

New Life in the City

Catholic Workers Heal Souls and Soil Across America

By Jerry Windley-Daoust

Maryhouse, one of two houses of hospitality operated by the New York Catholic Worker community, is something of a pilgrimage destination for people interested in Dorothy Day, the journalist and social activist who co-founded the Catholic Worker movement and whose cause for sainthood is being considered by the Vatican. The simple bedroom where she lived the last years of her life has been largely preserved as she left

it, filled with her books, prayer cards, and other personal effects.

Yet, Maryhouse is no museum but a living community carrying on the Catholic Worker tradition. As they have for decades, community members work for “a world in which it is easier to be good”—that is, a world shaped by the justice and charity of the Gospel. They feed the hungry and shelter the homeless; they denounce injustice in the streets and announce the Church’s

vision for a more just society in the pages of their monthly paper, *The Catholic Worker*. And they hold regular “roundtable discussions for the clarification of thought.”

All of which makes the vegetable and herb garden the community installed on its roof just last year stand out. After all, what do raised beds and pots of tomatoes, lettuce, squash, herbs, and beans have to do with the reconstruction of the social order?

“It’s a form of rejoicing in and announcing God’s creativity,” said Martha Hennessy, Dorothy Day’s granddaughter and a member of the New York Catholic Worker community. “There’s nothing more beautiful than growing stuff. So that’s why we do it. That’s why we need to do it.”



The rooftop garden at Maryhouse in New York City allows Catholic Workers to rejoice in God's creativity. (Photos submitted by Jerry Windley-Daoust)

Integral Ecology

While the practical benefit of the garden—fresh produce supplementing food donations—is important, the deeper purpose lies in the opportunity it provides community members to engage directly with the earth, practicing what Pope Francis calls “integral ecology.” In his encyclicals *Laudato Si'* (2015) and *Laudate Deum* (2023), Pope Francis presents integral ecology as a holistic approach to the ecological crisis, one in which the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are understood to be deeply interconnected. A meaningful solution to the ecological crisis must respect human dignity and social justice, the pope says; conversely, respecting human dignity and achieving the common good requires care for God's creation.

At its core, then, integral ecology is about restoring right relationships—between humans and the earth, between the rich and the poor, and between people and God.

The integral ecology described by Pope Francis resonates deeply within the Catholic Worker tradition. Many of Pope Francis's ideas echo those articulated nearly a century earlier by Peter Maurin, who co-founded the Catholic Worker movement with Dorothy Day. Maurin, often described as a “peasant intellectual,” advocated for a radical renewal of society through the integration of cult (religious devotion and worship), culture (intellectual and artistic pursuits oriented toward wisdom and virtue), and cultivation (economic and community life centered on agrarian

practices, care of the land, and manual labor). Drawing on a wide variety of Catholic intellectuals and the recent development of Catholic social doctrine, he argued that this integrated lifestyle was best realized in small, local communities organized around parishes, houses of hospitality, and “agronomic universities”—basically, communal farms.

For nearly a century, Catholic Workers have been attempting to realize this vision, generally (and admittedly) with limited success. Early Catholic Worker farming communities floundered due to a lack of practical farming know-how and, as Dorothy herself put it, too many lazy “workers.”

But beginning in the 1970s, a new generation of Catholic Workers began establishing more successful Catholic Worker

farms. Today, more than 30 of the movement's approximately 180 communities identify as farms, and even urban houses of hospitality with tiny yards maintain at least a small garden.

The rooftop garden at Maryhouse is a nod to Peter's vision, Hennessy said: It brings people together, it involves manual labor that feeds the laborers, and it participates in God's work of creation, making something beautiful.

There's nothing more beautiful than growing stuff. So that's why we do it. That's why we need to do it.

Kansas City

Halfway across the country, the John Paul II Catholic Worker Farm also takes its inspiration from Peter Maurin's early concept of integral ecology. Near inner city Kansas City, Missouri, a handful of Catholic Workers maintain a large vegetable garden, a fruit orchard, a small yard for sheep and goats, and a chicken yard that produces eggs in abundance—all within a half-acre plot. Besides all that, the community makes biochar from brush on their land and surrounding properties. (Biochar is a special form of charcoal that is excellent for soil amendment, carbon sequestration, and improved water and nutrient retention.)

"We've created a closed-loop system where the brush is getting integrated with the manure going into the compost, and then ultimately into the field and into our food," said Spencer Hess, one

of the farm's co-founders. Most of the food supports the community, with surplus food (including a lot of eggs) being distributed to the largely working-class Hispanic families in the surrounding neighborhood. Some of the food and biochar is also shared with Cherith Brook Catholic Worker, another urban homestead eight minutes away.

All of this begins to point at what Peter Maurin had in mind for the Catholic Worker, Hess said. Houses of hospitality and doing the works of mercy were foundational elements of Maurin's program, but so was cultivation, "the idea that we needed to get back in touch with nature, that we needed to be farming in agro-ecologically sane ways, and that this wasn't just good ecologically, but it was good for a person's soul, and it was good for society."

Nashville

Modeling a more just, harmonious, and less stressful way of life is one of the reasons that Karl Meyer established Nashville Greenlands Catholic Worker in the late 1990s. Meyer, a longtime Catholic Worker whose introduction to the movement was getting arrested with Dorothy Day as she protested nuclear war preparedness drills in New York City in 1957, grows hundreds of pounds of fresh food on two urban lots comprising a total of about one-sixth of an acre.

Having grown up in a small Vermont dairy village, the decades Meyer spent with the Catholic Worker in poor urban neighborhoods showed him the potential to transform vacant lots into productive urban farms.

"I wanted to bring that small-farm, mid-20th century way of

life into the use of unused urban land," says Meyer, who is now in his late 80s. "And I've been doing it now for 28 years in Nashville, and I raise most of my own food here with chestnut trees, fruit trees, berry patches, grape vines, and all kinds of vegetables."

For Meyer, the success of the project goes beyond the food it provides. More crucially, it embodies Maurin's vision in which people live in closer relationships with the land—and one another, particularly the poor.

"Peter Maurin said, 'Raise what you eat and eat what you raise.' And poor people all over the world have to do that, you know," he said. "The earth is telling us we need to slow down our way of life."

Philadelphia

In the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia, the House of Grace Catholic Worker has very intentionally created a space for people to slow down, breathe, and reconnect—with God, with the natural world, with themselves, and with one another. One side of the community's garden is dedicated to organic vegetables, berries, herbs, and flowers, while the other side features a beautifully landscaped shade garden.

The community operates a house of hospitality as well as a free medical clinic, and over the years, both their guests and their patients, as well as residents of the neighborhood, have made good use of the garden, say community members Johanna Berrigan and Mary Beth Appel. The garden has provided a space for graduation parties, engagement blessings, baptism parties, and even a memorial service for clinic patients who never had a funeral.

Neighborhood moms bring their young children to the garden, too.

This is a recurring theme when it comes to urban Catholic Worker garden and farm projects: the recognition that as much as people need healthy food, they also need beauty and community.

Los Angeles

This is the rationale behind the Los Angeles Catholic Worker's dining garden.

The community tried growing food in a vacant lot on Skid Row in the 1970s, only to have all the produce eaten by passersby before it could be properly harvested. However, after an earthquake destroyed the building where it operated a soup kitchen in the early 1990s, the community took another approach. Forced to serve meals outdoors on the blacktop parking lot, they immediately noticed a difference in the mood of their guests.

"We realized that sitting outside was mighty nice," said Catherine Morris, a founding member of the community, "and that people were calmed by being outside, even when it was only a temporary spot in a parking lot."

They decided to rebuild the kitchen in a smaller building, replacing the indoor dining area with an outdoor garden. This garden, they decided, would be designed not to feed the body, but the soul.

"It was intentionally created as a place of beauty," Morris said. "Skid Row is a wild and crazy place, so to come into the garden is to have some time away from that. Not only is it beautiful, it's also a safe space."

The garden isn't huge—just about one-sixth of an acre—but

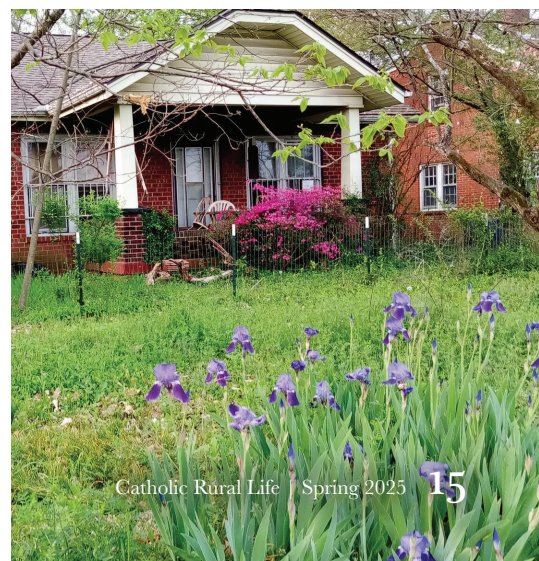
it packs a lot of beauty into that small, walled-off space. A tiered fountain graces the walking area, and a waterfall garden enhances the dining section. The free clinic at the garden's rear is adorned with flowering vines, while the grounds feature an array of ground-level bushes and succulents, some housed in tiled pots crafted by a resident artist. A tiled mural of sunflowers graces the back of the garden, complemented by a beautiful tile peace pole. Mature ornamental trees, including tipu, silk floss, ginkgo, and flowering jacarandas, provide a green canopy and cool shade. The dining garden has tables and benches along the walls where diners can eat meals from the adjacent soup kitchen.

Some residents have dubbed the space "Eden" or "Paradise," perhaps proving the truth of Fyodor Dostoevsky's sentiment that "beauty will save the world"—a quote Dorothy Day often repeated, Morris noted.

In all their variety, Catholic Worker urban farms and gardens are both practical and spiritual projects groping toward the integration of ecology, religious practice, and social justice proposed by Pope Francis and Peter Maurin.

Catholic Workers readily admit they haven't fully realized that vision. But if cultivating the earth teaches them anything, it is patience for the quiet, steady emergence of the reign of God.

"There's nothing like planting little seeds and seeing them turn into something good that always, you know, brings hope and joy," Hennessy said. "Things die, but then things come back. And that's cause for rejoicing."



Catholic Workers across the country are establishing gardens and farms in both urban and rural areas. (Photos submitted by Jerry Windley-Daoust)