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The Catholic Worker Archives

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The Catholic Worker Archives:

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I am now well into my fourth decade as an archivist at Marquette University. Fortunately, I have been able to spend a good share of this time with the Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection. A lot has changed in these years. I began in the era of typewriters and card catalogs. At the dawn of the digital Age, Chuck Trapkus sounded the alarm and urged CW'ers to say off the net. Now many Worker communities have impressive websites, utilize YouTube, and stay in touch via Facebook and email discussion lists. Yes, a lot has changed. But I am still doing many of the same things, if mostly by computer.

Before ending on a more personal note, I will provide some background on this collection, starting by addressing that most frequently-asked question—why did Marquette end up with the CW Archives in the first place? That is largely due to the efforts of William Ready, director of libraries from 1956 to 1963, who was particularly adept at acquiring book and manuscript collections. (A native of Wales, he achieved some notoriety for securing the manuscripts of JRR

Tolkien and Bertrand Russell for New World repositories, at Marquette and McMaster universities, respectively.) Soon after his arrival Ready joined forces with Raphael Hamilton, SJ, long-time professor of history, to establish an archives in the new Memorial Library. Among those he solicited for donations was Dorothy Day, whom he had met when she spoke at Stanford University in 1952. He recalled in his autobiography that "She made a disciple of me, and the more I saw her as the years went by the more I became sure that I was in the company of a saint" (*Files on Parade*, Scarecrow Press, 1982, p. 135).

For her part, Day had reasons besides the presence of an admiring librarian to be favorably disposed toward Marquette. The Dean of the College of Journalism, Jeremiah O'Sullivan, had provided moral and material support to the Worker movement in its early days, and several of his students had been active in the Milwaukee Catholic Worker community before the Second World War; one of them (Nina Polcyn) remained one of Day's closest friends. The university's Jesuit ties did not hurt either, as she thought well of that order, and she was familiar with the campus, having spoken there on several occasions. Perhaps Marquette benefitted most of all—since Day did act impulsively at times—from being the first to approach her. In any event, Dorothy Day readily agreed to send her papers and the records of the New York Catholic Worker community to the university, and the first six boxes arrived in March 1962 (some nine years after a reviewer of her autobiography had observed, "Oddly enough, she has a few letters to quote—though the movement's poverty will never permit the accumulation of archives." (Henry J. Browne, *Catholic Historical Review*, 6-53).

The head librarian apparently took a particularly solicitous interest in the Catholic Worker materials. At any rate, it was to Ready that Dorothy Day confided, in a letter of May 22, 1962, that she was "having a fearful attack of cold feet" for having sent the records, "what with so many personal letters from people in them." * She asked that the papers remain closed until she could "come and go over them a bit." (Before shipping the records off to Marquette, Day had written the librarian that she could "spend a week in Milwaukee and thin down the collection." See *All the Way to Heaven*, paperback edition, p. 362). Ready quickly dashed off a note of reassurance, reiterated in his next

note to her, two months later, which contained the rather chivalrous promise, "I shall guard your files against all." True to her word, Day made her first "tour of inspection" that November. How much time she spent in the library is unknown, but she reportedly "showed great pleasure at the handling of her papers."

After Ready left Marquette in 1963, William Miller of the History Department assumed his role as Day's principal contact at the university, while Father Hamilton took on overall responsibility for the manuscript collections. Miller recognized the significance of the Worker papers and the need for a scholarly history of the movement, having participated in discussions at the Memphis Catholic Worker in the early 1950s. He had written Day as soon as he learned of the records' pending arrival to request permission to use them, which she promptly granted. A lengthy correspondence and close friendship ensued. Consequently, when Miller left the university in 1968, Day started sending her papers directly to him, for transfer to the Archives after he had examined them. There are occasional references to this in her letters. For example, in one dated Easter 1972 she informed him, "I'm going to cut down on my files—putting everything in bare envelopes, which were saved to keep addresses or information later. No one wants to do clerical work—that is the efficient ones." Although this arrangement produced some awkward moments, it enabled the Archives to obtain material that Day might otherwise have discarded or sent someplace else. Foremost among such records were her diaries. In another letter to Miller, she confessed that she was sorely tempted to throw them into the incinerator. "They are all so personal, so repetitious," she wrote, "that I truly do not see how any researcher can get anything of any value out of them." She also considered accepting an invitation to donate them to the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe. Fortunately, she successfully resisted these impulses until Miller was able to come and relieve her conscience.

The historian also aided the Archives by encouraging Dorothy Day and her colleagues at the New York Catholic Worker to regularly transfer office records to the repository without a prior culling of the material. This they faithfully proceeded to do. In May 1972, Day notified Father Hamilton, "I'm sending you even our most recent files, before they get lost or scattered as so many letters have. We have

little privacy at the CW." (She'd earlier written the archivist that a letter from Cardinal Spellman, concerning the Gravediggers Strike, "had been removed...Many people dipped into our old files, and sad to say, walked off with letters (as they do with books.)" Subsequently Day had some qualms:

Dr. Miller kept telling me to send "everything to the Archives and as we answered my mail we just bundled up the mail and sent it on. I have been thinking we have put you to a great deal of unnecessary work. We should have eliminated a lot of useless material ourselves.

Before she had time to act on her good intentions, the archivist hastened to assure her that the burden was a welcome one. So the New York Catholic Workers continued to "bundle up" their mail and send it on to the Archives, following the Catholic Worker "non-filing system," and leaving to their archivist the task of organizing it all.

When Father Hamilton retired in 1973 at the age of eighty, he was succeeded on an interim basis by Paul Gratke, following his own retirement from the Milwaukee Public Library. Although a Unitarian himself, Gratke was closer to the Catholic Worker in his political and social views than his predecessor, and he adopted a more activist approach to administering the CW records. Specifically, he sought to negotiate a new contract with Day that would open non-confidential materials to general use, and to expand the collection to incorporate records of other Catholic Worker communities, of which there were approximately forty by the mid-1970s, letters from Dorothy Day that were still held by their recipients, and oral history interviews focusing on Day's pre-Catholic Worker years, for which documentation was lacking in the Archives. The records recruitment and oral history project was to be directed initially by William Miller, who had completed his history of the Catholic Worker movement and was now contemplating a biography of Dorothy Day and a return to Marquette. For funding, the university applied to the Rockefeller Foundation—in hindsight not the most judicious choice. (There is a letter in the Archives from Day, written on 10-13-34, declaring "If Mr. Rockefeller offered us \$100,000, indeed, we would not take it. We would tell him to go and give it back to the miners in Colorado from whom he stole it." See *All the Way*

to Heaven, paperback edition, p. 84.)

Paul Gratke broached the contractual matter to Day when he visited her in the spring of 1974, and apparently obtained her verbal consent to the removal of restrictions from all but her private and family correspondence (her diaries had yet to be turned over to the archives). He also discussed the records project at this meeting and during a second visit with Day the next year, and mentioned it several times in writing as well, at first to no response. (She continued to correspond with Miller throughout this period, writing on October 8, 1975: "Please respect my privacy, what I have left of it. Sometimes I wish I had never started this archive business. I feel at times as tho I were being skinned alive, flayed. I suppose I deserve it.") By January 1976, however, she had become fully aware of the project's Rockefeller connection, prompting the only display of Day's usually controlled but formidable temper in her long association with the Archives. She wrote Gratke that, rather than accept any foundation support, the Catholic Workers would keep their papers from then on. During a phone call which the archivist placed upon receiving the letter, Day repeatedly interrupted his reading from a prepared statement, reiterating that she didn't "want anyone connected with the Catholic Worker to touch any Rockefeller money." Two weeks later, Gratke informed her that the application had been withdrawn. Whatever hopes may have remained for a new contract vanished with the receipt of Day's statement of November 23, 1976, giving as her "said wish that...all such papers and materials known as the Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Archives be closed until 25 years after [her] death."

One may imagine the consternation this document must have provoked in the Marquette Archives. The prospects for a successful appeal to Dorothy Day, in her eightieth year and recovering from a heart attack, probably seemed remote. Indeed, the statement proved to be her last word on the subject; she died four years later without having responded to Gratke's plea for a clarification of her intent. Fortunately, the Archives soon found a friend in her newly appointed literary executor, Stanley Vishnewski. Having joined the New York Catholic Worker community in 1934, Vishnewski had become by virtue

of his long tenure and personal inclination the community's archivist and historian in residence. While keenly aware that the misuse of sensitive documents in the Worker papers could produce a distorted picture of the movement and bring harm to the individuals whose confidences were betrayed, he came to see that sizeable portions of the collection could be opened, and to trust the archivists' discretion in making these decisions.

A further stimulus to Catholic Worker scholarship at Marquette was provided by the return of William Miller in the fall of 1976. He gave generously of his time and knowledge to archivists and visiting scholars and Workers alike, and organized Catholic Worker conferences that raised the archival consciousness of those in attendance.

Lastly, the addition of two archivists to Marquette's staff in 1977 enabled one of them to devote much of his time to the Catholic Worker Collection.

Today the Catholic Worker Archives comprise more than 300 boxes of records, including the personal papers of Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and others involved in the movement; records of past and present CW communities; photographs; audio and video records; and a wide variety of publications. Although confidential materials have been restricted at the request of donors, most records are open to research used, including all of Dorothy Day's papers. For forty years the collection was located, with other archival holdings, in the basement of Memorial Library. These quarters were considered more than adequate for a long time, but life underground did have its drawbacks, including occasional floods from the overhead pipes. In the summer of 2003 the department moved up in the world, to the third floor of the new and adjoining John P. Raynor, SJ, Library, where the CW records continue to be frequently consulted by students, scholars, and the general public. The majority of inquiries now come via email. A common request is for photos of Dorothy Day. Thanks to digital technology we can provide same day service in most cases. (In the pre-Internet era the turn-around time was often a matter of weeks.) We recently cataloged and digitized more than 700 audio recordings concerning the CW, including Dorothy Day's talks, Friday night

meetings, and the oral history interviews by Deane Mowrer and Rosalie Riegler. They may be found on the Marquette Libraries catalog through an advanced keyword search limited to audio materials. MP3 downloads are available upon request. What I wrote a quarter-century ago still stands: We “welcome all visitors . . . and endeavor to dispel the media-perpetuated stereotype of ‘musty and dusty’ documents guarded by equally forbidding custodians.”

Speaking personally, I’ve been challenged and rewarded by even the more routine tasks—organizing and describing the materials, and assisting researchers. My relationship with William Miller was anything but routine, and might warrant an article in itself. Suffice it to say that I am very grateful for his kindness and hospitality, his encouragement and support of my work, during the five years that our tenures at Marquette overlapped. Sadly, we became estranged following his retirement in 1983. We managed to renew acquaintances when he accepted my invitation to co-present a program at the Society of American Archivists meeting in the fall of 1988. I introduced him as “A man of strong opinions concerning the Catholic Worker movement, the history profession, the state of western civilization, and even a few archivists he has known. Nonetheless, most of my memories of him are very pleasant ones, and the void created by his departure has not been filled, and may well never be.”

Another great ‘job benefit’ has been the opportunity to meet the likes of Frank Donovan, Eileen Egan, Nina Polcyn Moore, Jacques Travers, and Joe Zarrella, to name only a few among those CW’ers who have passed on. Their friendship, and that of younger, active-duty Workers, led me to soon become a fellow traveler of the movement, undeterred by the fact that I was really a Worker, or even Catholic. Beginning in the early ‘80s, I traversed the country, dropping in at CW houses and attending the national gatherings and various other meetings, all the while harboring the ulterior motive of records recruitment. By Valentine’s Day 1985 I was ready to cross my first line—at the Strategic Air Command headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska, beginning an avocation as weekend resister that I’ve attempted to follow ever since. I do recognize the risks of such involvement. Indeed, I have been caught up in a few intra-community and Worker-scholar conflicts which called into question my ability to serve all patrons and

donors fairly and impartially. And thus far the converts to the archival mission have been rather few and far between, which really should not have come as any surprise. As long ago as 1939, a Sr. Zita had observed: "The spirit of the Catholic Workers seems to be hostile to the keeping of any accounts of note." On the other hand, contacts made or renewed as a result of my extracurricular activities have led to some significant additions to our holdings, and hopefully increased the chances that other Catholic Workers will commit their papers to us in the future. Last but hardly least, I have a lot of memories for which I can be thankful.

*Uncited quotes are from letters in the Marquette University Archives (administrative records, Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection and William Miller Papers.)