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An Interview with Tom Cornell

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Tom Cornell has been a part of the Catholic Worker movement for more than sixty years. He started in 1953 when he was nineteen years old. By then, the movement, founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, had been around for twenty years. Day was still leading the movement, and Cornell often worked with her, especially as a writer and editor for the Catholic Worker newspaper, to which he still contributes. He has also been a leading peace activist, one of the first to publicly protest the Vietnam War. Tom's wife Monica was born into a Catholic Worker family; her parents joined shortly after its founding.

Tom and Monica have lived for many years at the Peter Maurin Farm in Marlborough, New York, about seventy miles north of New York City. Tom and Monica's dedication to the corporal works of mercy is evident as soon as you meet them. The farm functions as a house of hospitality for the formerly homeless and for men recovering from addiction or struggling with physical or mental impairments. The farm also provides rooms for a few volunteers and, occasionally, visiting guests.

The following interview took place primarily in the kitchen of the farm's "Green House." Most of the men live in a second

house, called the “White House,” which includes a communal dining room and a chapel. There are a few other buildings on the farm, including a hermitage in the woods and a small residence for a beekeeper, who also serves as caretaker of the walking trails on the farm’s property (about fifty acres). The organic farm supplies most of the food for the residents, as well as fresh produce for St. Joseph House and Maryhouse, Manhattan’s two Catholic Worker houses. The Peter Maurin Farm also brings produce to a soup kitchen in Newburgh, New York.

Wayne Sheridan: Thank you, Tom, for welcoming me back to Peter Maurin Farm, and for sitting down for an interview on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the Catholic Worker movement.

Tom Cornell: There was a period of time, about ten years—five during the time of Dorothy’s final illness, and five years after her death—during which the future of the movement was much in doubt. Dorothy was such a dominant figure. She really held everything together. We have, however, managed to survive and grow, with much trial and error.

As you know, Peter Maurin Farm is one of the Catholic Worker houses. We are part of the New York Catholic Workers, which include St. Joseph House and Maryhouse in Manhattan and, of course, the *Catholic Worker* newspaper. I suppose we might be called a sort of “mother house” of the movement. Today I believe there are about 217 houses worldwide, 195 in the United States—the most in our history.

Peter Maurin Farm is quite engrossing for all of us. Monica, my wife, is really the heart and soul of the place. And Tommy, our son, runs the farming operation and does most of the maintenance. And I? Well, I’m not sure what I do besides hang out and help where I can.

WS: You still write often?

TC: Well, I do write when I can. A twenty-nine-page article of mine on “Christian Anarchism” has just been published in Vienna, in German. They seemed very pleased with it. And *American Catholic Studies* will be publishing an article I wrote about the Catholic Worker’s relationship to Communism, Communists, and the Communist Party. I am pleased with that.

I’ve been active in a new group called Catholic Scholars for Equal Justice whose meeting in California I was able to attend and about which I wrote recently in the *Catholic Worker*. The organization and the article have had a very, very positive response. But I’m not able to travel or write as much as I’d like to because of age.

WS: When were you born?

TC: I was born in 1934. The world seemed very stable to me when I was young, especially the Catholic world. We still had the same pope two years after I finished college as we did when I was very young—that was Pius XII, of course.

WS: I haven’t been involved with the Catholic Worker movement since my years in college some decades ago. But it seems to me that the core values of the organization have not changed—that is, the focus remains on the practice of the corporal works of mercy and peace work.

TC: “Peace activism,” to be precise. In fact “activism” is a very apt word for all we try to do. In the Bible we read, “I was hungry and you fed me.” It does not say, “I was hungry and you formed a committee”! Our thing is just getting down and doing it. And that’s what keeps us sane. A perfectionist group like ours can get off the track by becoming a little sect, but we try to avoid that by being grounded in reality.

WS: What reality keeps you grounded?

TC: The poor. People come to the Catholic Worker, and even if they stay only a few years, or even just a few months,

they often find their vocation. Few of us aspire to living among the poor as a career path. But, our modus operandi is direct action and works of mercy in small intentional communities. We live in voluntary poverty. There is no distinction between staff and guests. That's the way it has always been, and it's been fun.

In fact, John Cort, the socialist leader [and a former *Commonweal* editor], remembered when he first met Dorothy. She was giving a talk and she seemed to be having so much fun that he thought, "I might like to try that too. Have some of that fun." So he became a Catholic Worker.

WS: You mentioned that there was a young Muslim man staying at St. Joseph's House in the city. How long has he been a resident there?

TC: About a year, maybe a bit longer. He goes to a mosque on Tenth or Eleventh Street. It's a bit conservative. He's a resident volunteer at St. Joseph's and he helps around the house.

WS: What do you mean by "conservative"?

TC: The mosque does not have interfaith programs or sensibilities. As you know, the Catholic Worker movement welcomes volunteers who are not Catholic and who want to experience the way we live and who wish to serve the poor. Some of these non-Catholic volunteers go on to found or join intentional communities in their own faith traditions. A few convert. We've also had many Jewish Catholic Workers over the years. We don't discriminate as to who can be called a Catholic Worker, just as we don't discriminate as to whom we serve.

WS: How do you keep the farm going with so few workers?

TC: We used to have two very good and strong men in addition to Tommy, our son, and then they left. One, Tim is off to Italy, following the woman he fell in love with, and they are

ing it belongs to others, not ourselves. He was quite bitter about it. He eventually left the movement. At that time Ammon Hen-nacy’s brand of anarchism appealed to many of the younger people in the movement. Ludlow was a scholar—of Aquinas. Ammon’s simplistic one-liners drove him nuts. Dorothy advised us not to listen so much to Ammon but to follow his ex-ample of personal responsibility. His anarchism was not really compatible with Catholic social teaching: too individualistic, not communitarian in the way Dorothy’s was.

The anarchism that the Catholic Worker has adopted comes from the wider socialist movement. The word “anarchist” was used by the so-called scientific socialists (Marx, Engels, and their followers) as a pejorative term to describe what they called “deviationists”—left-wing deviationists. But you have people like Peter Kropotkin, Bakunin, Tolstoy; theirs is the kind of anarchism we are aiming at with a great emphasis on what’s called “horizontalization.” Authority, wealth, and power have to be decentralized as much as possible. What is specifically Christian about the Catholic Worker form of anarchism can be found in Aquinas, who said positive laws that are not in harmony with the natural law are not binding for us. Such laws are a species of violence.

In Catholic Worker thinking there is a set of preferences. We would rather have people in charge of what they are doing. Who is the authority in the kitchen? The cook. How do you get authority, how do you exercise it? It isn’t by delegation or majority vote; it’s by good work. And that authority is exer-cised as long as it is recognized by equals. Anarchism of this kind should not be equated with sloppiness or irresponsibility or chaos. That is not what we’re aiming at. And it is not what we ordinarily have, although we fall down on occasion. It has worked out extraordinarily well for us, although it does take time.

both now trying to open a Catholic Worker house to serve im-migrants, appealing to the Italian church to let them use aban-doned church-owned buildings. And the other, Michael, is in Massachusetts trying to open an intentional-community farm to serve mentally challenged adult men. We admire them and encouraged them, but it has left us short-handed as most of the guests living here are unable to do the type of physical labor needed on the farm. Somehow we made it through the bulk of the harvest in 2013.

WS: When I helped your son deliver fresh produce to St. Joseph’s House in Manhattan, it was beautiful how all the vol-unteers came out to help unload the van, sort it, and store the produce in the basement storage areas—all with such joy and enthusiasm.

TC: We have people who come to our houses and are used to eating junk food. Some of them continue the bad habit, but we try to provide all organically grown vegetables and some fresh fruit and eggs. The meals at St. Joseph’s are much, much better than they were when we were young. It was awful then. Dorothy was a typical American in that she just focused on the basics of food. But at least she did know that you don’t put onion in a fruit salad, which is what one of our volunteer chefs would often do.

Monica is our prime cook here on the farm, and she does an excellent job. We do have a guest who was once in the catering business, and he will cook the communal meals once or twice a week.

WS: In the early days of the Catholic Worker the empha-sis was on feeding the urban poor, and all else was secondary. Since then, the movement seems to have widened its focus to other things, including ecology.

TC: Actually, there was no real awareness of the polluting of our planet in the general public. The awareness was not there

in the early part of the twentieth century—and not even in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. But I think we in the Catholic Worker movement anticipated it, almost providentially, much earlier. Caring for what is now called the “biosphere” was a central part of Peter Maurin’s philosophy. We have had small farms and have been pioneers in the modern “back to the earth” movement for most our existence.

Today we all have to learn to live more simply and more responsibly. It amazes me that the short-term goals of the very rich dictate the policies in this country—policies from which their grandchildren will suffer no less than our grandchildren. We have the rapid disappearance of whole species. What happens when the sea can no longer support fish because of acidity? What happens when large populations migrate out of regions that can no longer support them? The Maldives Islands are putting away money to buy a new homeland.

Also, the importance of employing active nonviolence was something I believe we were ahead of the curve on. Dorothy would not support U.S. participation in World War II. She urged men to refuse the draft. That was a minority position within society and within the Catholic Worker community itself. She was adamant about it. She welcomed back people who went to the war, but she never wavered from her commitment to pacifism.

No one was sure whether a Catholic could be a conscientious objector when I applied for that status in 1956. It took four years for the Selective Service system to grant me an exemption as a conscientious objector. I had no idea why it took so long. I had assumed that somebody was doing my family a favor by putting my file at the bottom of some big pile of paper. My godfather John Cornell was a well-known jurist and a leader of the Democratic Party in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where we lived. I thought they were just protecting someone with the name of Cornell. It was an embarrassment.

But Fr. Ned Hogan, chair of the theology department at Fairfield University, told me years later that my application was submitted for review to the National Catholic Welfare Conference, which was what the bishops conference was called at the time. Originally it was called the Catholic War Council because it really was an open question: Can a Catholic be a conscientious objector? And most people assumed the answer was no. That was for Quakers, Mennonites, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The theologians said they would not make a judgment on this because they never studied it; it was not in their manuals at the seminary. They had just-war theory, and that was it. Finally, Fr. Hogan, who wasn’t himself a pacifist because he couldn’t imagine excepting himself from the Irish war, guided my study of the question. He said pacifism was orthodox; my position was contrary to nothing in Catholic teaching. Later on, the U.S. bishops’ 1985 pastoral letter on peace recognized pacifism as a legitimate strain in Catholic tradition in addition to just-war theory.

The preferential option for the poor, which has been at the heart of Catholic Worker activism since our founding, has also become central in American Catholic thinking. There is now a higher awareness of the needs and just claims of the poor. But there is need for more work here. In the War on Poverty, poverty has won.

WS: I’m curious about the relationship of Catholic Workers to politics.

TC: It’s indirect. We do not get involved in politics per se. I knew a Catholic Worker who was a Republican and later became a Christian anarchist.

WS: Could you define what you mean by “Christian anarchist”?

TC: In 1954, Robert Ludlow, whom Dorothy named our “chief theorist,” renounced the use of the word “anarchism,” say-