed that all war – in fact all violence – was immoral, and that the suffering of the poor could not be tolerated. To them, it was an unfortunate fact that American society, by ignoring the poor through its pursuit of a powerful military, perpetuated both of these problems. Therefore members of the Catholic Worker felt that they had no choice but to attack both with equal vigor. Lawrence Wittner claims in *Rebels Against War* that disarmament groups suffered a decrease in members but not in vitality in the late years of the Cold War, but he does not explain how that phenomenon could have occurred. My study of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker demonstrates that by adopting a broad focus (work for justice, rather than work exclusively for disarmament) organizations could maintain their convictions and social significance.

Throughout the Cold War years, the LACW worked in several different dual capacities. For instance, religious beliefs and spiritualism manifested themselves physically in work for the poor. Of

¹²¹ *The Catholic Agitator*, October 1979, 3.

¹²² “On the Line: Dentists,” *The Catholic Agitator*, October 1986, 7.

particular interest is the relationship between individual decision and collective action in the anarchist group. For the Catholic Worker, this relationship was similar to that which bound militarism and poverty in that it was self-perpetuating. The group compelled nobody to act in any particular manner, but the collection of like-minded people found that their actions produced better results when they combined their efforts; and the more successful their actions, the more people they attracted. Further, one could explore the interaction between Catholic Worker's faith in the unity of all people in the mystical body of Christ and the reality of world politics punctuated by war and a nuclear arms race. This duality, for those who faced it, such as Molly Rush and the Plowshare 8 or Jeff Dietrich in jail, often became a radicalizing rather than discouraging factor. If all people shared in the dignity of Christ, how could one do nothing while the world neared annihilation?

The people who joined the Los Angeles Catholic Worker all had their own reasons and their own personal hurdles to clear before they could sacrifice themselves entirely to the organization's idealistic cause. They were neither born activists nor professional organizers, but each of those who committed themselves eventually came to recognize that the ultimate goal of the movement was the creation of a society and culture based on human dignity in which universal justice motivated the populace. In short, they strove for nothing less than the establishment of what they viewed as the Kingdom of God on earth.

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