

FOOD, HEALTH AND LESSONS FROM THE CATHOLIC WORKER

When traveling west across the Delaware River from the New Jersey border into Pennsylvania, the highway quickly passes under a bridge labeled “Morgan Hill Road.” Given the recent theme of Environment and Health in the fall issue of *Health Progress*, I’d like to focus on this place that offers insight for Catholic health care from Catholic Worker farms. These places motivate us to consider the link between sustainable food production and caring for the less fortunate.



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The first Catholic Worker farm, named Maryfarm, was located on this road just outside of Easton, Pennsylvania, about 90 miles from both New York City and Philadelphia. Established by Servant of God Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in the early 1930s and operational until 1944, Maryfarm’s produce was sent to the Catholic Worker community at Maryhouse in New York City. Maryhouse still provides shelter, a soup kitchen, clothing and laundry services, counseling and friendship for the poor. Both Day and Maurin understood that there was a link between sustainable food production and caring for the less fortunate. To grow food for others was meant to connect the goodness of God’s gifts in creation to our care for each other.

Today, other farms continue the mission of Maryfarm: 19 Catholic Worker farms operate in the United States with one each in Australia, Canada, Sweden and the United Kingdom.¹ For example, the Peter Maurin Farm in Marlboro, New York, contributes 8,000 pounds of kale, onions, potatoes and other fresh produce every year to feed about 100 people a day on the soup line and to 50 Maryhouse residents in New York City. Tom and Monica Cornell, who are veterans of the Catholic Worker movement, are the catalysts for this place.

Another example is the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Farm in Harveys Lake, Pennsylvania, established in 2013 by Carmina and Larry Chapp and Fr. John Gribowich. The owners follow a Benedictine spirituality, pausing throughout the day to pray the Liturgy of the Hours in their private chapel, while also working to produce food for

others.² Their latest project increases opportunities to teach homesteading skills to the next generation, so that they learn the tools of self-sufficiency. The Chapps are both farmers and Catholic theologians with PhDs. Fr. Gribowich is a parish priest of the Brooklyn Diocese. Together, they believe that the farm is the place where they put into action the faith that they hold so dear.

To care for those who are hungry, it is not enough to just feed them for a day — that’s emergency care. Instead, as Day and Maurin believed, we must change the way in which we think about the food that sustains us. How is food grown? What is grown? What is shared? How do we empower those we feed so that they can feed themselves? These are structural questions that still resonate today. As Maurin wrote in his essay *Regard for the Soil*, “It is in fact impossible for any culture to be sound and healthy without a proper regard for the soil, no matter how many urban dwellers think that their food comes from groceries and delicatessens or their milk from tin cans.” So Maryfarm and other farms founded as part of the Catholic Worker movement were intended to be an ethical source for the care of Maryhouse.

The Catholic Worker questions are also Catholic health care questions. Our structural questions are aligned: How can we address disparities systematically, instead of just in the moment? How can we provide resources that address the root causes that bring a person to need emergency care? What can we do to disrupt the trajectory of community-based diseases and conditions? How can we positively impact a community where personal choices sometimes exacerbate or even lead to diseases?

In short, how can we give tools to those who are most affected by a structural system of inequality that will allow them to make their own

decisions that result in a healthier life? At the very least, how can we share what is needed to survive? The Catholic Worker offers food; we offer health care.

We will, perhaps, always need the “soup kitchen” or emergency department that addresses immediate needs. But that is not enough. To paraphrase Maurin, it is impossible for any community to be healthy without a proper regard for food and our environment, no matter how many people think that health care comes from hospitals, physicians or drugs.

The Catholic Worker is prophetic. Prophecy for Catholic health care may seem unrealistic to some, since we have large systems that address the needs of many people. But the Catholic Worker and Catholic health care are not naïve. Prophecy is a realistic view of what is, combined with a vision of what can be. We don’t just care for those who are sick. Instead, we take care of present needs, with our gaze upon a better future for those whom we serve.

Both the Catholic Worker and Catholic health care invite us to an individual encounter with those whom we serve. What are our values? How can we care? Do we meet the need? Without this reflection, we cannot effectively serve. The Catholic Worker’s origins reflect the same optimism that guided those who established the American Catholic health care ministry.

And this same prophetic voice still resonates within our ministry. Look at the work that we do. In Cleveland, the Sisters of Charity Foundation has launched an initiative to revitalize the Central neighborhood — where 68.8% of residents live below the federal poverty line — and to develop a health campus at their medical center to offer services beyond acute care. Or, we could look to the work of Bon Secours Community Works program in West Baltimore. They make investments in affordable housing, neighborhood economic development, family and youth services, addiction programs and prison outreach. Looking across the ministry, there are many other examples that we can see. That’s prophecy in action.^{3,4}

Food can express love and care. Family meals at a common table are, at their best, communities of love. This value should also resonate in our Eucharistic liturgies. But it can also be so much less. Food can be empty calories that are pushed for profit, leading to undesirable health outcomes. Food can be a product to generate income.

Farmers, particularly those working on Catholic Worker farms, intentionally think about the food that they plant and grow and how it will benefit others. Their love for others is poured out in the food that they produce for people who are poor.

Food also tends to be a product to be delivered in the most efficient way. The ethical difficulty

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comes from pursuing profit as the primary value. If we make our primary values speed and efficiency, rather than meeting needs, we will ignore the slow economy, the local organic farms, the small producers and the local businesses near us. In the process, we will lose connection with our communities and those whose labor makes this possible. When we instrumentalize food as a product, rather than as a human need, we create a system in which other people become things to be used by some to create profit. The same could be said for health care that adopts the same ethic.

Harvesting and producing affordable, healthy food is an ethical challenge for the United States. The average American household overbuys food, then discards it. According to a study by the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic and the National Resources Defense Council, about 40% of food produced in the United States goes uneaten, and according to even the most conservative estimates, Americans waste 160 billion pounds of

food each year.^{5,6}

Secondly, simplicity is a Catholic value. In Catholic social teaching we talk about the importance of subsidiarity, giving the power of choices to those with the least power. That's the ethic of the Catholic Worker, empowering those who have nothing: giving essentials, with the hope that those who receive will find their path forward.

What does simplicity, or subsidiarity, mean for Catholic health care? It means to look at where you are now. What needs to be changed? How can that be done? Local relationships are often more powerful for change than regional or national relationships.

Lastly, the vision of Day and Maurin to provide a link between sustainable food production and caring for the less fortunate remains our challenge, applying their questions to our work in health care. What does sustainable health care and addressing the needs of the less fortunate mean for our ministry? Can we care for the less fortunate with a new model of health care? Acute care and its reimbursements are changing. How can we continue to care in this new environment? Prophetic health care will need to look at the needs and the means to continue our care.

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NOTES

1. "Catholic Worker Farms," The Catholic Worker Movement, <https://www.catholicworker.org/communities/farms.html#PA>.
2. Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Farm, <https://dorothydaycwfarm.org/>.
3. Lisa Eisenhauer, "Sisters of Charity Foundation to Invest in Cleveland Neighborhood," *Catholic Health World*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/catholic-health-world/archives/issues/october-1-2021/sisters-of-charity-foundation-to-invest-in-cleveland-neighborhood>.
4. Renee Stovsky, "Offering a Hand-Up, Ross Cultivates Hope in Beleaguered West Baltimore," *Catholic Health World*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/catholic-health-world/archives/issues/july-1-2021/offering-a-hand-up-ross-cultivates-hope-in-beleaguered-west-baltimore>.
5. Emily Broad Leib et al., "The Dating Game: How Confusing Food Date Labels Lead to Food Waste in America," National Resources Defense Council and Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/dating-game-report.pdf>.
6. Lilly Da Gama et al., "Driven to Waste: The Global Impact of Food Loss and Waste on Farms," World Wildlife Fund, https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/technical_report___wwf_farm_stage_food_loss_and_waste.pdf.

PAUSE. BREATHE. HEAL.

I Find Rest

For just this moment, bring your attention to your breath.

INHALE deeply and settle yourself into your body.

EXHALE the stress and tension you feel.

On your next inhale, pray, [I Find Rest](#).

And as you exhale, [In Your Shelter](#)

**I Find Rest,
In Your Shelter**

KEEP BREATHING this prayer for a few moments.

(Repeat the prayer several times)

CONCLUDE, REMEMBERING:

Even now, God is with you, as near to you as your breath. Continue giving yourself the gift to pause, breathe, and heal knowing you are not alone.

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. PSALM 91:1

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