



ON THE IMMIGRATION QUESTION

Carter Edwards

It's a story we have heard often: a nation has inhabited a land for centuries, cultivating it, establishing an order and a way of life all its own. It maintains an economy, governance, ritual, symbols and laws which determine its complex social fabric and provide it an identity. Upon an encounter with a foreign nation, a different culture, set of beliefs, language and way of life, the residents at first extend an admirable hospitality. In not too long, however, it becomes clear that the newly arrived peoples have little interest in adopting the ways and customs of the natives, but seem only to wish to exploit the resources so carefully tended for so long, for their own purposes. After suffering these violations the natives finally resist, with force, those who have imposed themselves, and who have come to threaten the stability and order of their way of life. We can hardly blame them.

This narrative has been used for some time to describe the exploitation and enslavement, for political ends and economic purposes, of American natives, African peoples in the slave trade, and the Third World by the First. It is now being used to describe the history of the American federal government's response to recent immigration to our own land.

Here I suggest that this description, which can be legitimate and useful at times, is on its own radically inadequate to

determine a Catholic posture towards the issues of immigration and displacement vexing our world today. To realize this is also to realize the insufficiency of borrowing from American political arguments (both left and right) to describe and so respond to these current events. Instead, I hope to show that a properly Catholic response to our world will require a specifically Catholic description of it.

That description starts with the Catholic confession that paradoxically Christ is both visible to all and at the same time unseen by many. We today confess with centuries of Catholics that Jesus Christ, in the flesh, *is* God. This conviction is the source of the use of icons, of the Sacraments, and of the convictions that compel us to see, in the poor, Christ himself. God Himself is en-fleshed, and so He can be approached in all of these things.

Yet St. John, in his first letter, also states that "no one has seen God." This reminds us that most who saw Jesus *did not see God*, or did not know that they did. They saw instead, by turns, a threatening blasphemer (the Pharisees), a political adversary (Herod), a disappointment of a false prophet and Messiah (the Zealots), a helpless or hopeless marginal tribal minority member (Pilate), or another threat to the hard-fought cultural "peace" acquired by Jews in the Roman occupation (the Sadducees). But, no, not God. To see God, when He became

enfleshed, requires a cure of our inherent blindness—it requires conversion. What we see depends on where we stand.

And where we stand on Jesus Christ will not just determine our description of that one man. For it is the Christian profession that the sight necessary to see God in Christ is the sight that also allows us to see the world as it truly is, and which gives us a different description of what is happening in Minneapolis than yet another recasting of the narrative reviewed at the beginning of the essay.

That narrative trades fundamentally on two concepts of power and possession. It assumes that there is not enough of either one of these to go around, and that consequently human existence always boils down to conflict. It's about "rights," "ownership," "claims," "who was here first," and so, what's "mine" or "ours" versus what's "yours." It assumes that there's some sort of universal standpoint from which these claims can be adjudicated, and that, once that's determined, if one side fails to comply, violence will be necessary in the name of justice. It's a zero-sum game, and a dog-eat-dog world.

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THINKING CHRISTIANLY ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

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VARIETIES OF LOCALISM: PETER MAURIN'S VISION

Renée D. Roden

What might Peter Maurin say about localism? Peter Maurin, born 1877 in the peasant village of Oultet, France, died in 1949 on the Catholic Worker's farm in Newburgh, New York. He is often characterized as the "back to the land" voice of the Catholic Worker movement, and a counterpoint to Dorothy Day's urban radicalism. But the truth is that both of them were urban radicals, both equally comfortable in cities.

Maurin's call was less of a call to an agrarian lifestyle and more of a call *back to ourselves*. Catholics, Maurin said, would never find freedom, dignity, or the goodness of work if they continued to work for a wage. Working for a wage to buy the means to make your living is not the point of work, Maurin challenged. But then, *What other system is possible?*

Maurin, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, considered himself a "personalist communitarian." Personalism, a philosophy of action developed in inter-war France, emphasized the inherent dignity of the human person and the necessity of building a society that was both founded on that dignity and guided by that dignity in every facet of its function.

Recently, while leading a seminar on personalism, I noted a simple, but common use of the term. "Personalism" is often put in terms of a folksy aphorism: "Take care of the person in front of you." Take responsibility for them, don't pawn them off to some agency to take care of them. It's *your* job, not the social worker's. But lest that be thought of as quaint, Emmanuel Mounier claimed that that piece of folksy wisdom is actually the basis of a *systemic* response to the modern, industrial systems of organizing the world. Personalism begins with the person and ends with the person, but

the radical challenge contained in it is that this method, of encountering the person you see in front of you, has the power to change the world.

Peter Maurin thus advocated for direct responsibility—taking control of your own destiny, the shape and goal of your work. Imagine if you had direct control over your water, energy, and food needs. What would that look like? In Peter Maurin's imagination, this could not be pursued in isolation, but only in terms of personalist *communitarianism*. For him, local community was the necessary condition—the necessary context—for any personalist dream.

This communitarian requirement for a personal sphere of influence is summarized in a quote from one of Peter Maurin's Easy Essays entitled, *Back to Christ! Back to the Land!* There, he summarizes the Southern Agrarian Andrew Nelson Lytle's mandate to dig into the dirt:

"It is in fact impossible for any culture to be sound and healthy without a proper respect and proper regard for the soil, no matter how many urban dwellers think that their food comes from groceries and delicatessens or their milk from tin cans. This ignorance does not release them from a final dependence upon the farm."

And yet I wonder what Peter would have thought about the health of our soil? "Forever chemicals," or PFAS, hadn't been invented when Peter Maurin penned these words. Such synthetic chemicals—used in a wide variety of products like waterproof fabric, yoga pants, carpets, shampoo,

mobile phone screens, wall paint, furniture, adhesives, food packaging, firefighting foam, electrical insulation, and cosmetics—seep into the ground entering most of our bodies through our water system. I can only imagine that this poisoning of all of us would have piqued Peter's pen. What would he have said of plastics buried feet underground, intact, unbroken, leaching into the water table? What would he think of a soil made toxic by corporate malpractice and carelessness?

Maurin sees all of this, and so many other modern malaises, as a result of our *alienation* from the soil. He notes, for instance, the strip-mined, over-extended and exploited soil that fed those far away from it that led to the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl in the midst of the Great Depression. It is this same *distance* from the natural *sources* of our life that continues to blind us to our destruction of creation today.

Take, for instance, a simple artificial intelligence search. The power necessary for such computing, the toxic chemicals used in their materials, and the millions of tons of water needed to cool such machinery, has put our casual consumption of this convenience on a path that is ecologically unsustainable. Adam Zewe of MIT News says that, "By 2026, the electricity consumption of data centers is expected to approach 1,050 terawatt-hours (which would bump data centers up to fifth place on the global list, between Japan and Russia)." Every 100-word query entered into AI consumes 1 bottle of freshwater. Chat-GPT alone requires 39.16 million gallons of freshwater *per day*.

Again, it is our lack of *local presence*, of *personal responsibility* for production and consumption, that makes this possible. Compounding this dynamic is the fact that

since the early 1990's, more than half of the U.S. population has lived in the suburbs. As such, most of us simply assume that water will keep coming from the tap (and it will not poison us), food will keep coming to the grocery stores, drywall will keep coming to Home Depot, the internet will keep streaming to our devices, and AI will keep answering our questions. We rarely stop to think about the effects on our world—and therefore on ourselves—of all these "harmless" practices. The suburbs isolate us from our neighbors and creation—here and across the world. We can forget that we exist on the same crust of planet and share the same resources: that my well-being does not exist apart from your wellbeing.

Maurin's call "back to the land" is in fact a call back to an awareness of our own bodiliness. For it is to point out that our own lives—even our AI searches!—are ultimately dependent upon our use of *God's* earth. And his point is that we cannot be responsible for our actions from a distance, but only by personal proximity. Only *localism*—living close to the sources of our bodily life—enables the moral life. This is his call back to *ourselves*. It calls us to ask, what are we doing *here*? What is our effect on *this* person right in front of us? On our own backyards? We are responsible for just four score years of life on this earth (if we're lucky) and a few acres of topsoil. Be responsible for them. Bring them to full life. Live with both feet in the reality of God, and of his creation he has given us to share.+

Renée Roden is a Catholic Worker in Pennsylvania, and co-editor of Roundtable, a publication of catholicworker.org.

CHRISTIAN CONVENIENCE

Br. Basil Stewart, OP

Every society has its peculiar idolatries. It is safe to say that one of the idolatries of our society is the worship of convenience. There is much evidence for this. The justly lamented “throwaway culture,” for instance, is one in which old and worn out things are *replaced* rather than creatively *salvaged*; such salvaging is often considerably inconvenient, after all. And, indeed, even an unusually creative householder would be hard-pressed to find a new use for many of the things we find in a modern household (how does one creatively re-purpose an old refrigerator?). The result is the mound of trash twice the size of Texas floating around the Pacific Ocean.

Well-taken is the common and bemused observation that for all our time-saving instruments, we seem to be “busier” (and more anxious) than ever. The increase in conveniences in our daily lives has not resulted in greater human flourishing. The dysfunctions of our food culture provide perhaps the clearest indications of the human wreckage left by the convenience idol. We see this not only in the startling prevalence of obesity and heart disease in American society, surely closely correlated to the ubiquity of easy processed (or “fast”) foods. We see it also in the disappearance or at least severe curtailing of the household table as a quasi-sacral place and event in the domestic economy, which, when cultivated by the careful and dedicated work of human hands, can become the venue for a most profoundly and uniquely human act—the meal, as opposed to the mere consumption of calories.

The worship of convenience results in a society where it is harder for people to be good. Ease has an irresistible allure for most of us, and the more readily available it is, the more we choose it; the more we choose it, the more it becomes a habit; and as it becomes a habit, we come to imagine

that we can’t live without it, to the point that we feel violated if something or someone appears to get in the way of it. Put simply, we burn incense to this god every time we choose what is easy over what is good, and as with all idolatries, our new Ba’al takes his ever increasing toll on our virtue.

Idolatry is the worship of a created good as though it were the ultimate good. This means that what we worship as an idol is not evil in itself, but rather has been promoted beyond its proper worth. Convenience abuses us when treated as a god. But how might it serve us better if



treated as a lesser good? What might be its proper place among the goods of human life, if it is dethroned from its false place at the pinnacle of those goods and set where it belongs?

“Convenience” is, in fact, one of the most frequently used terms in historic Catholic theology and philosophy. But in this context it never meant “what is easy.” It always meant “what is fitting.” Convenience only takes its proper place in human life and human societies when we order our material lives not according to what will give us “more free time” or fewer occasions to feel the resistance of reality against our sovereign wills, but rather according to what is congruent with the form that God has revealed to us as the normative form of all human life—the form

that is Christ. His life, death, and resurrection establish for us the mold into which our lives must be fitted if we are genuinely to become the divinized creatures God made us to be.

That doesn’t mean the “Christian form” is “one-size-fits-all”; quite the contrary: there are as many potential iterations of this form as there are human souls. But it does mean that the material shape of a life fitted to Christ will be one which shows the poverty of obedient and loving self-denial as the divinely ordained means to real spiritual, if often invisible, fruitfulness.

Christ shows us what is fitting for human beings. He shows us that our nature is fully realized and activated only when, having surrendered ourselves completely to God’s will, we place ourselves and all of our capacities at his disposal. To do this is to attain a new kind of freedom, not the freedom from constraint that is the goal of “convenience as ease,” but rather a freedom for divinely assisted excellence in the making of a human life. Convenience as *ease* promises to set us free from mundane and drudgerous tasks and instead tends to deliver only a frenzied boredom and an unsatisfied obesity. Convenience as *fittingness* embraces those mundane tasks if they are what love requires—embodied, tangible, human love—and finds in them a spiritual reservoir that spills out to others,

and inspires in them a similarly self-sacrificial fruitfulness. Convenience as *ease* often leads us to cede the practical decisions about the material of our lives—our food, our clothes, our bodies, our movement from one place to another—to corporations, impersonal institutions, and machines. Convenience as *fittingness* would prompt us to reclaim our capacity to do more things for ourselves, to look to our families and friends to learn domestic skills we’ve forgotten or never learned, to accept a reduction in precision and sparklingly sanitized cleanliness for the sake of the satisfaction of wielding a personal authority over the conditions closest to us.

To prioritize what is fitting and good over what is easy might, it is true, make our lives harder in some ways. The extra “inconveniences” might lead others to ask us—and lead us sometimes to ask ourselves—why we insist on making life more difficult than it needs to be? But the point is not to invite arbitrary difficulties into life when plenty of difficulties just do present themselves in the course of things. There will be times when prudence points to the easier option as the better one. The point, rather, is that ease can never be the final criterion of practical judgment for those who believe that life has a proper shape to it. Only when we base our lives not around what is easy but around what best fits us to the form that is Christ will we attain the practical wisdom to use (or not) the increasingly dizzying array of gadgets our world presents to us in a way that is truly convenient.+

Br. Basil Stewart, OP is a Student Brother in formation with the Dominican Friars.

THE NEW APOLOGETICS

By Peter Maurin (1936)

1. In his lectures on the new Christendom Jacques Maritain emphasizes the necessity of trying the foundations of a new social order.
2. Laying the foundations of a new social order is the task of the laity.
3. The task of the laity is to do the pioneer work of creating order out of chaos.
4. The Clergy teach the principles; the task of the laity is to apply them without involving the Clergy in the application.
5. The application of the social problems by the Catholic laity of the Catholic principles taught by the Catholic Clergy is a new kind of apologetics a kind of apologetics Catholics will not have to apologize for.

ON THE IMMIGRATION QUESTION (Continued)

Carter Edwards

Christian language is fundamentally different. It proceeds from the logic of the cross. It tells a story whose Hero laid down all the power and possessions literally in the whole world. He claimed none of his rights, and told his disciples that they could only follow him if they gave up everything they own. He laid down his life for his brethren, for his enemies, for those very people who crucified him, and told his followers that they must do the same.

Because this story shows the very shape of God himself, it also reveals the most fundamental fabric of the universe. It shows that conflict, possession, and violence are not, as the secular narratives of rights presumes, our most basic realities. The most basic reality is self-sacrificial love, and therefore that the way to have security is to stop trying to have security, and that the God Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship is always the God of the poor and the oppressed.

And lest we think this ethic is only for Jesus, that same epistle of St. John tells us that “whoever wants to remain in him must live just as he lived.” And lest, again, we think this imitation of Christ is to be confined only to our private lives, we have no shortage of modern saints that the Church holds out to us as models, who have associated with the lowly and despised, even to the point of losing their lives alongside them: Bl. Stanley Rother, St. Roque Gonzalez, St. Damien Molokai, St. Teresa Benedicta, and St. Maximilian Kolbe, to name only a few. It is the way of the world to exert and threaten violence in its attempts to secure the interests of its own. And it is the way of Christ to live outside the calculation of worldly interest, even at a personal sacrifice.

This view cannot be arrived at from the other. It cannot be gathered from a calculus of power, rights, claims, and

possessions. It cannot be deduced from a disinterested, or rationally neutral standpoint. And it is not the view of any political platform the world offers. But, then again, none of the platforms of the day, and no form of reason, is disinterested either.

Rather, like those platforms, this is a view that can only come from standing in a very particular place—from immersing ourselves in the community dedicated to the “apostles’ teaching, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.” We cannot find God’s view on all of this without being part



of the living flesh of living communities of the Church centered on the living Christ in the Sacraments. Life in this community generates a very particular set of assumptions, that funds our uniquely Christian description of the world.

Of course, that our description of current events, like all other descriptions, is shaped by our membership in a particular community, does not mean that we will be uninvolved in them, or holed up in the safety of religious isolation. Far from it. Our Church is Catholic: it does not just have “views” of the poor and oppressed, but is made up of communities of the poor and oppressed. This is an essential part of where we stand, of the habits that shape our vision.

Nor does this mean we will not find reason to speak out at particular times, in support of this or that measure, as a way

of getting on in the world. And this will be informed both by our faith and by our friendship with those the measures affect.

Nor, does this mean, finally, that we will not often find reason to stand shoulder to shoulder with those outside the Church, with whom we can make common cause in particular moments. People of all kinds: pagans, atheists, conservatives, liberals, Protestants, Muslims, lawyers, even politicians.

But it does mean that truly seeing what is happening between ICE and our immigrant neighbors requires stepping out from the worn narrative of cultural rights utilized by right and left alike, and into the truth of the Gospel. And the challenge is that, for all of us, this perspective, far from shoring up our own claims and consolidating our “side’s” control, will cost us. For that Gospel, again for all of us, is about ongoing conversion to Christ, who bids us follow him in laying down our lives for others. Such conversion cannot be won by social media wars or by safely shouting slogans at elected officials. But it is the only thing that can generate a true description of our world. This means such a description can ultimately only be *lived*, in courage and hope, because Christ has, in truth, conquered that world.+

Carter Edwards is the mother of five and oversees a Catholic house of hospitality.

Contact Us

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

