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Subject: Another response to the question of Catholic Workers and Plowshare Actions

Can a Catholic Worker Beat Swords into Plowshares and Still be a Catholic Worker?

by Michele Naar-Obed

(Michele and her husband Greg have been CWers and Plowshares activist for over 30 years, they have collectively served years of jail time for Plowshares Witnesses over the years They are currently at the Hildegard CW in Duluth MN.)

I could be wrong, as I often am, but my understanding of the Catholic Worker Movement is that it is a movement consisting of autonomous communities and individuals that agree to live by certain tenets and principles and at least try to incorporate the 3 pillars of a program as suggested by Peter Maurin. Those pillars are houses of hospitality, clarification of thought and the agro-university. Further, we attempt to study and follow the aims and the means and we recognize the Sermon on the Mount as our manifesto, so to speak.

Our Catholic Worker website states, "Today 240 Catholic Worker communities remain committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer, and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry, and forsaken. Catholic Workers continue to protest injustice, war, racism, and violence of all forms."

Now, we have what seems to be, self-proclaimed Catholic Worker monitors who want to police how we live out those principles and precepts in our lives and in our actions. This has become particularly evident with regards to plowshare actions.

The plowshare action, again in my opinion, is a highly spiritual act that is meant to bring to life Isaiah's prophecy, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not wage war against nation, nor shall they study war anymore." This, if we believe that Isaiah was, in fact, a prophet, was God's direction given to us through the mouth of Isaiah. When any of us participate in a plowshare action, we are bringing God's words into life. That's really the bottom line.

The plowshare action is an attempt to follow our Judeo-Christian teachings, upon which Dorothy and Peter based our principles and precepts. There is nothing in that prophecy that says we have to meet some kind of effectiveness quota, nor does it say we have to divulge all the details to everyone that is mildly curious, nor does it say we have to worry about how the weapons producers might respond to such an act.

So who gets to decide that someone's attempt to follow God's command is Catholic Worker sanctioned? Peter Maurin made it clear that he wasn't in the market to promote or sanction strikes and boycotts. Strikes didn't strike him at all. Yet, we have self-proclaimed Catholic Worker monitors stating that the only acceptable acts of nonviolent resistance are simple trespass and non-cooperation.

And who gets to decide what level of effectiveness needs to be met in order to be worthy of

recognition? Is the conversion of former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark not enough? What about former General Butler? Or how about the young sailor who saw the leaflet from the Jubilee Plowshare East action and went to the Quakers for help to become a conscientious objector? And if that is not good enough, what about the German judges who left the bench to convert the intermediate nuclear missiles into plowshares, or Judge Miles Welton Lord who chastised the real criminals, ie, Sperry Software Corporation for its work in nuclear weapons development with computer software. The fact is, we have no idea how many hearts or minds have been changed by the over 100 acts of beating the swords of our time into plowshares.

As to the charges that the acts have been done in secrecy, that the acts cannot be done by ordinary people, that the acts might cause a guard to do harm to the person or persons carrying out the act, or that physically converting these weapons is an act of violence, I propose that the accusers look at the life and example of Jesus. He knew when to be open with his followers and when not, and he knew with whom he could be open. In part he protected his followers until they also were ready to face the consequences of their actions. Anyone who wants to support a plowshare action and can accept the consequences of the action is welcome to know the details. If you cannot, then why would you want to know the details? Jesus told his followers that in order to be a disciple they were to pick up their cross and follow him. There was nothing extraordinary about his ragtag bunch of followers. They were fishermen, tax collectors, doctors, housewives, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. And what are we who have answered the call to enact Isaiah's prophesy but a bunch of ordinary human beings who are willing to pick up the cross and follow him to the end? And maybe, just maybe, the question of effectiveness can be answered that in doing so, we also bring to life the Resurrection. I'd say that is pretty dang effective. And my final argument is that Jesus didn't alter the course of his actions in order to save Pontius Pilate from making the decision to kill him.

I submit that the issue here isn't whether the plowshare action is Catholic Worker or not. It is more about betrayal. Jesus was born to bring God into the world. Many people, including some of his followers had their own expectations of what he would do. They cheered him on and marched with him in the streets but in the end, he was betrayed by some of his followers, and by the masses. By human standards, he was a failure, ineffective to say the least.

We are so sorry that our actions did not meet your expectations, that we too are ineffective failures in your eyes. But many of us are Catholic Workers, and in the end it is God who will judge us.

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