The Green Revolution Response to Modern Technology

The Catholic Worker Farms and Jacques Ellul

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In 1983, Katherine Temple, in her role as one of the editors of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper of the New York City Catholic Worker house of hospitality, wrote an editorial concerning her ambivalence at the recent acquisition of a home computer because the addressograph machine was made obsolete.[1] "Secretly, I have felt a bond with the Luddites who wanted to smash the new machines in the 18th century."[2] Temple, who had interviewed and written about Ellul for her dissertation, imbued the *Catholic Worker* newspaper (and thus the movement as a whole) with an overt Ellulian critique of technique, continuing a consistent skepticism of technology that had begun with Peter Maurin in the 1930s and his brand of French personalism that emphasized dignity and direct action.[3] Temple's ambivalence over (what many thought "small potatoes") the computer offered a glimpse at the everyday tension of working with and against technology at the same time. As Ellul argues in *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, "If one refers hope to the possible, then the computer is the true figure of hope. [...] It possesses all the eventualities. In a given situation nothing escapes the computer."[4] Temple gives us a concrete contradiction from which to wrestle with the role of modern technology in our lives. Further, she argued, "Just as money—dollars and cents—cannot be divorced from capitalism, so this home computer or that little video game cannot be divorced from our enslavement to technology."[5] Like her assessments about the computer, agriculture in the twentieth century took on the mantra "There is no other way," such that horsepower, manual labor, and smaller-scale growing seem not just quaint but backwards and immoral.

The Catholic Worker movement, founded by journalist Dorothy Day and itinerant theologian Peter Maurin, emerged in the midst of the Great Depression to fill a vacuum between state-level responsiveness and individual charity. The early Worker ministered to striking seamen and those evicted, while documenting other social ills in the pages of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper. Within just a few years, the Catholic Worker expanded from a newspaper and sometime coffee and soup lines to providing housing and clothing. This Catholic-inspired movement often confounded both liberals and conservatives alike. While many observers may recognize the affinity between Ellul

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[1] Parts of this essay are based on Paul V. Stock, *The Original Green Revolution: The Catholic Worker Farms and Environmental Morality* (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University, 2009) as well as observations during the 2013 National Catholic Worker Gathering (February 15-18) in Dubuque, Iowa, and visits and correspondence with New Hope CW Farm and St. Joseph's Catholic Worker Farm in Kai-kohe, Aotearoa New Zealand.

[2] Katherine Temple, "Our Computer Dilemma." *The Catholic Worker* (December 1983), 1.

[3] Temple herself drew a comparison between Maurin and Ellul (despite their many differences): "Each has turned against the tide to develop critical analyses that move us beyond ideologies and state power; each is rooted in a Christianity that pre-dates confidence in 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'; each has understood the Christian response as one of personalism, self-sacrifice, poverty, the daily works of mercy; each is a Christian intellectual in the true sense." Katherine Temple, "Jacques Ellul: A Catholic Worker Vision of Culture." *Ellul Forum* 7 (July 1991), 6.

[4] Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 196n.

[5] Temple, "Our Computer Dilemma," 7.

and the Catholic Worker movement's personalism, critiques of capitalism, and faith-filled witness, readers of the *Ellul Forum* may not be as familiar with the long tradition of Catholic Worker farms that exhibit hope despite the fact that "We are living in a situation which we think has no way out and is hopeless."[6] That hope comes in the form of a philosophy of work, consistent and ethical engagement with technology, and an emphasis on the dignity of persons through hospitality and communication.

My own journey to the Catholic Worker is through these farms. While writing about organic farmers in Illinois, I came across a mention (probably a footnote) about these Catholics concerned about the poor who also like to farm; maybe it was an offhand reference to Peter Maurin. I haven't seen it since and can't tell you where it was from. But it never let go, and I'm pretty sure I might be the only person to have learned about Dorothy Day because of the green revolution and not the reverse. But what is this green revolution? Isn't the green revolution where we sent seeds, pesticides, artificial fertilizers, and irrigation materials, along with the credit-financing systems, to India, ostensibly to grow more food but which actually impoverished Indian farmers? Yes, and, in fact, it represents technique at its most insidious. And yet, Peter Maurin named his idea for a socio-theological revamp "the green revolution" to counter the Communist "red revolution" gripping the globe in the 1920s and 1930s (more on this below).

When I attended the 2013 National Catholic Workers Farm Gathering, people would ask, What farm are you from? None. Where do live? Lawrence, Kansas (where there is not a Catholic Worker farm). And then the confusion sets in. I'm a professor at the University of Kansas that studies the Catholic Worker and sustainable farmers internationally. When deciding to do my PhD but after volunteering and living in community in Selma, Alabama for a year, I tried to discern a project that combined my intellectual curiosity with my own faith journey.[7] In the Catholic Worker farms, I found not only an important intellectual topic but one that offers daily challenges to my own wrestling with technology and faith.

[6] Ellul, Hope in Time of Abandonment, 192.
[7] Stock, The Original Green Revolution.

The Catholic Worker's Green Revolution

Chris Montesano, one of the co-founders of the Sheep Ranch Catholic Worker Farm in the 1970s, described the day he went to begin building his home, with a hammer in one hand and a book in the other. At that very moment and without Chris having any knowledge of how to build a house, a man stopped his pickup in the road and asked, "What are you building?"

"A house."

"Mind if I help? I've been looking for a project, and I'm a builder."[1]

The serendipitous meeting changed both men's lives. These journeys in the green revolution involve such serendipity—or maybe the work of angels.

When Dorothy Day met Peter Maurin, observers would have been hard-pressed to anticipate that a movement that would last for at least eighty-seven years was about to begin. And those that purported to know Dorothy would also be hard-pressed to predict that rural communes or farms would become a major proposed solution to the social ills of capitalism. Dorothy was a journalist by training and a burgeoning activist as well as a recent convert to Catholicism in 1933. Peter, born a peasant in France, flirted with theological and philosophical circles in Paris before emigrating to Canada and then floating through the US before settling in New York City. Within three years of meeting one another, the Catholic Worker published an eponymous newspaper, ran houses of hospitality in multiple cities, and began searching for a farm. These three points of the green revolution (again, as opposed to a red one)—of clarification of thought (newspapers, public lectures, teach-ins, conversation, prayer), hospitality (coffee, soup, vegetables, donated food, vegan lifestyles), and communes or farms (for food provisioning, restoration, retreat)—compose over eighty-seven years of Catholic Worker tradition that exhibit a long history of ambivalence and contradiction regarding technology.[2]

The *Catholic Worker* newspaper printed out of the New York house could be considered, like the *New York Times*, the paper of record. While not officially the mouthpiece of all the houses, farms, and those involved, it is often an expression of both the tradition and the contemporary challenges of those involved in the Catholic Worker move-

[1] Chris Montesano, "Panel Discussion of Catholic Worker Farms." National Catholic Workers Farm Gathering, Dubuque, Iowa, February 15-18, 2013.

[2] Paul V. Stock, "The Perennial Nature of the Catholic Worker Farms: A Reconsideration of Failure." *Rural Sociology* 79.2 (2014): 143-73. https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12029.

ment. To that end the *Catholic Worker* publishes the movement's Aims and Means every May, celebrating the May 1 anniversary of the publication of the first issue. The 2020 issue declares as one of the movement's means:

A "green revolution," so that it is possible to rediscover the proper meaning of our labor and our true bonds with the land; a distributist communitarianism, self-sufficient through farming, crafting and appropriate technology; a radically new society, where people will rely on the fruits of their own toil and labor; associations of mutuality, and a sense of fairness to resolve conflicts.[3]

Thus Catholic Workers are explicit about their stance toward technology, emphasizing the writings of Ellul but also those of Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, Helen and Scott Nearing, and Peter Kropotkin, among others, whose words were quoted throughout the newspaper but also in the newsletters, zines, pamphlets, and speeches of Catholic Workers since the 1930s.

Peter Maurin, for his part, while never leaving the kind of written corpus that we often associate with significant thinkers, favored conversation and interpersonal interaction to impart an emphasis on work and labor that drew from medieval guilds and peasant-village models of societal organization. Catholic Worker-aligned priest Fr. Clarence Duffy interpreted Peter's vision thus:

The object of the project is to build up healthy human beings on healthy soil and with healthy food and to make as many of them as possible, free men and free women who can live as God intended them, and as they desire to live in a world of peace and reasonable abundance on their way to eternity.[4]

From the inception of what we might call the first Catholic Worker farm in 1936 in Easton, Pennsylvania, farms have played a significant, if not large, part of the movement. By 1940, there were upwards of twelve farms. The US entrance into World War II and the pacifist stance taken by Dorothy Day (and many Catholic Workers) created a rift and diminishment of the movement. The split between conscientious objectors and peace activists versus pragmatists and anti-fascists cleaved the movement for decades. It took the emergence of the anti-war left and the back-to-the-landers of the 1960s to fully restore the Catholic Worker to its previous popularity.

Multiple farms established soon after the movement's founding, though, offered good examples of what the farms could look like within the movement. Two farms named St. Benedict emerged early in the farm experiments, one in Michigan by the Murphy family, and the other in Upton, Massachusetts. At Upton, the farm merged three families, with some remaining on the land through the 1990s. The Gauchat couple led a push to establish a farm outside Cleveland that today, while not a Catholic Worker farm, still serves those differently abled. Other efforts sprouted and wilted over the

[3] "Aims and Means," *The Catholic Worker* (May 2020), 3.

[4] Fr. Clarence Duffy, "Food, Farming, and Freedom." *The Catholic Worker* (October 1952), 3.

decades, sharing consistent goals of limiting technological involvement, local interest as paramount, and with different goals related to hospitality and husbandry.[5]

Prominent peace activists who moved to rural Catholic Worker houses offer an example of the dynamism of the green revolution. Brian Terrell and Betsy Keenan moved to Maloy, Iowa, with an emphasis on local food production and rural advocacy as well as engaged peace work against nuclear weapons and other injustices. Their newsletter, *The Sower*, often details Chris's latest imprisonment for one of these actions.

Tom Cornell, famous for his involvement in burning draft documents during the anti-Vietnam movement, and his family moved to the most recent iteration of a Catholic Worker farm affiliated with the New York City house of hospitality in 1979. At Peter Maurin Farm, Tom and his wife Monica and son Tommy, Jr. host those in need of hospitality while also actively farming the land.

Early on in the Easton Catholic Worker Farm, three men tried to plant peas. One held a book, another a ruler, and the third a bag of seeds. John Filligar approached with a sense of disbelief and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Planting seeds. The book says they are supposed to be an inch apart."

Filligar grabbed the seeds from the young men and proceeded to finish the planting.[6]

This anecdote speaks to the divide between the scholar and the worker that Maurin so loathed when it comes to the land. In my scholarship of the Catholic Worker, I might as well have been one of the early Catholic Workers trying to farm out of a book just as Chris Montesano tried to build a house—a little out of my depth. Here I sit in my university/home office without an ounce of agrarian experience, and yet, as many have identified, the land, the rural, and the people connected to both are a vital fount for community, as well as socio-ecological health and well-being. As a pair of geographers writing under the pen name J.K. Gibson-Graham argue,

Our interest in building new worlds involves making credible those diverse practices that satisfy needs, regulate consumption, generate surplus, and maintain and expand the commons, so that community economies in which interdependence between people and environments is ethically negotiated can be recognized now and constructed in the future.[7]

For Gibson-Graham, the Catholic Worker farms would be an example of diverse economies, both persisting within and also resisting consumerism and capitalism.

But they are also trying to farm. And farm well. As Sirach 7:15 says, "Hate not laborious tasks, nor farming, which was ordained by the Most High." Just as each Worker has their own journey of discernment, serendipity, community, conflict, and

[5] For a take on the perennial-ness of the farms see Stock, "The Perennial Nature of the Catholic Worker Farms."

[6] Peggy Scherer, "John the Farmer." *The Catholic Worker* (June-July 1982), 3.

[7] J.K. Gibson-Graham, "Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for Other Worlds." *Progress in Human Geography* 32.5 (2008), 623. https://doi. *org/1*0.1177/0309132508090821.

resignation, so too do the movement's farms as a whole. As the editors wrote under a banner labelled "The Land—There is no unemployment on the Land":

We have never held that life on the land is a Utopia. Our fellow workers on the farm are confronted by endless work, lack of tools, seed, lack of variety and stimulus in their daily work. They are indeed leading a hard life and a poor life. But they are trying to rebuild within the shell of the old, a new society, wherein the dignity and freedom and responsibility of man is emphasized. And there is no place better to do it than on the land.[8]

[8] "Farming Commune." *The Catholic Worker* (October 1939), 8.

The Re-Emergence of the Catholic Worker Farm in the Driftless Region

Not only do the farms continue to exist, they may just be fulfilling McKa-nan's assessment that, "Though the Catholic Worker has in recent decades been more associated with issues of war and homelessness, the decentralized economics of Peter Maurin's green revolution provide one of the most promising solutions to global warming."[1] The farms are also growing in number and stability. The growth in numbers of new communities and the increasing number of Catholic Worker farmers led to a new annual gathering of the farms that—while they discuss typical Catholic Worker conversations such as Peter's historical role in the movement, women in the Church, Dorothy Day and sainthood, and the decay of civilization, among others—also discuss the politics of seed catalogs and manure. Talk about shitty theology. One of the more promising areas of growth is the emergence of multiple Catholic Worker farms in the Driftless bioregion in the upper Midwest of the United States. The Catholic Workers of New Hope (Dubuque, Iowa), Lake City, Minnesota, Anathoth (Luck, Wisconsin), and St. Isidore (Cuba City, Wisconsin) farms embody a new energy for the collective greening of the movement.[2] While they all maintain significant food-growing efforts, they also minister to the poor and work for Indigenous and environmental justice. The Greenhorns, themselves an activist organization that celebrates growing food as part of a peaceful future, documents some of the Catholic Worker efforts in a video with an emphasis on intergenerational sharing.[3]

As Eric Anglada describes it in volume 3 of *The Isidorian*, the handmade zine published by the Workers on the farm, "The uneven landscape of the Driftless [bioregion] contains myriad springs, sinkholes, massive Oaks, and bluffs containing spectacular views of the Great River."[4] Anglada describes his life as a home-comer, following E.F. Schumacher, in the following terms:

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[1] Dan McKanan, The Catholic Worker after Dorothy: Practicing the Works of Mercy in a New Generation (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 221.

[2] Paul V. Stock and Lukas Szrot, "Justice." In *Routledge Handbook of Sustainable and Regenerative Food Systems*, ed. Jessica Duncan, Michael Carolan, and Johannes S.C. Wiserke, 98-112 (New York: Routledge, 2021), 106.

[3] Available at https://vimeo.com/204248108.

[4] Eric Anglada, "Homecoming." *The Isidorian* 3 (2019), 13.

Much of the work with which I engage is the quotidian work of supporting the home: splitting firewood with an ax, gardening with hand-tools, tending chickens and cows, hanging laundry, cooking over wood, and cleaning the almost endless mountain of dishes a kitchen full of home-grown ingredients inevitably produces. These satisfying labors are the ways I can join my body with my ethics.[5]

That ethical work includes these skill-based jobs as well as community engagement through a new Community Supported Agriculture scheme and hospitality. In addition to farm work split between the two families and rotating cast of interns and temporary residents, St. Isidore Catholic Worker farm prioritizes peacemaking work in conjunction with other Workers and a local Catholic university, cooperation with a local group of Catholic sisters, anti-racist and decolonizing work with local tribes and guests, and peace and non-violent resistance. Brenna Anglada, specifically, took part in an action called the Four Necessity Valve Turners, in which they entered the property of a pipeline shut-off valve to protest the company's and government's infringement on tribal, sacred lands as well as to bring to light the urgency of climate change.[6] In mid-2020, felony charges were dropped. As Anglada describes the Driftless Region and their work there, "People here, more than anywhere else I've ever lived, are extracting themselves bit by bit from the extractive economy."[7]

[5] Eric Anglada, "Homecoming," 14.

[6] Brenna Anglada, "Pipeline Resistance: Four Necessity Valve Turners." *The Isidorian* 3 (2019): 6.

[7] Eric Anglada, "Homecoming," 14.

Conclusions

If we return to Temple's dilemma with the computer, she asked, "Is it possible to propagate the dignity of manual labor if the only means available is a computer?"[1] She offered, "We are constantly caught between pure means and necessities, and it is hard to know where the point of assimilation comes. As Peter also said, 'At least it arouses the conscience.'"[2] And so do these Catholic Workers that continue to build the green revolution with hopes of arousing consciences as witnesses for us to see and be challenged by. Through their lives they prove that the trappings of computers, technique, and capitalism are fictions unnecessary to live a fulfilling, loving life, whether Christian or not. As Jeff Dietrich wrote in the *Ellul Forum*, "As Christian realists, we must be engaged with a sinful world, but aware that it is not possible to do anything about it."[3]

The focus on community, reconciliation, and love, inspired by Christ and the saints, offers Catholic Worker farms daily opportunities to engage in love without much hope of change. And yet that is the hope. Tom Cornell, Jr., during a talk at the 2013 National Gathering, reflected on the culture of the house that recognizes the tension between visions of grandeur about reshaping the system and the reality of the little way of potatoes, onions, and carrots. Either way, we are called to do the work well. In the wider community, the presence of the Worker farms is a witness—witness not only in solidarity with the poor, but to those ignorant of living otherwise than they do.[4]

The Catholic Workers, especially the farmers, are an example of living incognito, where "[the incognito] is a matter of remaining the firm and constant bearer of a truth which is no longer uttered."[5] By doing so, they actively help to keep open a crack of hope and possibility.[6] Through their faith-informed stance toward and with technology, the movement aims to fulfill the relationship to technology along Ellulian lines where "to give to things, to nature and to technology, a specific value, considered in relation to God and not in relation to man, is to treat them with respect, and cau-tion."[7] The difficult and often contradictory stance of being in the world but actively hoping for

[1] Temple, "Our Computer Dilemma," 7.

[2] Temple, "Our Computer Dilemma," 7.

[3] Jeff Dietrich, "Jacques Ellul and the Catholic Worker of the Next Century— Therefore Choose Life." *Ellul Forum* 7 (July 1991), 6.

[4] Stock and Szrot, "Justice," 106.

[5] Ellul, Hope in Time of Abandonment, 293.

[6] Ellul, Hope in Time of Abandonment, 249.

[7] Ellul, Hope in Time of Abandonment, 237.

another continues to confound observers. As one anarchist author commented about the Catholic Worker as a whole, "If it did not exist I would have thought it impossible."[8]

But it does exist. So do the farmers at St. Isidore Catholic Worker farm in Cuba City, Wisconsin. And so do the other farms in the Driftless Region. And so do the other farms and houses of hospitality of the Catholic Worker. And so do people like myself and the readers and contributors to the *Ellul Forum*. The Catholic Worker farms offer witness to ways of living with and in spite of technology that show us ways to live in the world that foster hope, dignity, and love.

[8] David DeLeon, *The American as Anarchist* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 65.

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