



Center
for
Catholic
Social
Thought

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, POLITICS, CULTURE, AND LIFE

Vol. I No. 2—December 2023

The Catholic Citizen

A Publication of the Church of the Assumption, Saint Paul, MN

REBUILDING CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

Colin Miller

Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day co-founded the Catholic Worker Movement in New York City in 1933. In the depths of the Great Depression, the Movement consisted of hospitality houses for the homeless, group discussions about the social teaching of the Church, farming communes where the faithful could learn an alternative to industrial ways of life, and a newspaper called *The Catholic Worker*. The Catholic Worker was never meant to be an *alternative to* the Church, but simply *be* one way that the Church could embody the Gospel-way-of-life in the world today.

One thing that is often missed about this vision is the way it was designed to create new cells of vibrant Catholic community. This is why Maurin called the Catholic Worker way of life “communitarian.” By this, he was emphasizing that daily community life and shared tasks were essential to the life of the Church. This was long before anyone had ever thought of our Archdiocesan synod or the invitation to join a small group, but they are certainly the sort of things Maurin would have heartily endorsed.

By “communitarian,” then, Peter didn’t have in mind any political party, then or now, that might go by that name. Rather, he wanted to distinguish the Catholic Worker from “communism” on the one hand (which was a live political option at that time), and from the normal

“individualism” of American life on the other. He was emphasizing the Church itself as a distinctive way of life, a live alternative to others on offer.

The Catholic Worker, in other words, was meant to simply be an embodiment of the Church being itself. And this, for Maurin and Day, necessarily meant that it would include Catholics being deeply enmeshed in the business of each others’ lives. Hospitality houses, the daily practice of the works of mercy, shared work, regular meetings for discussion and reflection, corporate liturgy, weekly or daily meals together, the pooling of resources—all these were ways they advocated that the Church could be more of a community. This is what he meant by communitarianism.

Once again, Peter saw this kind of thick community as *essential* for the life of the Church. In other words, we can’t really be Christians without it. Today we think of community as an optional add-on to our faith. For most of us, Church-going consists of coming together for Mass—even perhaps for daily Mass—but too often not having any real-life connections with one another.



We wave as we pass the Peace, say our prayers, and then head off to our own lives.

But things were not always this way. I regularly hear stories about a time, still within the memory of some older members of our parishes, where there were thick social bonds uniting Catholics in St. Paul. One octogenarian I talk to often tells of living on a block with a half dozen other Catholic families. Each morning around breakfast time, she relates, her back door would open and ten neighborhood kids would scurry by as she made breakfast, using her kitchen as a shortcut as they all went off to the parish school down the street. The families cooked together, ate together, shared childcare, took care of each other when someone was sick, shared lawnmowers and cars and rides, grieved together when someone died, helped out when someone lost a job, played football in the street, and dropped in unexpectedly just to chat.

Surely such communities were not perfect, but they do show a much closer resemblance to the ideal held out to us in Scripture than the reality of most of our lives today. The early Church, says the Acts

of the Apostles, ate together, prayed together, took care of the poor together, shared their possessions freely, and met regularly in each other’s homes (see Acts 2:42-47). Such daily fellowship was not just “hanging out”, but doing these things that simply were the practice of the Faith. Their social bonds, you might say, were the Gospel itself. They couldn’t be Christians without each other.

Of course, exactly what the Church’s community looks like will vary from place to place and from time to time. It looked one way in first-century Palestine, one way in a medieval village, one way in the Great Depression in New York City, and yet another way in St. Paul 60 years ago.

But there is no doubt that we will have to reclaim, in our own way, something like Peter’s communitarianism, something like what we see in Acts, if the Church is once again to become at all socially credible to a world that sees mere individualistic piety as totally irrelevant. We will have to become, in other words, a way of life that makes people once again say “see how they

Colin Miller is the Director of the Center for Catholic Social Thought at the Church of the Assumption in St. Paul. This article is slightly adapted from Colin’s article in The Catholic Spirit, “Catholic Communitarianism”, Nov 20, 2023.

THE EUCHARIST vs. “BLACK FRIDAY”: BEING CHRISTIAN FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Father Byron Hagan

I write on this day after Thanksgiving, which in recent American tradition is the start of the Christmas shopping season and so naturally a day of joy and celebration which continues the national act of gratitude we shared on the day before, propelling us through a festive “long weekend.” This day has also become known, since the full flowering of the American religion of acquisitive materialism, as “Black Friday”, a day marked by the stress and anxiety which arises from that liturgy of consumption enacted by a kind of army mounting an all-out assault on the shopping centers, whether brick-and-mortar or virtual. It occurs to me that Black Friday may be partly a defensive reaction to the marketing blitz we suffer every year, as if to say “Enough! I surrender! Now if I shop sufficiently well will you then leave me in peace?”



Designed by macrovector / Freepik

We’re all implicated in the corruption no matter how diligent our attempt at resistance to the idol-culture of American consumerism. We, too, have done this and we must undo it, and that on two fronts.

On one side we cannot be seduced by the crass rhetoric of economic materialism which would have us judge the well-being of our national enterprise and therefore

our national spiritual health by such metrics as put forward by the National Retail Federation Survey, which records, among other things, “holiday spending.” Accordingly, a quick internet search readily brings up an article about holiday shopping which begins with the sentence, “The biggest gift that the United States could get during the holiday season is robust shopping by the American consumer, who is now the primary engine powering economic performance.” Is this what patriotism has been reduced to? I understand that popular writers can be careless about overstatement, but really, the whole line of thinking is a sign of spiritual destitution. We’ve got to resist that in our persons, in our actions, our lives.

On the other hand, we must also resist the forces of revolutionary rage which identifies the problem as the idea of human nature itself. Now, perennial Christian wisdom holds that because nature is the creation of God, it is good in itself and stands as a system of intelligible symbols which, if read aright, can help lead us to fulfillment of our human mission. In our fallenness we must work, with the help of divine grace, to conform ourselves to nature through use of right reason and the disciplined cultivation of virtue. Such a view is at the heart of a truly Christian ecology, the basis of a responsible environmentalism.

For late-modern industrial society, however, nature is no divine gift, but rather a frustrating limitation on human freedom, which must be overcome. Technology, unlike the alchemy of old, is magic that really works. By leveraging this awesome power, it is thought that we can compete with God and overcome nature—including human nature—and remake ourselves at will according to the desire of the moment.

This project, promoted relentlessly by an increasingly invasive mass media in the service of consumer culture, seeks to replace the human role of shepherd and custodian of nature with the project of total domination. We are encouraged, for instance, to constantly “update” our natural lives into new, better versions of ourselves. To be thoroughly incorporated into this way of thinking is to forget the original gift of nature and to be made incapable of adopting the Marian posture of humble reception which leads to gracious, life-affirming response. What is left is an industrially-produced and packaged, virtual and purchased world, which inevitably disappoints us as inauthentic and unsatisfying.



Designed by pch.vector / Freepik

Essential to the act of Thanksgiving is the enjoyment of the fruits of our collaboration—for all labor is collaboration. The holidays are in fact feasts, and a good measure of celebratory spending down of our capital on one another is only right and just. Let there also be a real self-sacrifice in our gift-giving which recognizes those who are specially dear to us, and from that sacrifice let us offer gifts conceived and crafted just for that very person. Think of the poor couple in O. Henry’s *Gift of the Magi*.

And we cannot forget to give alms; for our excess, our capital, gives us the

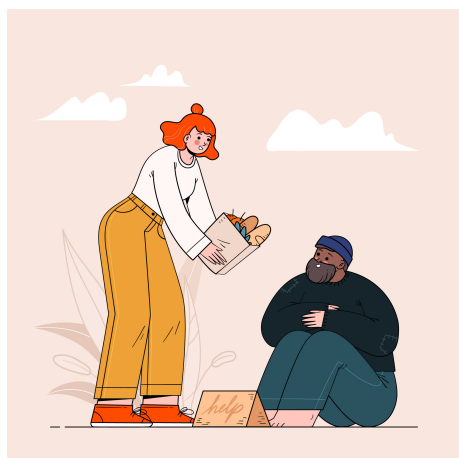


Image by pikisuperstar / Freepik

privilege of giving to the poor. We must exercise that privilege for therein lies our salvation. Our holiday celebrations become acts of true thanksgiving (*eucharist*) the more they are conditioned by the Christ who, in giving his total filial gratitude to the Father as Divine Son in his incarnation and death, also gives the perfect human thanksgiving to God.

If national celebration can really be an expression of good citizenship, and if thanksgiving means gracious self-offering, and if the giving and grateful receiving of gifts is the essence of the Christmas “holy days” (holidays), then it is the eminently Christian thing to inquire into our holiday celebrations: how deeply informed are they by the eucharistic celebration that is the very life of Christ? If we who belong to the society of the sacrament of Christ (the Church) do not exemplify the patriotism and good citizenship of Christ, then who will?+

Fr. Byron Hagan is co-pastor of the Church of St. Mary in St. Paul.

ROUNDTABLE REVIEW: *THE TWO CITIES* BY ANDREW WILLARD JONES

Tyler Hambley

Among the many opportunities the Center for Catholic Social Thought offers folks is the chance to explore challenging written material in a round-table-style discussion format. Too often, when it comes to working out the implications of our faith, we can end up siloed within our particular lanes—lay or ordained, political left or right, working class or academic. So, you'll often see a specific type of book club here, or an academic study circle there. When we do leave these silos, it's usually to take a class from an expert of some sort. These, of course, are important in their own right, but as Peter Maurin, one of the co-founders of the Catholic Worker, proposed, we also need ways for "scholars to become workers, and workers to become scholars." In other words, we need people from all over the Church to *read the world together* in fellowship with those whose bodies and minds do quite different work, and this, not for flattening everyone into everyone else, but for mutual gift-giving amidst differing *forms* of life.

Recently, The Center wrapped up just such a round-table gathering. The centerpiece? Andrew Willard Jones' breathtaking new history of Christian politics, *The Two Cities* (Emmaus Road Publishing, 2021). Many may know Jones as a co-founder of the journal *New Polity*, but his day job consists in serving as the Director of Catholic Studies at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. Jones' well-honed experience teaching undergraduate students shines through in this book. His writing is both rich in detail, yet highly accessible to the non-expert.

What really sets Jones' book apart, though, is his *Catholic* approach to history. Consider the following, "The Church doesn't merely have a history; the Church is history." What does he mean? He continues, "The Church is not a player on

the field of history, a contender in the game of human order; the Church is the field, and human history is Church history. 'The Church' is the name of the game being played." In other words, the Church is a set of practices—think, the Sacraments and the communal life flowing out from them and surrounding them—that reveal how all of life is to be lived and understood. Nothing escapes, not money, not relationships, not technology, not politics, not even how we go about doing the laundry. There is (or can be) a Catholic way about everything. All of this sounds exhilarating, and yet not a little odd. Why?

Because we have become so accustomed to viewing reality through an unacknowledged secular lens, the claim that the Church determines everything strikes us not just as odd, but out of bounds! Politically speaking, just think of some modern principles we carry with us like the "freedom of religion," the "separation of church and state," and the division between what counts as "public" and what as "private." These seem to indicate there are at least some realms of life that should be... well, "not Church." Moreover, we have been trained to be cynical toward any story—especially a religious one—that might make such an unapologetic claim as Jones does toward being the *whole story*.

We have—perhaps unintentionally—subjected the Christian story to other stories, albeit with Christianity still being given a seat of—we'd like to think—high honor. As a result, it is difficult to reorient

ourselves to the far more robust Catholic ground upon which Jones would have us stand. All this, coupled with the fact that Church history has been every bit as replete with sinners as it has of saints, and one could be forgiven for raising an eyebrow or two at Jones' argument.

And yet, Jones' primary claim can't help but strike Catholics as true. After all, he must be right: Christianity cannot just be a nice story nestled somewhere *amidst* all the other stories, e.g. the market's story, the state's story, the story of the triumph of science and technology, etc. The story of the Church is one that must take precedence over all of the others and from which all others must be reframed. If Christianity is true, it will be the key to interpreting history. And this means that no telling of history is "neutral"; it will always be governed by one's particular commitments, whatever they may be. This is a subtle but explosive point, for it means that the way we tell any story, especially

the telling of political history, is in part determined by our own community—the social and political context within which our feet stand to work out the meaning of everything else.

Unfortunately, many historians today write as if a *bird's-eye, view-from-nowhere* perspective is preferable. Such a perspective assumes you can look over the horizon—the variety of human experience—and offer a "neutral" overview without taking into account where your own feet are standing. It's incredibly distorting!

Jones knows this, which is what makes him not just a good historian, but an excellent philosopher and theologian. Jones is forthright about wanting to narrate all of history from *within* the community that makes his vision possible: the Catholic Church.

This brings us back to the roundtable setting in which the Center for Catholic Social Thought worked through Jones' material. Because Jones teaches us that all reading is "political"—that it's done from the perspective of a particular community—it's especially appropriate to read his book alongside other Catholics. Far from meaning we will always agree, however, having other types of Christians present to challenge our account or broaden it, is critical to the politics of telling (and living) any story well. Moreover, by critically engaging one another in group discussion, we set the groundwork for further community building and are reminded of the differences that make us truly Catholic. Reading in this way, then, becomes an act of love and peace, a small instantiation of an alternative, Catholic "public sphere" capable of healing the rifts between sinners and saints, and, little by little, the Church and the world.

In the end, Andrew Willard Jones has given us a great gift! More than just a book *about* Christian community and politics, *The Two Cities* is a book that invites the fostering of small communities of readers. For behind what Jones himself envisages, such small, Catholic communities are the true starting point for any Christian politics that would give witness to the reign of Christ... *over it all!*+

Tyler Hambley is the managing editor of the *Catholic Citizen* at the Church of the Assumption.

SILENT NIGHT

Carter Edwards

"For while all things were in quiet silence, and night was in the midst of her course, Thy almighty Word leapt down from heaven from thy royal throne." (*Wis 18:14-15*).

The Word came to be born but, when the hour came, found no room in the inn. The King of kings instead found his welcome not among human company, the common gossip, those about the business of room and board, and the cares of those at the work of economy and government, but in the darkness and the quiet silence of the stable. This cave, like the Mother it received, had no other business more important to attend to, nothing else occupying its space and time; it was, in this respect, silent. It was thus ready, like Mary and then Joseph, to receive God Himself.

But, truth be told, there is little that defines a modern person more than the discomfort, the disregard and even the anger that we hold for this stillness called silence.

We know loneliness and isolation are at an all-time high, made physically possible by the saturation of our landscape with screens, internet, cars, and delivery services. People are bored, anxious, depressed, despairing and angry at alarming rates. We should not assume however, that in our loneliness we are necessarily practicing, or even capable of practicing, silence. Instead, the constant noise of our lives—the sound of the television, the scrolling of the personal device, the constancy of the radio or the podcast, the exhausted immersion in video—is both the means and the result of the isolation. Yet, I propose, to welcome the Christ this Christmas we must enter, each of us, into the silence that has been definitively rejected by the world.

What is traditionally meant by silence is not confined to the auricular level.

Silence, in the Catholic tradition, takes on a note of stillness and emptiness applied to all aspects of the Christian's life—the sensory, social, intellectual, and emotional. Noise comes in multiple modes.

First, there is external noise we suffer passively, the sensory stimulation that inundates our daily lives in the form of billboards, machines, muzak and media. We are generally so constantly engaged, even if just by the 24-hour news, that we have almost no experience of real personal solitude. However, I contend, we actually clamor after this exterior noise because its job is precisely to cover up another type of noise, the interior—our own boredom, worry, restlessness. Our consumption of media, addiction to screens, endless to-dos and meticulously over-packed days, are like a white noise machine used to cover this interior din.

To confront this interior unrest is, I confess, a formidable task. Yet the Church has always had names for it. "Acedia" usually translated "boredom", is the vice of needing to be constantly distracted, to find some new thing, something exciting, because we are perpetually dissatisfied with where we are, what we have, and what we are thinking about. It is closely related to the vice of curiositas: a state of mind that shallowly skips from one piece of information, one spectacle, one image, not for the sake of sharing the world with others or knowing God, but simply for ourselves. Curiositas is the vice of "entertainment."

We need, then, today, a different kind of asceticism, of mind as well as of body. We must take up disciplines that get us in the habit of doing, saying, hearing, seeing, ruminating, less. Shut down your phone. Turn off the TV and the podcast. Tear up your to-do list. Let the news go by. Let the blog posts go. Talk to your family. Eat

dinner with your friends. Look in each others' eyes. Only such asceticism will allow us to receive each other in all our marvelous, fleshly particularity. Only then can we give others the possibility of surprising us. Only then can they be a gift.

Real silence, as we learned that night in Bethlehem, is the requisite to being able to truly receive the neighbor, the alien, the friend and, even, the Christ, not as we expect Him, but as he comes: in the quiet and the night of our lives, in the measure to

which we choose to abandon our attachments in all their forms.

Our God is a lover and, like any true lover, He does not force Himself on us. Christmas is about the world being unprepared to receive the God of the Universe, not through open malice but precisely through the idleness of distracted industry. Yet the truth remains: He constantly knocks, but enters only where space is made. May Our Lady give us the courage to do so.+

2024 Spring Speaker Series

REBUILDING CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

A series of weekly conversations about rebuilding Catholic community today. Thursdays, 7pm, including reception, at the Church of the Assumption in St. Paul. Free and open to the public. February 15, 22, 29, and March 7. Featured speakers include:

Leah Libresco

Author of *Building the Benedict Option*

Bishop Joseph Williams

Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis

Register online at www.catholicsocialthought.org/2024-spring-speaker-series

Contact Us

Colin Miller, Director
Center for Catholic Social Thought
cmiller@assumptionsp.org
Church of the Assumption
51 West 7th Street
St. Paul, MN 55102
651-224-7536

Website:
catholicsocialthought.org



CHURCH OF THE
ASSUMPTION