

May Day

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1957, 2.

Summary: An anniversary remembrance of the Catholic Worker's origins and how war and labor issues continue in the present. Recalls Peter Maurin's opposition to the modern State, his emphasis on the principle of subsidiarity, clarification of thought, and the common good. (DDLW #721).

MAY DAY

When **The Catholic Worker** went to press for the first time, twenty-four years ago in 1933, the main issue of the day for the worker was unemployment due to depression. Unemployment is still with us, due now to automation. Remedies proposed by union officials are the shorter work week, the shorter day, and the employer counters this demand by building new factories in areas where the worker is not organized to seek remedies. "Right to work" laws, opposition to unions still exist, and the South is still generally unorganized in spite of the growing industrialization of the area.

We are still having to urge the right of the worker to organize into unions among Catholics. Great advances have been made in the organizing of industrial workers and the CIO and AFL are now united and as usual the fight for honesty in the union goes on as well as the fight for wages, hours and better conditions. It is sad to have to use the words of the class struggle, but struggle it is, though a non-violent one.

There is still the issue of civil rights. In spite of the Supreme Court decision three years ago the condition of the Negro has not bettered, but is has been brought out into the open. The story in this issue of Koinonia highlights this struggle.

Since 1933 we have lived in a time of war, – class war, race war, civil war and world war. There has been war between China and Japan, Italy and Ethiopia, a civil war in Spain, the World War, the Indo China war, the Korean war, and now both Africa and the Near East are scenes of warfare. In all these years we have maintained our pacifist position. Peter Maurin, Frenchman that he was, prized human freedom above all other gifts of God, and respect for that freedom of choice meant for him that man's will could not be forced either in the service of God or his fellows.

Since 1933 we have tried to follow Peter Maurin's program of reaching the man in the street by the works of mercy, practicing voluntary poverty ourselves in order that we might have the means to do this work. No one has received a salary but we have lived in community in cities and on the land, receiving all that we needed and more than we needed. Peter's slogans

still hold good, “there is no unemployment on the land,” “what men need is a philosophy of labor,” “the worker must be a scholar and the scholar a worker,” “the less government there is, the better it is.”

Peter began his opposition to the all-encroaching State during the NRA. He opposed the State with a program inspired by such anarchist writers as Kropotkin and Proudhon. He opposed the Communist and Socialist programs of the day because of his opposition to the modern State. He called attention always to those principles of subsidiarity laid down in the Popes’ encyclicals. He was untiring in his discussion of cooperatives, credit unions, folk schools, and upheld a living dynamic economy as opposed to a planned economy. And yet he always had plans of his own, schools for workers, study groups, an emphasis of thought before action, what he liked to call “a theory of revolution,” his green revolution.

Peter began his teaching of the Thomistic doctrine of the common good by pointing out that since we lived in a pluralist state we had to find common ground with believers and non-believers, and he much approved the kind of discussion which will celebrate this May Day in workers halls, and at which **The Catholic Worker** editors will speak, with Communists, socialists, anarchists and other radicals. He enjoyed such mass action as the coming Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington, but knew that it was built on personal contacts such as that which began in Montgomery, Alabama with one woman suffering indignity in a bus, and one man’s protest in the pulpit.

We are not celebrating this 25th May Day with dinners and self-congratulations, but shall begin it as we begin all our days, with holy Mass and communion, realizing that of ourselves we can do nothing, but that we can do all things in Him who strengthens us with His own Body and Blood.