

# **Peter King on Catholic Worker Pacifism**

## **An Interview Conducted by Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec**

**P**eter King is a hospitaller of the Unity Kitchen Community of the Catholic Worker in Syracuse New York. He has been with the Catholic Worker community since September 1972, and now identifies himself as a Catholic Worker. He was interviewed by Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec at the conference “Dorothy Day and the Church: Past, Present and Future” held on the campus of University of Saint Francis in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The interview took place on May 15, 2015, which also happened to be the 66th anniversary of Peter Maurin’s death.

JKC: Dorothy Day is a rather unique figure in American Catholicism, her pacifism extended from her socialist commitments in World War I right through the 1930s after she had converted to Catholicism, then through World War II, Korea, the Vietnam War, and up to her death in 1980. Is that important to Catholic workers today? Are all houses of hospitality expected to commit to pacifism in 2015?

PK: The Catholic Worker took a position that they were against the Spanish Civil war during that war. So they supported neither side. Yes, pacifism is very important to the movement as an identifying characteristic, but each house is autonomous, so even if a house supported a war of liberation (as in Nicaragua) they could be criticized for it but there is no way that they could be sanctioned.

JKC: Could you briefly explain what the church means by the concept of a “Just War”? I had understood that Dorothy Day thought that a Just War was no longer a possibility. Why is that?

PK: It is interesting that Dorothy Day who did not believe in war for any reason could at the same time allow a writer like Thomas Merton to do a piece during the Cold War that implicitly approved of the Just War theory. She later published a response to Thomas Merton’s article and clarified the Catholic Worker stance vis-à-vis his assertions about

Christians and the Just War but she did not in any way attempt to excise that or prevent that article from being in print or being discussed.

JKC: Will Dorothy Day's commitment to pacifism hinder her cause for sainthood? I understand that she is currently being considered for canonization.

PK: Yes the pacifism will hinder her cause. It will be questioned. On the other hand no one has ever been excommunicated for being a pacifist and there has always been some understanding in the church that Priests should not be obligated to enter into military service for that very reason, that the church does not see that within the dignity of the priesthood that the priest should be killing other people. I think that the understanding of the church on war and peace is evolving and that the church will endorse the fifth commandment, thou shalt not kill, without any extenuating remarks. This can already be seen in the writings of Benedict XVI.

JKC: Let's get personal: what have you done as a Catholic Worker to protest and work for peace?

PK: Well, pacifism at the Catholic Worker starts at the door, so we have to be ready to absorb violence non-violently and with love from the moment that we open our door to wounded and afflicted people. As a corollary, we have to be able to design a service in which it is "easier to be good," that is commensurate with the value and dignity of all persons involved. Personally, I would say when we experienced an arson fire in our home in the poor neighborhood in which Unity Kitchen is located, we did not attempt to find anyone guilty of the crime, and if that person had been found we would not have pressed charges. So, Unity Kitchen Community's stance on war and peace is an existentialist stance. We would participate in anti-war activities if we discerned that it was God's will for us to do so, but we believe that non-violence should be practiced at home first.

JKC: You have never done any anti-war protesting yourself?

PK: I was arrested in 1971 at a peace demonstration in Washington, D.C. Just reflecting on that experience I can say that being in prison in a jail like the D.C. central lock-up was something I was not ready for. I'm glad that I was bailed out before I had to spend the night there. We have a tradition of what's known as a "Good Friday way of the cross" that tends to use scripture and contemporary interpretations of Christ's death and witness to take a stance against all violence, whether it be abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, or oppression of the poor, or war. We have a principle of not allying our witness to other groups in the peace and social justice field that have diametrically

opposed rationales for their opposition to war. We would call that an unholy alliance.

JKC: Do Catholic Workers encourage people to become objectors of conscience?

PK: Yes.

JKC: How does that happen?

PK: We believe part of our witness is politicization and that would be done primarily at the homilies and weekly mass and through clarification of thought meetings, and through the witness offered in our *Unity Grapevine* newsletter, and any public witness that we felt that we should make after the appropriate discernment of the community. We definitely have an attitude of witness and politicization.

JKC: How do you feel about drone warfare?

PK: Drone warfare is inconceivable to me on the moral level of the participants, because the very fact that it is bloodless for the initiator of the drone attacks I see as one of the most morally corrupting things not only for the enactors, but for all of us in our local community. It is very much the same way I feel about the executioners in capital punishment scenarios, but even in those cases witnesses are invited in so that society can be told about an execution or how it transpires. But in the case of drone activity it becomes desensitized or detoxified and makes taking a human life look like a video game.

JKC: Some Catholic Workers have apparently been active in reaching out to refugees outside the US. Is that common practice?

PK: The Catholic worker was very much involved in the sanctuary movement in the 1980s during the Nicaraguan Civil War. One of the local Catholic Workers in Syracuse adapted their house for that, to take in people fleeing from that conflict. I remember one person very clearly because he was a contra-veteran and he was given hospitality at Slocum House. I mention that specifically because it was a non-ideological offer of help.

The Houston Catholic Worker is famous for what it is doing for illegal immigrants. And I understand that this kind of hospitality is being done by a lot of Catholic Workers.

JKC: What recommendations can you offer to the general citizen who wishes to promote peace but is not willing to get arrested?

PK: It's really to perform what in Catholic terminology is called the corporal works of mercy (cf. Matthew 25). These are good to do individually: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless. But they are most fruitfully done communally. But what is needed are bridges in the community that would join the poor with the non-poor. And so our society desperately needs facilitators to help us build those bridges.

JKC: To conclude ?

PK: On my recent travels on a train trip the man in the seat next to me opened a discussion about the current racial problems in North American cities and asked me if I'd drawn any conclusions about this problem. I had said that systemic address of these problems is to me a dead end, and after thinking about it from the point of view of my own neighborhood, which is a multi-racial neighborhood and very poor, I advocate a personalistic address to this kind of problem in that, as I said to my friend on the train, where one neighbor says to another, I am sick of the situation that we find ourselves in, is there something that I can do to help you so that we can help others. This could be the beginning of building a stronger neighborhood and it's an organic solution that develops from cell to cell.

JKC: How could that work in Syria?

PK: I would draw from the life of Dorothy Day, who was the co-founder with Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker movement. After the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, she experienced neighbors spontaneously helping neighbors, which she never forgot and always reflected on. These kinds of human responses to war are probably happening even now in the war zones. Think about what you would want from the other if you were in such a situation and realize that when it's everyone for themselves everyone perishes.