

# The American Church and the Catholic Worker

# Tumultuous Times

- World War I
- Russian Revolution
- Spanish Flu Pandemic
- “Roaring ‘20s”—unbridled capitalism
- Stock Market Crash: The Great Depression
- Spanish Civil War
- World War II

# Reflection

- Our times also have a great degree of uncertainty and tumult—wars, financial insecurity, pandemic, etc.
- Please discuss in your small groups the question: “Have the trials of the current age strengthened or inhibited your religious impulse?”

# Strengthening American Church

- The highly structured nature of the American Church helped it to bring the various ethnic churches together by the early 1920s.
- Anti-Catholic sentiment and protestant control of public schools led to rapid establishment of a Catholic “state within a state”—schools, universities, hospitals, services.
- Al Smith’s presidential campaign, and defeat, in 1928 accelerated this tendency.
- Church went on a building spree, even during the depression.

# American Church as Model

- The Church struggled in Europe as governments sought to distance from past ties.
- American Church, while remaining remarkably independent, became primary source of income for Vatican.
- During World War I, instituted the National Catholic War Council as an administrative clearing house for American dioceses. Retained after the war as National Catholic Welfare Conference—first national bishop's conference.

# Labor Conflicts Dominated

- Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century labor conflicts continued to shape society.
- Industrial (liberal) capitalism used humans, often immigrants, as disposable tools for industry.
- Socialists, communists, anarchists all flourished in the labor movements and had social programs for workers.

# Lack of Catholic Representation with Workers

- The state and the Church were identified as being on the side of the capitalists, despite two social encyclicals.
- The state overtly.
- The Church through its cooperation with the state and lack of action for justice— “There was plenty of charity but too little justice . . . I felt that charity was a word to choke over. Who wanted charity? And it was not just human pride but a strong sense of man’s dignity and worth, and what was due to him in justice, that made me resent, rather than feel proud of so mighty a sum of Catholic institutions” (Dorothy Day, *Long Loneliness*, 150).

# Dorothy Day

- Strong social welfare impulse and strong religious impulse.
- Journalist and activist for socialist and anarchist movements, but never quite gave herself fully to the cause.
- After a long time of drifting and searching, did give herself to Christ.



# Faith in Action

- Dorothy Day felt that the Church was absent in the struggle to protect workers:
  - “More and more [bishops] were taking help from the state. They came under the head of Community Chest and discriminatory charity, centralizing and departmentalizing, involving themselves with bureaus, building, red tape, legislation, at the expense of human values” (*Long Loneliness*, 150-151).

# Personalism

- Dorothy Day felt a strong personal identification with the poor and suffering.
- As a child, she had seen poor workers cling to their Catholic faith in the hardest conditions, so she identified the Catholic Church as the church of the poor.
- Influenced and educated by Peter Maurin, she developed a philosophy of personal engagement as a vehicle of justice.

# Peter Maurin

- Drifter, philosopher, laborer, intellectual, dreamer, Catholic.
- Saw in Dorothy Day the person who could put his ideas into action. Had the idea for the newspaper which became Catholic Worker, as well as houses of hospitality and communal farms.
- Imagined a pastoral world centered on agronomy and craft—almost a return to the medieval guilds.

# Reflection

- Dorothy Day never lost her focus on the Eucharist and the importance of liturgy. She gave herself fully to Christ, and saw her works of mercy as a the way to live her life for Christ in his poor and suffering.
- The Church is historically leery of enthusiasts, idealists, and movements with a narrow focus.
- Please read the following passage from *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis and discuss how it may have relevance to your life and the life of the Church.

# Screwtape instructs Wormwood

“On the other hand we do want, and want very much, to make men treat Christianity as a means; preferably, of course, as a means to their own advancement, but, failing that, as a means to anything—even social justice. The thing to do is to get a man at first to value social justice as a thing which [God] demands, and then work him on to the stage at which he values Christianity because it may produce social justice. For [God] will not be used as a convenience.”