Obsculta

Volume 15 | Issue 1 Article 16

4-28-2022

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Henry O. Widdicombe
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, hwiddicom001@csbsju.edu

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)
ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation
Widdicombe, Henry O.. 2022. Everyone Wants a Revolution, No One Wants to Do the Dishes. Obsculta 15, (1) : 118-129. https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol15/iss1/16.

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Everyone Wants A Revolution, No One Wants to Do the Dishes

by Henry O. Widdicombe

ABSTRACT:

This piece is a reflection on climate despair, filtered through the novel A Canticle for Leibowitz, the Catholic Worker Movement, and Benedictine spirituality to imagine what the response of a faithful Catholic might be. It posits that the only adequate response to, seemingly, insurmountable challenges is to hope against hope.

SYNOD:

In the Synod on Synodality, the Church is actively working to listen to the signs of the times, one of the most pressing of which is the reality of climate crisis. Thus, this piece attempts to articulate a Catholic response to the subjective experience of climate despair in the face of the objective situation of climate change.

"Everyone wants a revolution, but no one wants to do the dishes."
—Servant of God, Dorothy Day

I grew up on the West Coast and am not unused to the sight of a red sun veiled in smoke. Such a childhood comes with the risk of acclimating to the pseudo-apocalyptic feel of raining ash, triple-digit temperatures, and omnipresent gray skies for the "fire season," a period of time which, in some places, is becoming indistinguishable from the calendar year. Still, it came as a surprise to find myself watching that same sun set over the fields of southern Minnesota at the Lake City Catholic Worker Farm. There I stood, far from home, encompassed in the smoke of a blaze burning hundreds of miles to the north, experiencing what can only be described as existential dread.

The notion of climate despair is something I first encountered on Twitter, among people united by our youth, leftism, and Christianity. As an assortment of twenty-somethings, our futures are unstable, lacking the natural progression of life that was all but assured to prior generations. Unlike my parents and grandparents, I do not see a clear path towards professional stability. If I continue in my pursuit of a doctorate in theology, God only knows whether or not there will be openings at relevant universities, let alone tenure track positions with which to cement my place in academia and secure a life for myself. Not only are my own career prospects uncertain, but so too the global situation is on a shaky foundation. It is difficult to feel otherwise when presented with the potentiality of global environmental catastrophe, a possibility increases in probability with each passing day. One hears of entire towns burning to the ground, storms leveling whole neighborhoods, and "100-year floods" that occur every year.

In the summer of 2020, my best friend and I embarked on the John Muir Trail, a 211-mile trek through the High Sierras. Covering such a distance with only what you can carry on your backs requires a resupply of provisions, which we had mailed to Vermillion Valley Resort on Lake Edison. Not that much later the same summer, approximately 50 people that had taken shelter at the resort to avoid the Creek Fire had to be evacuated by helicopter. I can only imagine what those people experienced in that moment, but the very idea of being trapped by a wildfire is enough to strike fear into my heart. I consider

myself a genuinely capable outdoorsman and having backpacked thousands of miles I am able to contend with a whole host of unexpected events in the wilderness—but a wall of fire is far beyond my powers. Wildfires seem to be an apt symbol of the climate crisis—an untamed blaze capable of riding the winds and creating weather systems out of smoke: unpredictable, dangerous, and terrifying. In one of those quirks of linguistic development, the word inferno, coming from the Latin *infernus*, simply indicating the lower places, which Dante describes as a locale lacking all warmth, instead means for us a conflagration and thus, in contrast to Dante, hell is a place not of ice but of fire.

A Canticle for Leibowitz, a novel by Walter M. Miller, Jr., opens several centuries after an apocalypse, the Flame Deluge, has nearly obliterated the human race.[1] The reader quickly recognizes this infernal downpour for what it really was—the princes of this world, in their insatiable lust for power, sought to do the unthinkable, to break atoms over the heads of their enemies and wipe them from the face of the earth, thus leaving them to rule over what remains. In their misguided quest for domination, they instead brought hellfire down upon themselves and the people they ruled. One thinks of Ozymandias, "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" The characters in the *Canticle* have lost an accurate sense of what happened; only mythic imagery remains. They do, however, recall quite clearly the nature of the events—characterizing some elements as demonic forces, to be prayed against and exorcised.

Fiat Homo, the first part of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, drops us into the middle of a ruined land, a desert in which a handful of monks are striving to scrape out an existence, occasionally beset by roving bands of marauders and seldom visited by pilgrims. We first meet Francis of Utah, undertaking his stringent Lenten vigil before he might be permitted to profess permanent vows with the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, men tasked with the preservation of the few scraps of written knowledge left—knowledge they know not what to do with, but preserve all the same. Together with Francis we encounter a strange man from the wilds, who leads us, incidentally or intentionally we never learn, to relics of the founder of the order, which, later in the novel, permit humanity to

1 Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1959).

harness electricity yet again and sing another verse into what Miller calls the "special liturgy of Man: Versicles by Adam, Rejoinders by the Crucified."[2]

The novel is a kind of mirror for the development of Western Europe after the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. *Fiat Homo* maps onto the Early Medieval period, Part II: *Fiat Lux* to the early portion of the Enlightenment, and Part III: *Fiat Voluntas Tua* to the Space Age, at least as it was imagined in the late 1950s. Miller walks us through nearly two millennia of time alongside the remnants of humanity, as they build another society from the ashes of the prior—what embers are left smoldering in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust are tenderly kept burning by the scattered survivors and stoked, ever slowly, back to life by the stubborn refusal of that remnant to fade away.

Miller's inspiration for writing the book was his own participation in the destruction of the monastery at Monte Cassino, founded by Saint Benedict in 529.[3] Allied forces believed the monastery was being used as a fortress by the Germans and deemed it strategically necessary to destroy it. In actuality, the Germans had made an agreement not to use the monastery and the only people inside were monks and Italian civilians, only a handful of whom survived the bombing campaign. The novel, inasmuch as it is inspired by the destruction of Monte Cassino, serves as a kind of homage to the legacy of Western monasticism, of which that abbey is emblematic. Miller's implication is that the monks have kept the torch of civilization burning in and through a period of darkness.

It is here that I must declare, unequivocally, that it is not the intent of this essay to extol the praises of the civilized West over and above the barbaric hordes which, allegedly, sought to extinguish the flame of culture. That would be to dive head-first into the shallow pool of classicism, a misunderstanding of human culture and history. Furthermore, I would like to distance myself from the so-called "Benedict Option," ostensibly inspired by the closing lines of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Rod Dreher's book, and his online presence, advocates for a retreat from the world, abandoning it in favor of so-called higher pursuits. In a question and answer session after a lecture, MacIntyre notes that an escapist stance is a misread of his line "waiting for a new,

2 Miller, Jr., pt. Fiat Homo. and Miller, Jr., 243.
3 Miller, Jr., *Canticle*, sec. Author's Biography.

doubtless very different, Saint Benedict" and that what he intended was to point to the fact that Benedict and the communities he founded were not only deeply interconnected with their local contexts but also new forms of being in the world.[4] Thus, I seek, not unlike Miller, albeit with a different purpose, to point to new forms of community as a balm for the ailments of our age. Saint Benedict did not preserve and replicate the culture of the Roman Empire. Rather, he was, somewhat inadvertently, the progenitor of new ways of being in the world—not unlike the monks of the Abbey of Saint Leibowitz.

Benedict did not set out to found a religious order. In fact, the "Father of Western Monasticism" first attempted to become a hermit. His way of life, however, proved attractive and he soon found himself surrounded by would-be emulators. Thus, his hand forced, Benedict set out to regulate the life of the community which had sprung up around him.[5] The whole process was organic, question preceding answer and problem preceding plan, slowly re-emerging from the ashes, nourished by the example of holy people, and built by the hard work of regular folk. It was not "the West" that was preserved at the monasteries, copied down and locked away, to be retrieved, at a later date, when humanity was prepared to rise to the intellectual prowess of the Ancients. Rather, at the monasteries, and in their vicinity, a wholly different thing was being preserved. The embers being gradually stoked back to life were not the achievements of the passing-away society, but rather the achievers themselves—persons-in-community.

A Canticle for Leibowitz was first recommended to me by a professor from whom I have learned a great deal and I have since read the novel multiple times and discussed it with as many people as have been willing to listen. Among them is a former supervisor, with whom I have a divergence of opinion about a particular aspect of the novel. He posited that it is inherently pessimistic and I held the contrary, that it was inherently optimistic. However, in reflecting further on those two positions, I think that we have both missed the mark. The novel is, instead, a realistic account of human nature—but

4 "'A New Set of Social Forms': Alasdair MacIntyre on the 'Benedict Option,'" April 21, 2020, https://tradistae.com/2020/04/21/macintyre-benop/.

5 Shawn Colberg, "In-Class Lecture" (History of Christianity I, Collegeville, MN, September 16, 2021).

should one despair at or find hope in the prognosis? I firmly believe that a dialectic between despair and hope is a far more meaningful approach to the themes of the novel, and also of human history, than pessimism or optimism.

In my move to Minnesota from Spokane, I had escaped the first of many intense heat-waves which have recently rocked the Pacific Northwest. I had also escaped, or so I thought, the onset of fire season. So it is that we return to where we began, the driveway of the Lake City Catholic Worker Farm, finding it rather hard to summon any hope while I watched the red sun dip lower and lower towards the horizon. This particular trip was my second to the farm, as I had visited for a weekend earlier that summer. It was, in fact, the very first thing I did upon arriving in Minnesota. I knew when I drove away that first time that not only would I be returning to the farm, but that it had ignited in me something which still evades complete explanation.

The "agronomic university" or "farming commune" has been an integral element of the Catholic Worker philosophy from the inception of that movement.[6] Peter Maurin writes, in his "Easy Essay" *What the Catholic Worker Believes*, that they believe "in Farming Communes where each one works according to his ability and gets according to his need."[7] The idea is quite simple, and there are only a few aspects to his theory. First, the idea springs from the notion that we ought go back to the land, that physical connection to and proximity with the food that we eat and the natural world in which we live, would benefit everyone overwhelmingly. Second, there is the communal aspect. These farms are meant to be loci of community, by which we might achieve a real respect for one another by working together on a common project. Third, there is the idea of the farming communes as "agronomic universities." Maurin envisioned the farms as being not only centers of work and prayer, but also learning. He imagined a context in which workers might become scholars and scholars might become workers, a mutual enrichment wrought by a common life, instantiated in communal prayer, "round table discussions for the clarification of thought," meals together, and the other trappings of a life lived in community. Sharing not only the joys and hopes

6 Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981), 169–81.

7 Peter Maurin, *The Forgotten Radical Peter Maurin: Easy Essays from the Catholic Worker*, ed. Lincoln Rice (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 137.

of our lives, but also the griefs and anxieties which beset each of us. All told, Maurin is not unlike Saint Benedict—trying to formulate new ways of being in the world, a world undergoing rapid and unprecedented change. Maurin died in 1949, one can only imagine what he would have thought of the developments of the intervening seventy-two years.

The program of the Catholic Worker is neatly encapsulated in the Easy Essay mentioned above, which includes six elements;

> the Catholic Worker believes in the gentle personalism of traditional Catholicism …, the personal obligation of looking after the needs of our brother …, the daily practice of the Works of Mercy …, the establishment of Houses of Hospitality for the immediate relief of those in need …, Farming Communes where each one works according to his ability and gets according to his need …, [and] in creating a new society within the shell of the old with the philosophy of the new, which is not a new philosophy but a very old philosophy, a philosophy so old that it looks like new.[8]

Each of the above elements is a crucial aspect of the Catholic Worker Movement, which finds its inspiration in the Sermon on the Mount and attempts to formulate a program for societal betterment. It is to the notions of "the gentle personalism of traditional Catholicism" and the "new society within the shell of the old" to which we now turn.

The personalism which informs the Catholic Worker Movement and serves as its philosophical foundation and fundamental orientation is inspired principally by Emmanuel Mounier, an influence of Maurin. The grounding notion of personalism is that the human person is an "integral psycho-physical unity of body, mind, and spirit" who is due all dignity and respect simply by the virtue of being born of a woman, regardless of sex, gender, orientation, race, creed, intellectual capacity, etc.[9] From that starting block follows the remainder of the philosophy: looking after our neighbor, the Works of Mercy, the Houses of Hospitality, the Farming Communes, and the new society. But what precisely is this new, but actually old, philosophy of which Maurin writes?

8 Maurin, 137.

9 Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

Dorothy Day wrote of Maurin that he was always "leaping from peak to peak of noble thought, leaving the rest of us to fill in the chasms" and I concur.[10] While his writing is inspirational and easily accessible, it also has a near unmeasurable depth still to be plumbed by adherents to the program of Catholic Worker thought, which he outlined in hundreds of Easy Essays over nearly two decades of writing. They are indeed an ever-burning lamp by which one might find their way in the world, but Maurin nevertheless leaves the actual way-finding to the person, no doubt on account of the unconditional positive regard for persons that is a core tenet of personalist thought. Thus, this new but rather very old philosophy is never brought to fruition by Maurin, and that was likely intentional—a move of subsidiarity inspired by Catholic Social Teaching and the anarchistic undercurrent of the Catholic Worker. One could easily imagine asking Peter, "What do you mean by all this?" and him responding, "What do *you* think?"

The Lake City Catholic Worker Farm is an answer to that question. That community, capably led by Paul and Sara, is an attempt to work out, here and now, a new society within the shell of the old, grown from the fertile ground of the preceding elements of the Catholic Worker program. They are painstakingly striving to live a new way of being in the world, a way which is new to us but old to the world. My visits to the farm have been, without reservation, excellent experiences. As someone who has lived most of my life in the suburbs, the realities of living on a farm are foreign to me. I get my eggs from the grocery store and they get theirs from chickens named Burnt Marshmallow and Bob, among others. My milk comes in cartons and theirs is contained in neatly labeled mason jars and comes from goats named Corsica and Cyprus. They lead lives which are, in a concrete sense, set apart from the rest of the world.

Their days progress at a less hectic pace than my desk job, despite them having, arguably, far more pertinent and meaningful tasks to complete by day's end. Each day begins with chores, a meal in common, and prayer. From there, the community goes about the various tasks they have been assigned, following an agreed-upon plan that they create each morning and return to for reference throughout the day. The days, weeks, months, and years flow in a

10 Day, *Long Loneliness*, 195.

rhythmic circle, intimately tied to the natural world and the land upon which they live. Each member of the community, from the youngest of their three daughters to a weekend guest like myself, gives what they are able and receives what they need.

There was little time for me to stare forlornly at the setting sun, as there was dinner to be made and chores to be done before the end of the day. Each new day brought more tasks to be completed: garlic to be harvested, berms to be weeded, trees to be selected, purchased, and planted, etc. Yet, all the while, we were in conversation. Another guest and I swapped life stories, learning about one another and growing in community. I was learning from the farm, my thoughts guided and shaped by the work I was doing with my hands. Life on the farm is not all hard work, however. The youngest daughter enjoys coloring in my shell tattoo, enthusiastically joined by her older sisters, all of whom argued about precisely the color scheme they were to follow. They enjoy playing board games, arguing over the precise interpretation of the rules and explaining to me exactly what I should be doing. The days are punctuated with meals and prayer, each week with Mass at the local parish. It is a life lived at the pace not of our world, but the world. Goats need to be milked each day and the chickens need their eggs collected. Things need to be planted, watered, weeded, and harvested. So it was that, despite my weekend at the farm beginning with a moment of despair, I found myself wrapped up in a way of life that was focused wholeheartedly on the project of living virtuously in a world which has little regard for radicals—persons-in-community seeking after our roots.

These disparate threads, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the Benedictines, and the Catholic Workers, all find their common ground in that notion—persons-in-community. The person is an integral psycho-physical unity of body, mind, and spirit and the community, intractably formed by persons and informative of their ways of life, is like unto a person, albeit writ large. The interplay of persons and the community in which they find themselves is essential to understanding ourselves and also to moving forward into a new world. It is only inasmuch as we have self-knowledge, of ourselves and of our contexts, that we might be capable of tackling the manifold challenges and crises with which we find ourselves presented.

The monks of Saint Leibowitz, the Benedictines, and the Catholic Worker all have another element in common—the gradual working out, within the context of a community, new ways of being in the world, i.e. building a new society within the shell of the old. The monks of Saint Leibowitz are fictional and the Benedictines have been around for nearly 1,500 years, but the Catholic Workers are, comparatively, new to the scene of wholesale societal reconstruction. As an ardent proponent and erstwhile adherent of that worldview, certainly I am inclined to advocate for their program. I would be a terrible personalist, however, if I did not concede the ground of contexts of which I know nothing to the persons far more familiar with them—which is to say, the ones living in them. Thus, this essay should not be perceived as a prescription of Catholic Worker thought always and everywhere, a cure-all for societal ills. Rather, my sincere aim is to inspire conversation about how we might wrestle with the issues of our time, a kind of open letter which serves as the first word in one of Maurin's famous round table discussions on new forms, new ways, new societies to be thought of and brought about in the face an epochal shift, the preeminent problem of our day.

On a penultimate note, the responsibility of the Christian, in the face of what certainly appears apocalyptic, is to hope. Certainly, the temptation to fall into despair, to lay down and die, is powerful. What can we do when presented with odds overwhelmingly stacked against us? We are called to respond, not with a blind optimism that brushes the reality of the situation aside nor with an uncritical pessimism towards our fellow human beings, but rather with a hopeful orientation towards our future—not as the future, but as ours. Humanity will continue to exist far into the future, characterized by societal forms now unimaginable, insofar as we decide to contribute to that endurance here and now.

We do not, unfortunately, have the luxury of being righteous dictators, who, in a state of emergency, are given total authority over the peoples. Rather, we have been given authority only over ourselves and it is only by our persuasive lives, in word and action, that we might convince others not only that there is a problem which must be faced but also that there is a solution to be lived out. That solution lies in a radically hopeful orientation, instantiated in our

communal living, our being persons-in-community, by which we are equipped to face the manifold challenges of the decades to come. Together we will work out a solution to the problem of living in the third millennium. The precise problem and the appropriate answer will no doubt be different in all places where persons are to be found. It is not our solutions per se but the task of working out solutions itself which unites us in our struggle for life.

Our liberation, who is a person, Christ, does not utilize the weapons of the powerful to strike them down but rather, it is by his dying and subsequent rising, striking a fatal blow to death, that he saves. It is only in our being like him, our being united to him, only as persons dedicated to the project of communion, as the Body of Christ, that we find salvation. We are liberated by God's own self, born as one of the lowliest of us and sentenced to die as a criminal. But there is no waiting for someone else to rescue us from our dire circumstances, no magic incantation that will cure all ills and vanish away all threats, only our own action, hopeful in ourselves as the hands and feet of God made flesh and raised from the dead that we all might live. Thus, we find ourselves with a mighty responsibility. A responsibility not to fiddle while Rome burns but rather to stoke the flames—not those of the hellish wildfires which bear down upon us but those of the dim and dying sanctuary lamps within each and every one of us, those wisps of flame which signify the presence of Christ.

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