

What is the Catholic Worker?

Jim Forest

1997

The Catholic Worker movement was founded in 1933 during the Great Depression by Dorothy Day at the urging of Peter Maurin. It is best known for houses of hospitality located in run-down sections of many cities, though a number of Catholic Worker centers exist in rural areas. Food, clothing, shelter and welcome is extended by unpaid volunteers to those in need according to the ability of each household. In 1995 there were 134 Catholic Worker communities, all but three in the United States.

“Our rule is the works of mercy,” said Dorothy Day. “It is the way of sacrifice, worship, a sense of reverence.”

The Catholic Worker is also the name of a newspaper published by the Catholic Worker community in New York City. From 1933 until her death in 1980, the editor was Dorothy Day, a journalist who was received into the Catholic Church in 1927. Writers for the paper have ranged from young volunteers to such notable figures as Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan and Jacques Maritain. (Many Catholic Worker communities publish newsletters or journals chiefly for local distribution.)

Beyond hospitality, Catholic Worker communities are known for activity in support of labor unions, human rights, cooperatives, and the development of a nonviolent culture. Those active in the Catholic Worker are often pacifists people seeking to live an unarmed, nonviolent life. During periods of military conscription, Catholic Workers have been conscientious objectors to military service. Many of those active in the Catholic Worker movement have been jailed for acts of protest against racism, unfair labor practices, social injustice and war.

Catholic Worker communities have refused to apply for federal tax exempt status, seeing such official recognition as binding the community to the state and limiting the movement’s freedom.

With its stress on voluntary poverty, the Catholic Worker has much in common with the early Franciscans, while its accent on community, prayer and hospitality has Benedictine overtones.

“We try to shelter the homeless and give them clothes,” Dorothy Day explained, “but there is strong faith at work. We pray. If an outsider who comes to visit us doesn’t pay attention to our prayings and what that means, then he’ll miss the whole point.”

It is unlikely that any religious community was ever less structured than the Catholic Worker. Each community is autonomous. There is no board of directors, no sponsor, no system of governance, no endowment, no pay checks, no pension plans. Since Dorothy Day’s death, there has been no central leader.

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Retrieved on March 16, 2025 from <https://catholicworker.org/forest-history-html/>
This essay was written by Jim Forest on the Catholic Worker Movement for The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History to be published by the Liturgical Press.

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