The Jean Donovan House: Filling a Need and Leading by Example

Patricia D. Larson
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_theses
Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_theses/696

Available by permission of the author. Reproduction or retransmission of this material in any form is prohibited without expressed written permission of the author.
The Jean Donovan House:

Filling a Need and Leading by Example

A THESIS

The Honors Program

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"

and the Degree Bachelor of Arts

In the Department of History

by

Patricia Larson

May 2000
Signatures

Ken Jones, Professor of History
Thesis Advisor

Martha Tomhave-Blauvelt, Professor of History
Panel Member

Sheila Nelson
Sheila Nelson, Associate Professor of Sociology
Panel Member

David Bennetts,
History Department Chair

Mark Thamert OSB,
Honors Department Program Director

Margaret Cook,
Thesis Program Director
Acknowledgments:

This has been an adventure. My original choice in topic was a difficult one. I spent all of last summer going many different directions with my thesis topic. Many thanks to Dr. Ken Jones who helped me focus my ideas and reminded me that I needed to "keep in mind that this is a thesis, not a book." His advice this year has been invaluable. I would also like to thank my Research Seminar professor and committee member, Dr. Martha Tomhave-Blauvelt, for her encouragement and catching enthusiasm. There were many times I left her office with a renewed sense of energy for this project. Many thanks my other committee member, Sheila Nelson, whose advice helped considerably with the section on the economics of the 1980s and whose additional insights gave me a sense of the political atmosphere of the 80s and the importance of what I was doing.

Special consideration must be given to my sources. Helen Gaebe, Maggie Cashman, Dan Repinski, Bob Stuber and Fr. Ed Kraemer, without whom this project would be impossible. Phil Runkel, archivist at the Catholic Worker Archives at Marquette University was also instrumental in getting me connected with the newsletters published by the house between the years of 1985 and 1990. I must not forget our favorite history department secretary, Norma Koetter, who took care of the logistics of the telephone interviews that I did with Maggie, Dan and Bob.

Also thanks is due to my friends Renita Eidenschink and Elisabeth Skoro who let me borrow their tape recorders. Renita also lent her car, time and precious energy to my emergencies and took me to the library and waited during my interview with Helen; patience is a virtue my friend. Thanks to Stacy Deery who took me to the City Planning Office after a detour to the wrong government office building. My friend Jon Meyer was phenomenally supportive and helpful, always with great words of encouragement, persuasive suggestions, superior proof-
reading abilities, and remarkable camera skills. My folks were also crucial to the success of this project. Dad’s unwavering belief in my ability fueled my courage. My mother was a great source of relief from my preoccupations and insecurities. Thank you too, to all my friends who respected the fact that I had a very important interview with Maggie the morning after my 21st birthday and postponed their ambitious intents until a more opportune time presented itself.

My spring break experience at the Des Moines Catholic Worker House helped clarify many of the issues that had remained cloudy and impenetrable. Nothing compares to hands-on experience. Thanks Fr. Frank, Richard, Eddie, Norman, Carla, Mark, Brian and Jackie. And I’d like to acknowledge my awesome group, Huong, Michelle, Nate, Sam, Sarah, Kate, Maggie, Anne and Carolyn. You all were part of the magical potion that instigated my many epiphanies of the week.

I feel that I should attribute some of my success with this project to Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. Dorothy’s amazing strength and Peter’s personal philosophy provided most of the steam for this engine of social change and their contributions to peace are almost entirely beyond compare.

This paper never would have been completed without the help of these people. Nevertheless, any mistakes made in the paper are my own and should not reflect in any way on these wonderful sources of support.
Jean Donovan House Timeline

September 1983  Maggie, Bob and Margie begin planning the Jean Donovan House
November 7, 1983  First Newsletter
December 1983  Preparation of house
January 1, 1983  Moved into 315 8th Avenue North
February-April, 1984  Zoning problems
June 1984  Dan Repinski and Kathy Kraemer join house
July 5, 1984  Moved to 611 8th Avenue South
September 1984  Margie DeSpain leaves the house
May 1985  Maggie Cashman and Dan Repinski marry and leave the house
Summer 1985  Helen Gaebe moves to St. Cloud and volunteers at Jean Donovan
August 1986  Article in St. Cloud Times, “Lack of Volunteers May Close Shelter”
Labor Day 1986  House temporarily closes, Bob Stuber leaves
October 1, 1986  House re-opens under Helen Gaebe and Rick and Cathy Endres.
December 1986  St. Cloud Times reports Jean Donovan House is thriving
Winter 1988  Helen breaks shoulder, spends time reflecting, makes changes
April 1990  Appeal for Volunteers
June 1990  House closes
It was 1983. St. Cloud Minnesota, like many other cities in the United States at the time was struggling to recover from the recession that kicked off the decade. Maggie Cashman, Bob Stuber, and Margie DeSpain had recently left the hallowed halls of the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University. College experiences with social service and social justice groups led them to look at St. Cloud as a city with many of the same problems as larger metropolitan areas. Their investigations into St. Cloud uncovered homeless and transient populations that were in great need of emergency shelter. They set out with the ambitious goal to begin a Catholic Worker House in St. Cloud. They named it the Jean Donovan House and it operated until 1990.

Why did anyone think that St. Cloud needed a Catholic Worker community? Why would three middle-class college students be attracted to a Catholic Worker project and lifestyle? How did they make this house work? Why did the project end? Though nothing has ever been written about the Jean Donovan House, much has been written about the Catholic Worker Movement, communal living and the economic challenges of the 1980s. These sources supplement a primary source investigation of interviews, a collection of newsletters published by the Jean Donovan House, and newspaper articles that provide the foundation for this study.

By their nature, these sources are especially challenging. The newspaper articles are largely uninformative because of their lack of depth but they reveal information about the city's concerns at the time. The newsletters are reflective and informative, but they become increasingly abstract and eclectic over time. The interviews are precious volumes of historical memory, but are nevertheless colored by time and distance. Also, as Helen Gaebe, a large player in the life of the Jean Donovan, pointed out in our interview, no one spends any amount of time
at a Catholic Worker House and leaves unaffected. The emotional aspect of the experience, I am sure, lends a particular slant to the interviews. In addition, most studies of Catholic Worker Houses include a visit or lengthy stay at the house for research purposes. This is impossible for this study and the result is the loss of atmosphere and detail because daily activities and individual experiences are not easily recounted ten years after they happened. To top it all off, each Catholic Worker House exists in its own element as a part of a larger movement. The movement itself is anarchist, which means that there is no pecking order of responsibility or authority. There is no parent organization that can answer all questions and each community is radically different.

This anarchist organization is a manifestation of the philosophy that motivates the Catholic Worker Movement and many of the individuals involved in it. This philosophy, called personalism, requires that a person relate to other people without judgement and as openly as possible. People are accepted as they are, in whatever condition that may be. On another level it means that people take the initiative to solve the problems that face them with a direct and personal response. We must not forget, however that even with this philosophy, personal identities and preferences can interfere with problem solving and personal relationships, which can affect the success of an entire project; especially when this project lacks the bureaucratic structure and hierarchy that could mediate this interference. The tension between living a philosophy and living with other people is amplified when the two elements are as intimately connected as they are in a Catholic Worker community.

Even with this tension, these sources show that the Catholic Worker Movement’s nature relies on the energy and dedication of individuals to succeed. The Jean Donovan House
was no exception. Their personalist response to the effects of the recession of 1981-82 was an attempt to address poverty, homelessness and social justice issues through direct and personal means and never intended as the ultimate solution for homelessness in St. Cloud. Nevertheless, there was a continuous and extensive network of community support that provided both time and resources. Even so, the house relied so heavily on the personal resources of its residents that it suspended operation once and closed the second time key individuals chose to leave. This suggests that the personalist response, at least in this case, was not as stable, continuous or comprehensive as society, or the Workers themselves, would have liked. The experience of the Jean Donovan House shows that the personalist philosophy can not always mediate the problems that arise when living in community, that the role of the individual is so important that his or her departure can be detrimental to the project when a replacement is not found or a supporting system able is not in place to absorb the loss, and that changing attitudes and social conditions affect the support that a project like the Jean Donovan House receives.
Part of the motivation for starting the Jean Donovan House in St. Cloud was that Maggie, Margie and Bob saw a need for temporary or emergency shelter there. Many of the guests who stayed at the house were people just passing through, but the economic situation of the time left many people, especially a large population on fixed income, needing emergency food or shelter because they simply were not able to make ends meet. This was felt on a national level, but the personalist motivation for beginning the Jean Donovan House was to address these problems on a direct, personal and local level.

The decade of the 1980s began with a recession which, "is often called the worst since the Great Depression." The costs were great as unemployment peaked to a national level of more than 10% and greater numbers of people were having trouble meeting their needs and becoming hungry and homeless. The incredible numbers of people who needed immediate attention were called to the attention of many concerned individuals. Projects like the Jean Donovan House helped alleviate this immediate need, but the residual affects of the recession reinforced the continued need for emergency shelter on both national and local scales.

To create the Jean Donovan House, the founders synthesized their perceptions of their Catholic heritage, their exposure to the Catholic Worker Movement, their involvement with the Direct Action Movement, their perception of the national economic and political situation and the increasing needs of the poor in St. Cloud. The world these students entered was filled with contradiction and struggle. One of the foremost concerns was unemployment and its effects.

---

American unemployment rates in 1981, 1982 and 1983 were the most alarming since the 1930s. Unemployment rates rose from 7.6% in 1981 to 9.5 % in June of 1982. The unemployment rate remained at this level through 1983 with an estimated 9.6% unemployment. The students leaving the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University faced a nation with almost 10% unemployment and all of the problems that accompany it, including homelessness, chemical addiction, and widespread emotional fatigue. The Jean Donovan House was founded with the goal of helping alert the public to these problems while at the same time, serving the basic needs of those suffering from high unemployment.

Though the recession receded between 1983 and 1984 and in this time, the unemployment rate decreased to a more comfortable 7.5%, the effects were long lasting. The statistics from the rest of the decade demonstrate the powerful disruption caused by the recession, and they proved the continuing need for a shelter like the Jean Donovan House, especially as the government’s reaction to the crisis was ineffective. Some people who had lost their jobs during the recession found new jobs, but they earned less money and many of those who were able to keep their jobs suffered a similar decrease in income. In fact, the Joint Economic Committee of Congress reported that, "a full-time worker earning the minimum wage to support a three-member family ... in 1979 earned 100.3 percent [of the contemporary poverty level,] but in 1985 he or she earned only 78.2 percent of the poverty level ..." This

---

phenomenon can be explained, in part, by the fact that the minimum wage remained steady between 1981 and 1989. With ever-increasing inflation, a minimum wage that did not increase caused many people to fall below their previous economic level. As this occurred, social scientists observed the first measurable decline in the number of members of the middle class. In 1986, those with incomes between $19,000 to $47,000 were considered ‘middle class.’ This group decreased from 52.3% of the population in 1978 to 44.3% of the 1986 population.\(^6\) Those people who had fallen into lower economic levels were the people who were beginning to need help from agencies like the Jean Donovan House. These were the people who were having a hard time making ends meet.

Those who had not been able to find work again were looking for jobs in an already flooded labor market. Many trends were influencing this influx of workers. The baby-boom generation had matured to an employable age. Many young people and record numbers of women were looking for work. The globalization of markets that increased during this time and a new focus on service industry instead of manufacturing jobs limited their opportunities.\(^7\) Technological improvements had a large impact on available jobs when automated machines replaced human workers. Many companies also sought cheaper labor markets outside of the United States. As a result, factories closed here and opened in developing countries with large, cheap labor forces. With all of these factors, it becomes easy to see how as of 1990, "1.5 million of the 10 million who lost jobs from 1983 to 1988 did not find new employment."\(^8\) This population was also beginning to look for assistance from outside sources.

\(^6\) Eitzen, 269.
\(^7\) Eitzen, 271.
\(^8\) Eitzen, 283.
These employment problems coupled with a housing shortage are two of the principal causes in the increase in homelessness in the United States at the time. Inflation and a decrease in available low-income housing created many problems for low-income families. In 1990, it was noted that, "the median price of a single-family dwelling has quadrupled since 1970," and that "this inflation in the housing market at all levels has placed increased pressures on the low-income population . . . Data from 1985, for example, showed that 6.1 million households below the poverty line spent more than 50 percent of their incomes for housing." This outrageous amount being spent on housing is a direct result of the decrease in affordable housing options. Many options previously available to low-income families became condominiums for wealthier families. There was also a push for the renovation and revitalization of urban centers. More often than not, this included the destruction of many single-occupancy and low-income housing options and the construction of new office buildings.

At the same time housing options were diminishing, government funding for affordable housing decreased dramatically. "Federal support for subsidized housing dropped from $32.2 billion in 1981 to $6 billion in 1989 . . . the Department of Housing and Urban Development authorized the construction of 183,000 subsidized dwellings in 1980, but only 20,000 in 1989."

---

9 It would be worth noting here how the government defines poverty. "The Social Security Administration [SSA] sets the official poverty line based on what it considers the minimal amount of money required for a subsistence level of life. To determine the poverty line, the SSA computes the cost of a basic nutritionally adequate diet and multiplies that figure by three. This figure is based on a government research finding that poor people spend one-third of their income on food." (It seems that this method only works to maintain the status quo, not to actually improve the situation of so many people.) This definition actually underestimates the degree of poverty in the United States because people in low-income situations today spend much more than 50% of their income on housing. However, even by this estimate, "in 1990, 13.5 percent of the population (35 million persons) were defined as living in poverty." Source: Eitzen, 271, 272.
10 Eitzen, 280.
11 Eitzen, 280.
12 Eitzen, 281.
This obvious reluctance of the government to support the lower classes is only reiterated in the administration’s other public assistance policies.

Indeed, as these reductions worsened the situation for the poor, the economy was steadily improving for the government, the wealthy and the large business owners. "By the end of 1986, there had been four years of economic expansion. Even more impressive is the fact that despite this impressive recovery, inflation [had] stayed at around 3 percent, for a full six years after its peak in 1980."\textsuperscript{13} This rapid and continuous improvement made the growing disparity between the rich and the poor and other Reagan administration actions even more difficult for the poor to understand and accommodate.

Reagan’s policies concerning the allocation and distribution of funds had a very negative impact on the increasing numbers of needy people. "Each of the Reagan budgets lowered programs that helped the needy in society by tightening eligibility requirements and reducing the monies allocated. All told, during the Reagan administration, government monies for the poor were reduced by $51 billion."\textsuperscript{14} Reagan also assumed that the state governments, not the federal government, would have better ideas about the needs of their constituents and the distribution of allocated funds. He relinquished a lot of responsibility and authority to the states in the matters of public assistance. For these reasons, federal funding policies did not effectively relieve the burdens of the poor, rather they augmented the growing disparity between the classes. One example of this was shown when "government tax breaks to homeowners who were able to deduct interest and taxes amounted to a housing subsidy of $43.8 billion in 1988, whereas the

\textsuperscript{13}Boskin, 103.
\textsuperscript{14}Eitzen, 284. Original italics.
amount the poor received in public and subsidized housing that year amounted to only about $7 billion.\textsuperscript{15} The Jean Donovan house newsletter, in 1984, demonstrated a public awareness of these changes and anticipated the effects of these new policies noting that the new federal tax structure created in the period of 1981-1984 would make it such that, "all families earning less than $10,000 will lose $23 billion, and households making more than $80,000 a year (1.4 per cent of the population) will gain $35 billion. The net loss for a poor family is $1,100; the net gain for a wealthy family is $24,000."\textsuperscript{16} This is actually a relatively small displacement of funds from the lower to the upper classes when compared to the direct subsidies and tax-benefits given to large corporations, big business and defense contractors. Nevertheless, the loss of this income had a devastating effect on poor families.

Reflecting on the national condition of the economy, the founders of the Jean Donovan House concluded that St. Cloud was probably just as affected by the tough economic times as any other city. Though there are discrepancies in the reported figures of unemployed and impoverished peoples in St. Cloud's greater metro area, the presence of the poor cannot be denied. In August of 1986, the Minnesota Department of Labor reported an unemployment rate of 5.0-5.3% in this area. However, the Jean Donovan House newsletter reports a "very high unemployment rate of 14%."\textsuperscript{17} A study conducted by Douglas O. Love and Jerome A. Deichert helps explain this discrepancy. This study reported that the reported number of households with earnings was 42,004. The reported number of households was 49,359. This left 7315 households with no reported earnings—14.82% of the total. This seems to be the source for the

\textsuperscript{15} Eitzen, 279.
\textsuperscript{17} Jean Donovan House Newsletter, Vol 2. No, 2, 5 Mar 1984
Jean Donovan House statistic which more than likely represents not only unemployed workers, but many people on fixed income like disability due to injury, mental or physical handicap, or drug dependency. The Jean Donovan House catered largely to this population.

The estimate of close to 5% unemployment probably came from the comparison of the total number of unemployed workers (4685) to the total labor force (89,265). These estimates vary because of the populations they compare. Nevertheless, it becomes clear looking at these statistics, that government assistance to the poor was not enough at this point in the nation and in St. Cloud. "Less than half of the poor actually receive any federal assistance. When compared with the non-poor, their life chances are negative, with a higher incidence of health problems, malnutrition, social pathologies, and homelessness." Only about 30% of poor people in St. Cloud received federal assistance. These mounting hardships illustrate the growing necessity of shelters and emergency assistance.

The Jean Donovan House was to a large degree, a synthesis of two movements. In the 1980s, a large movement developed to address these economic and other political concerns called the Direct Action Movement. In the 1930s, also a time of severe and widespread economic hardship, the Catholic Worker Movement developed as a critique of the current society and a vision of a new society. College experiences with both of these movements influenced and shaped the founding of the Jean Donovan.

Through the involvement of national movements like the Nuclear Freeze Movement, the Sanctuary Movement, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Pledge of Resistance and many

19 Eitzen, 285.
20 Love and Deichert.
local movements, the Direct Action Movement criticized the government and society on a large and public scale. "The direct action movement wanted to change public attitudes, and it wanted to create a community within which activists could change their ways of thinking and living and which could serve as a magnet to others, a living demonstration of alternatives." 21 The movement was driven by the idea that a person's life had to be the message, the meaning and the primary source for change.

This living and constant critique of society and its passionate adoption within the movement was born of the frustration felt as individuals felt they did not have national forum through which they may voice their discontent. Ronald Reagan's re-election in 1984 sent a clear message to those who were criticizing American foreign and domestic policy; the large majority of the American public, and a significant portion of the powerful wealthy were simply not going to listen to criticism. On one hand, this frustrated activists, but on the other hand, it boosted the involvement and activity within the national organizations that were orchestrating large scale demonstrations and protests. The means to accomplish comprehensive change varied among the groups who comprised the movement and their individual goals.

That the movement was comprised of so many different factions made the definition of the aims and means of the movement difficult to establish concretely. The participants came from all walks of life, with various levels of participation. This was a movement that included but was not limited to Pagans, Christians (from the entire political spectrum), anarchists, Jews, various racial groups, and feminists. Many of the groups used tactics like civil disobedience, protest, and leafleting to express their ideas and suggest ways to change things, but consensus

---

was not a predominant feature of the Direct Action Movement.

American involvement in the unrest in Central America and the continuous buildup of military power in various parts of the world were two key issues driving national forces. Much of the participation from the Christian lay religious population was motivated by exposure to Liberation Theology and the idea of giving moral witness. Liberation Theology is a response to the violence in Central America through very personal and direct means like living among the poor or working directly on their behalf. The concept of giving moral witness was heavily utilized by the Liberation Theologians and defined as, "Standing up for one’s beliefs, maintaining consistency, and acting when success is not guaranteed. . . . Men and women give witness not only as a means of self-definition, but to provide hope for people who might share their views and to catch the attention of those who have not yet reflected on the issues."22 This method was working rather effectively for many in Central America and the message was spreading through the United States. The experiences of those in Central America struck a chord with many in the Direct Action movement.

Personal and direct methods required a much smaller, more religious focus. Locally, many Christian activists turned to address issues like homelessness and other forms of injustice. "The radical Christians in the direct action movement were much more interested in oppression. . . . They sought to organize those who were abused and powerless. . . . There was a good deal of respect for those people who voluntarily gave up middle-class existence in order to live in poverty."23 This ideal also took on many forms which ranged from the establishment of

22Holsworth, 81.
23Marullo and Lofland, 108.
independently operated homeless shelters to mass movements for the improvement of living conditions and political status for the homeless, but largely echoed the means of the Liberation Theologians and their dedication to living among the poor populations and giving moral witness. The international network of support for a Christian movement also helped the direct action movement by providing validation for the participants and supporting the movement within a large, readily available source of material, intellectual, spiritual and ideological support. It helped provide a stability to the movement that other radical groups lacked.

For the Jean Donovan House Workers in particular, the Direct Action Movement empowered them to take a stand against the realities they faced upon leaving college life. Bob Stuber stated:

> I was learning about atrocities in Central America. I was exposed to non-violent protest action in the writing of Daniel Berrigan and other Plowshares activists. I got involved with the Honeywell project, a campaign to get Honeywell to stop producing cluster bombs. I learned about the Bomb, its spiritual, psychological and economic effects on people all over the world. It was the time of Ronald Reagan, the Evil Empire, Star Wars, Illegal funding of the Contras. Everywhere in the world I looked I could see the blood of US involvement, sometimes the result of the cold war, sometimes the result of naked greed.²⁴

For Bob and many others, the solutions to the problems they perceived were to be found in more personal and direct ideologies and methods.

They also were influenced by the conflict in Central America and they were inspired by the work of the Liberation Theologians. Bob reflected that:

> we were also moved by the base Christian communities throughout Latin America who were able to step away from the church as an

²⁴Bob Stuber, e-mail to author, 15 March 2000.
instrument for personal salvation—perhaps Marx’s opiate—to a liberating faith that called for the salvation of all of society. This move from the personal relationship with a God to Personalism seems to me to be more in line with the life of Jesus as we know of it. I was moved by the transformative power of the Church in Central America. Liberation Theology, the preferential option for the poor, community—the Mystical Body: this seemed to be the ‘authentic’ Church to me.\(^{25}\)

This authenticity was also propagated and reinforced by the Christian tradition of non-violence.

As Bob’s reflections demonstrated, the ideals and implements of the Direct Action Movement had a great impact on the political formation of the individuals who began the Jean Donovan House. The movement had shaped a large part of their college experience and their contemporary consciousness. They employed many of the same means of the movement and much of their support came from the large majority of Direct Action participants who contributed time, energy and resources out of religious conviction for the purpose of serving moral witness.

These tactics were reinforced by the founders’ exposure to and understanding of the Catholic Worker Movement. During the January Term of her Junior year, Maggie lived and worked in the Catholic Worker Cass House of St. Louis, Missouri.\(^{26}\) She brought her experiences from Cass House to the community that would eventually found the Jean Donovan. Maggie, having this positive experience at a Catholic Worker house was a major voice in establishing the Jean Donovan as a Catholic Worker. The development of the Catholic Worker Movement and the charisma of the individuals involved in the movement was contagious for

\(^{25}\)Bob Stuber, e-mail to author, 15 Mar 2000.

\(^{26}\)The College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University had a January Term planned into the academic calendar. This was a one month term between the Fall and Spring semesters. In this term, the first three weeks were spent in one class, usually lasting three hours each day. The last week of the month was a vacation week during which many students took time to travel, volunteer or rest before Spring semester. The colleges allowed each student the option of choosing not to attend one of the four January Terms of his/her college career.
these young people who were visiting other Catholic Worker Houses and learning of the philosophy of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin.

The social concerns of the Catholic Worker Movement were developed through the interaction of these two primary individuals. Dorothy Day, born on November 8, 1897, is traditionally considered the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Her parents were Episcopalian and Presbyterian, but Dorothy later converted to Catholicism. She spent two years in college at the University of Illinois where she began to experience internal unrest over political, social and economic issues. "Day’s growing disaffection with the world around her led to a rebellion that was typically youthful and American-highly personal and non-ideological, yet morally passionate and dedicated to making over the world with new ideas and direct action." Day spent some time writing for various radical papers and demonstrating against the government’s inability to relieve the suffering of the American poor that resulted from the Great Depression. She met Peter Maurin in December of 1933. From this meeting, her life took a radical turn.

Frenchman Peter Maurin (1877-1949) was a man of strong conviction. His early attempts to live by his convictions led him to join the Christian Brothers and later the Le Sillon lay movement. France’s obligatory military service drove him to move to Canada which has no such obligation. As opposed to pursuing a professional career, he took various hard labor jobs and for this reason: "his unencumbered life offered time for study and prayer, out of which a vision had

---

taken form of a social order instilled with basic values of the Gospel."28 This was the beginning of the vision that would grow to inspire and nourish the Catholic Worker Movement.

The particular values that Peter drew from were the Gospel values of the works of mercy. There are two kinds of works of mercy: "The corporal works of mercy are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, ransoming the captive and burying the dead. The spiritual works of mercy are instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, admonishing sinners, forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently, and praying for the living and the dead."29 Peter believed that these works could only be completely fulfilled in anarchistic, personal and egalitarian communities where people shared themselves and their talents.

To pursue the development of these communities, he traveled south by train and eventually settled as a handyman at a boy's camp in upstate New York. He often traveled to New York City to engage himself in conversation with whomever would listen. Fate brought Maurin and Day together one December afternoon in 1933.

Maurin's ideas provided a strong foundation and a new path for Dorothy Day. "Day quickly came to regard him as an answer to her prayers, someone how could help her discover what she was supposed to do."30 She was full of ambition and was eager to change the world. The Great Depression caused much poverty and the social problems that resulted from this poverty both inspired and motivated Day.


30 Forest.
Maurin served as her mentor and provided essential direction and criticism. "Maurin wanted her to look at history in a new way which centered not on the rise and fall of nations but on the lives of the Saints. She had to understand that... any program of social change must emphasize sanctity and community." He took advantage of Dorothy's journalistic experience and power of persuasion encouraging her to explore these ideas in a newspaper to be circulated to everyone.

The newspaper he proposed was used to communicate the aims of the ideals that were growing into a powerful movement, but its birth also highlighted some ideological differences between himself and Day. The very name of the paper became an argument between them. "The name Maurin proposed for the paper was *The Catholic Radical*. The radical—... meaning root—is someone who doesn't settle for cosmetic solutions, he said, but goes to the root of personal and social problems." This proposal reflects his deep intellectual foundation in a philosophy called personalism.

Peter Maurin espoused this philosophy which emphasizes the importance and power of leadership through the force of personality. Ideologically, this "suggests that individuals are responsible for problems in the world, that apathy is not a morally appropriate response and that by pooling resources, individuals might be effective in promoting change."

Day's view however, was that the name for the paper should be more practical and reflect the characteristics of the population who would most likely read it—the Workers. For this reason,
she named the paper *The Catholic Worker.*

This tension between ideology, practicality and personal preference is a consistent presence in life, but is historically problematic in the Catholic Worker Movement. The integration of personal problems and personal solutions without the interference of differences in personality continues to be a struggle within the Catholic Worker Movement. The conflict continues because the structure of the movement strives to maintain cohesive community but is without a hierarchy that demands accountability and assists in balancing the personal, ideological, and practical needs and goals of the community.

The paper was an important tool in resolving this conflict by supporting individual direct action with radical and revolutionary ideology. "*The Catholic Worker* was envisioned as a radical paper with Catholicism at its core." The paper sought to promote two particular encyclicals, Leo XIII’s 1891 *Rerum Novarum* and Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* from 1931. These encyclicals most clearly explained the Church’s social program. The paper "was created to call the Catholic people to recognize that their church has a social program." This awareness was supposed to prompt people to action and a conscious change in attitude and lifestyle.

The first issue, printed from scarce resources in the kitchen of a New York tenement, disappointed Maurin. He felt that is was filled with too much rhetoric and did not really express the ideals of his vision. He said, "It’s everyone’s paper, and everyone’s paper is no one’s paper." As a result, he refused to be named as one of the editors until the format was changed.

---

34 Ibid.
Maurin’s main objection was that he was opposed to the conventional methods that the first edition promoted like strikes and civil disobedience because they were ineffective and only perpetuated the existing structure of society. He was of the opinion that "what was needed first of all was a vision of a future society, and with this a program of constructive steps with which to begin realizing bits of the vision in one’s own life."\textsuperscript{37} This process, as stated before, was founded in basic Gospel values and was to be realized through small communities of workers and scholars.

The plan for these communities was expressed in \textit{The Catholic Worker}. "The paper also contained Maurin’s ideas for houses of hospitality, farming communes and roundtable discussion for the clarification of thought. Together they served as mechanisms that would bring about the establishment of a new social order."\textsuperscript{38} The idea was to begin revolutionizing society with an internal revolution. This would be a peaceful and complete change in social structure, economic distribution and American culture.

Dorothy Day also believed in this complete change, but for most of her political life, she had chosen civil disobedience and protest as her central means for accomplishing fundamental change in the rights and living conditions of New York City laborers. "But Day gradually became more open to his [Maurin’s] critique of assembly-line civilization and came to share his view that improved, unionized industrialism wasn’t enough, that community was better than mass society."\textsuperscript{39} Maurin’s ideological foundation and Day’s physical and intellectual motivation established the devices that were to be employed by those individuals willing to accept the

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{37}Forest.  
\textsuperscript{38} Aronic, 59.  
\textsuperscript{39}Forest.  
\end{footnotesize}
challenges of voluntary poverty and a simple lifestyle.

Even with these ideological growing pains, the movement was always about people. "The Catholic Worker movement was composed of laity unable to find within the established hierarchical church, a way of addressing what were pressing issues of the day, namely the need for economic reform, which would reduce unemployment, eliminate poverty and promote workers’ rights."40 The new vision that drew these individuals was clearly seen through the implementation of Maurin’s devotion to the personalist philosophy.

The time was right for these ideas to be well received in the Catholic community because by the height of the Great Depression in 1933, "unconscious attitudes growing out of Catholics’ American experience disposed them toward certain views of the social consequences of their faith. The Catholic Worker made its mark by extending and challenging those views, and by offering a radically alternative model of what it might mean to be both American and Catholic."41 The Catholic Worker Movement welcomed those who were questioning the role of the Catholic Church in a world that needed obvious social and economic reforms.

These people found a place in the movement because of the opportunity to make a direct and personal impact on their surroundings. For these individuals, "The Worker sought to find new ways in which to live out their individual commitment to the Church and simultaneously make the principles of Catholicism relevant for the 1930’s."42 For many individuals, the ideal avenue of expression of this commitment was direct action. As a result of this commitment to direct action, the Catholic Worker Movement quickly developed into two shelters whose open-

---

40 Aronica, 66.
41 Piehl, xi.
42 Aronica, 66.
door policy maintained the movement's ideals of hospitality and personalism. In fact, "Within a year of its founding, the Catholic Worker Movement was known as much for its houses of hospitality as for its newspaper." All dimensions of society, the rich, the poor, the educated, the impaired, the artistic and the sad interacted in these homes.

From the beginning of the movement, Day's motivation coupled with Maurin's ideals created a comprehensive structure that through hospitality, satisfied the guests' basic needs and through the philosophy of personalism, promoted peace, justice and social change through its example. This structure has lasted for over half of a century.

In the 1980s, fifty years after the establishment of The Catholic Worker newspaper and the first houses of hospitality, the issue of personalism continued to be of central importance in Catholic Worker literature. Through reflections on personalism in individual newsletters, Catholic Worker Houses around the country empowered each other with support and the encouragement of a shared ideology. According to co-founder Bob Suber, personalism:

comes from the softening of our stony hearts . . . . It comes out of a realization of the interconnectedness of our world . . . . Since we live in an interdependent world, we, as individuals, touch the world around us . . . . As we begin to understand how our lives are intertwined, we become more responsible. Personalism is accepting our responsibility . . . . This is the personalist vision: a new shell, a society of people who take responsibility, a community of people who will not say 'I have no choice,' for there is always a choice. The personalist knows that this new society, this new shell, will not be achieved by capitalism, communism, socialism or any other -ism that works from the top down. It will come about by the gentle personalism of traditional Catholicism.

\footnote{Forest.}
\footnote{Jean Donovan House newsletter Vol 3, No. 1, 14 Jan 1985.}
Thus, personalism was espoused by the Jean Donovan House Workers as an economic, political, social, and religious philosophy and it served their needs as a meaningful and complete avenue for criticizing and changing the world around them.

The ideological framework for both the Catholic Worker Movement and the Direct Action Movement were clearly a large part of the foundation upon which the Jean Donovan House Workers built their community, but other motivations for beginning the house included previous individual experience and perspective. Margie DeSpain, of whom I know very little, graduated from The College of St. Benedict in May of 1983 with a BA in Theology. She and her classmate, Maggie Cashman, 22, who graduated with a B.A. in German and a minor in Theology, had decided to begin the project before their graduation. They enlisted the help of Bob Stuber, a twenty year old student who had just completed his second year of college at St. John’s University. Their connections through the Theology department and other social justice groups reflected similar interests, passions and commitment to changing the world around them. After a summer apart, they reunited in St. Cloud to begin the Jean Donovan House and began their project in the fall of 1983.

The initial organization of the house began in the rectory of Holy Angels Catholic Church. Maggie, Margie and Bob had asked Fr. Richard Leisen, Director of Catholic Charities in St. Cloud if he knew of a place they could stay. He supported the students because he believed, “the Catholic Workers would be able to assist those who fall through the cracks of social services. They would be able to help those who are turned away by government agencies
because they aren’t able to prove they are truly needy.” He was a good friend of Fr. Ed Kraemer who had just become the pastor of Holy Angel’s church and asked Fr. Kraemer if he could share his space with them. Fr. Kraemer agreed to the arrangement, ”and you know they were supposed to stay for three weeks I think, and it got to be three months.” During those three months, Maggie, Margie and Bob lived on the second floor of the three-floor rectory. They spent a lot of time building a community among themselves, promoting the prospect of the Catholic Worker House and looking for a place to begin their project. The community-building that took place was intensive and necessary for the success of their project. Bob believed ”that the start of the Catholic Worker in St. Cloud was the result of the three of us taking our faith seriously.” They wanted to act on their beliefs and share their ideas with others through action and example, not just Sunday devotion or Bible reading. This shared faith and personalist ideology served as an anchor for them, but individual differences surfaced in the very early stages of the project. Bob said:

right from the beginning the three of us had personality clashes. As time goes on I remember less and less of the details about why it was hard, but I know it started even before we got our first house. There was kind of bickering amongst the three of us. We didn’t see eye to eye on everything and I think in particular, three is kind of an awkward number for community.

Personal differences did not prevent the development of the project because all three of the Catholic Workers desired to make a difference in the St. Cloud community through the house they hoped to establish. One of the principle goals of the Workers was to alleviate the physical

---

47 Bob Stuber, e-mail to author, 15 March 2000.
48 Bob Stuber, telephone interview by author, 7 March 2000.
and emotional suffering that had developed as a result of the recession of 1981 and 1982. The effects of the recession were obvious to the Workers, as Bob wrote in one of the newsletters, "When I look at St. Cloud, I see the many abused women and children, the mentally ill, the people crippled by wars, the alcoholics, the incarcerated. I see the homeless, the unemployed, the outcasts of our rigid society."\(^{49}\) It was very clear to the Workers that a big project awaited them.

The Workers published a pamphlet during this time that answered the question—why St. Cloud? They believed that "the Catholic Worker House could provide stimulus and a unifying element for social justice interest and efforts giving active witness of the Church in the St. Cloud area community," and that, "every community should have a place where those in need of temporary food or shelter are welcome."\(^{50}\) This clarified their goals and was a way to build their base of support within the St. Cloud community.

The choice of a name for the house was a very important matter because they wanted the name of their house to reflect every aspect of their ministry and motivation. In the second newsletter published, the Workers explained why they had adopted the name of Jean Donovan. Jean was a missionary in El Salvador and was killed there in December of 1980. Maggie wrote:

> In light of the escalating crisis in all parts of Central America we believed naming our house after Jean would be an important witness to saying 'no' to our government's increasing support of dictatorial governments in Central America. It is also a way of drawing attention to the financial aid and the US troops we sent to back the Honduran attempt to overthrow the government of Nicaragua negating the Nicaraguan's right to self determination.\(^{51}\)

---


\(^{50}\)Jean Donovan House Pamphlet ca. 1983.

\(^{51}\)Jean Donovan House Newsletter, Vol 1, No. 2, 12 Dec 1983.
She continued by speaking of the impact women like Jean had on her life. She saw her as a real role model. "In this time of women trying to assert their role in the Church, she is a great witness to Margie and I that women are a powerful force in our world community, a fact which needs to be recognized." The support of the feminist movement was a change from the time of Dorothy Day. The role of women in the society of the 1980s, courageous women like Jean Donovan and many of the single mothers who would come through the doors of the St. Cloud Catholic Worker community, provided consistent inspiration and motivation for the Workers.

The focus on Jean Donovan, a Central American activist also reinforced and adverized their concerns about the conflicts in Latin America. The name of the house very clearly stated this part of their political agenda and their goals for serving the poor in St. Cloud motivated them to get started. With this motivation, and the support of the community, they began their project as soon as the found a house.

They decided to rent a house at 315 8th Avenue North. They signed the papers and moved in January 1, 1984. This house had 5 bedrooms, 2 full baths, living and dining rooms, a kitchen, a single garage and a full basement with a shower. Two of the bedrooms were used for single men. One bedroom was used for women, one for families, and the other for the residents. In the beginning, the house averaged 5-6 guests per night. They had their first guests the very night they opened the doors. It was not long after they began serving the poor that they ran into trouble with the City of St. Cloud.

In February, the City cited the Jean Donovan on zoning violations of a "non-conforming duplex in a residential neighborhood." The Board referenced an Article which regulates the

---

52Ibid.
number of guests a family may have in their home. The Assistant City Planning Director, Gerald Hengel, stated that the occupancy of the Jean Donovan was problematic because, "the property is advertised and promoted as a facility that individuals can use for temporary lodging (transient housing) similar to a motel."\textsuperscript{54} The problem with allowing the Catholic Worker to operate this way in its current location, under the current ordinance, was that then, in the rest of St. Cloud, the "present occupancy ordinance could not be enforced."\textsuperscript{55}

This caused many problems for the Workers, but it also inspired much publicity, discussion and support. The Workers were challenged to define and defend their status as a home and their desired place in the community. The Jean Donovan House Workers petitioned to the Zoning Board of Appeals to allow them to operate their shelter in a residential neighborhood on the basis of their feeling that those who lived in house were a family and the ‘transients’ who often stayed at their house were their guests, not merely ‘transients.’ Bob Stuber commented in the newsletter that, "our main objective was to show that we are a family who have the rights of every other family in St. Cloud."\textsuperscript{56} The Workers believed that if their freedom to invite guests in to their home were restricted, the restrictions would apply to any family looking to provide shelter to their guests.

Margie’s reaction to the zoning trouble was that, "out of this struggle has come many fruits. This caused us to articulate more clearly the meaning and purposes of our community. It affirmed us with abundant support from many individuals who made themselves vocal."\textsuperscript{57} Their supporters were very vocal. The City Planning Office received at least 60 letters of support from

\textsuperscript{54} Gerald Hengel, Memo to Zoning Board of Appeals, 15 Mar 1984.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
friends of the Catholic Worker. Their comments leave little doubt as to the support that the house had built even in that short time. There was a petition signed by 19 members of the immediate neighborhood asserting that as neighbors, "we believe that the presence of this house in our neighborhood is harmonious and compatible with the character of the neighborhood and does not detract from the stability of the neighborhood."\textsuperscript{58} This opinion echoed many times over in letters written by other area individuals.

The support given to the Jean Donovan House during this time demonstrated the public awareness of the real need for a transitional shelter in St. Cloud. The Jean Donovan House conflict with the city also necessitated clearer definitions of 'guest' 'transient' and 'temporary.' A letter from one of the guests at the time stated, "I might have froze to death or starved but thanks to some really nice people, I'm not starving nor freezing, but if you close this place down, there are gonna be people out there who may be starving or freezing. This place does help. They try to help ya get a job. They treat me good."\textsuperscript{59}

The Zoning Appeals Board voted 5-1 in favor of the Jean Donovan House on the grounds that, "the permanent residents of the structure have a right to have guests in their home; there is no evidence of contract affiliation or subsidies; no fees are charged to the guests; there is no neighborhood opposition to the House and its operation; and the Zoning Ordinance is unclear."\textsuperscript{60} It was a significant victory both practically by allowing them to stay and ideologically by reinforcing their goals and perspective.

The community was expanding and it soon became clear that the current house could not accommodate the community's needs. An appeal for a larger house was submitted to the

\textsuperscript{58} A Neighborhood Statement Regarding The Jean Donovan Catholic Workers' House. Not dated.
\textsuperscript{59} John Kieffer, letter to City Planning Office, not dated.
\textsuperscript{60} Proceedings of the St. Cloud Zoning Board of Appeals, 21 Mar 1984.
newsletter stating that "We have come to realize that the space we have here at North 8th Avenue is not large enough. We often have guests sleep in the living room and the basement. We also do not have much room for our community to expand." New residents like Dan Repinski were coming to live at the house.

Dan graduated from Saint John’s University in May of 1984. He had really been involved with the house from the beginning because of his close personal relationships with his friends, Margie and Bob and his girlfriend, Maggie. His loan-free education, personal connection to the founders of the house, and ideological compatibility with the goals of the house facilitated his move to the Jean Donovan House upon his graduation. His move to the house along with more residents, guests and volunteers highlighted the need for more space like never before.

The community had great difficulties in finding a house that they would not have to rent. Some Franciscan Sisters were living at 611 8th Avenue South and they wanted to sell the house. The Workers did not have the funds to purchase the house, so their non-violent, personalist response was a weekend of fasting and prayer. The next Monday, Father Kraemer was having dinner with a friend of his, who in all publications remained anonymous. "I [Father Kraemer] said, ‘these kids just really need a place, and I just kidded with this person and said, ‘it would sure be nice if you gave them one.’ And he looked at his wife and he said, ‘I think we should.’" This mini-miracle demonstrated the power of personalism, personal relationships and faith. Dan served a role of a negotiator in the process of obtaining the new house. He helped outline the details of the new arrangement, which allowed the Workers to use the house rent-free provided

---

62 Kraemer.
they pay for the utilities and property taxes, and secured insurance in preparation for the next
This house was free from zoning restrictions and had much more room. "We have a capacity of
giving 17 guests a bed to sleep in. There are potentially 11 bedrooms."63

Sleeping, though, was not the only thing that went on at the Jean Donovan. "We aren’t
always right on schedule but we try to have prayer at nine every morning and supper at six in the
evening."64 Breakfast was an individual affair. It usually consisted of bread with peanut butter
and coffee. The guests were then expected to leave the house for the day. This gave the
volunteers and residents time to clean, organize, reflect and be active outside the house. They
stated that, "we would like to serve as a resource for information and different perspectives on
various issues to individuals, churches, schools and other organizations . . . . We would also like
to offer our time and energy to help plan liturgies, retreats and workshops."65 The Workers spent
equal amounts of time outside and inside the house. The time spent inside the house included
cleaning, cooking, doing laundry, writing the newsletter, making phone calls, fund-raising and
maintaining the community. Each Worker would be responsible for cooking at least one evening
meal per week. Dan said, "I learned to cook a lot that year. Beans and variations on beans.
Beans with rice, beans with noodles, beans with vegetables."66 With everyone doing their part,
the Jean Donovan House was able to help meet the needs of many people.

The variety of activities that had to be accomplished to make the Jean Donovan House
successful presented lots of personal challenges to the Workers. Dan saw his position at the

63 Jean Donovan House Newsletter, Vol 2. No, 2, 5 Mar 1984
66 Dan Repinski, telephone interview by author. 16 Feb 2000.
Catholic Worker as a temporary, but important transitional time in his life. He said, “the young adult era is a time for trying on identities and trying on roles within society and coming to understand, ‘Okay, who am I and what role do I play and what beliefs, values, and attitudes am I going to integrate into my life that are going to be manifest in my role in society?’”\textsuperscript{67} Part of the attractiveness of the opportunity to move into the Jean Donovan House was that he had ample opportunity to do his share of exploration and trying on identities. An essential exploratory tool became the daily chores which, he remembers included “a heck of a lot of laundry.”\textsuperscript{68} Exploration of roles and ideas was also a focal topic in the newsletter published by the house.

The monthly newsletter served as a means of expressing the Workers’ ideas, reflections and frustrations, communicating with their supporters, networking with other groups, and providing information. Part of the definition of a Catholic Worker House was that it, "works for justice in the nation and in the world in a spirit of non-violence so that all people can live in peace without the fear of violence or oppression."\textsuperscript{69} This was accomplished through fact finding and sharing of information and resources. News of boycotts and community social justice activities like protests and vigils were often included in the newsletters. The activities of the community depended greatly on the individual interests of the Workers living there at the time. They incorporated their varied interests with the daily working of the house using the newsletter to invite any concerned community members to join their causes.

The personalist motivations and passions of the individual members revealed themselves through these newsletters. Bob was adamant about subsistence farming and land stewardship. Margie did a lot of personal reflection through the newsletter. She reflected on her experiences

\textsuperscript{67}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69}Jean Donovan House Pamphlet, ca. 1983.
at the Jean Donovan: "I am becoming more convinced of the intrinsic goodness of people. I am experiencing a conversion of heart, realizing and believing that it is not the minority of the population that are good, trustable and concerned for others. It is the majority... I feel so much joy, encouragement and love for God in response to a renewed sense of goodness." This profound sense of hope was echoed in many of the newsletter reflections that came from other friends and volunteers of the house as it was a common forum for everyone involved with the house, volunteers and residents alike.

The Catholic Workers relied on these personal connections to provide for the needs of their project because they believed that there was enough excess that could be used in their project that was otherwise wasted in society. These means of sustenance for the Jean Donovan House were rooted in the personalist ideology. The Workers hoped to work within the existing social structure, but refrain from contributing to a culture of consumption, excess and waste. For this reason, Margie wrote an article about why there was always a list of needs included in the newsletter:

Our house tries to give people a chance to directly, personally, help those in need and fight oppression... We are trying to live simply and dedicated to community, which means we strive to use what is extra, especially that which is otherwise wasted or sits idle... And sharing oneself is a big part of Christianity. This is why we try and give people the opportunity to share more directly, to volunteer at the house, to give things which one no longer uses, or sometimes to go and buy for the house what is needed."

This is but one example of how the Worker involves the community in its philosophy and uses its philosophy to practically provide for its needs. Dan expressed the same sentiments. "We live

---

as we do because you believe in us. You support us financially, spiritually, and with your time and energy. You help us and we are able to help others."\textsuperscript{72} The ability of the Jean Donovan House to provide for people was truly a community feat.

On a practical level, strictly following the Catholic Worker philosophy of living off of society's excess meant that everything used in the house was donated. The furniture, linens, cookware and food were all given to the house from outside sources. Dan wrote: "Daily people stop by to give us bags of this and boxes of assorted that. Twice a week someone from the community journeys to the Warehouse Market to pick-up produce . . . . I must admit, I do feel some satisfaction after digging broccoli out of the dumpster."\textsuperscript{73} This is not to say that they really ate garbage. Dan clarified this comment in an interview when he said: "We had a set up with a number of grocery stores in St. Cloud. We'd have weekly or biweekly pickups where the stuff that they had pulled from their shelves that was edible, but that wasn't saleable, we would retrieve and use. We used stuff that if we wouldn't have used it, it would have been tossed."\textsuperscript{74} To some degree this reinforced their hope in the community and in a greater society. Sometimes though, this meant that aside from the arrangements they had made with local businesses, the donations that came in were sporadic. Seasonal changes, like the onset of summer with schools on vacation, the college populations dispersed, and the suspension of other school related activities, meant that the otherwise consistent schedule of donations and volunteers would be interrupted.

Bob wrote a farewell letter to many of these volunteers in the May 1985 newsletter. He thanked all of those people who helped the Jean Donovan House on a regular basis. The list he

\textsuperscript{72} Jean Donovan House Newsletter, Vol 2, No. 2, 5 Mar 1984
\textsuperscript{73} Jean Donovan House Newsletter, Vol 2, No. 2, 5 Mar 1984
\textsuperscript{74} Dan Repinski, interview by author, 16 Feb 2000.
included was extensive. Two students from St. Cloud State University came in for one semester every week to clean and be with the guests. A group from the Newman Center cooked meals on Tuesdays. Saturday’s meal was covered by a group from St. Ben’s. Fridays brought the talent and cleaning power of St. Augustine’s sixth grade class. Some of the St. John’s graduate students picked up food every Thursday. Bread was delivered by individuals within the community as often as possible. These volunteers were a central reason the Jean Donovan House could provide for so many people. Dan explained that "one of the virtues in trying to do what we did in Stearns County was that it was so darn Catholic." There was a "strong, strong level of support and enthusiasm for what we were doing, especially the basic shelter, clothing and feeding people. . . . All it would take would be a simple appeal to a local parish and they’d get something in their Sunday bulletin and then a couple of weeks later we’d have trucks full of food showing up at the back door."  

Cooperation with other agencies also satisfied the needs of the guests. The Jean Donovan House had not professional staff members per se. No one was a trained counselor or therapist. There was also no formal job search offered through the Jean Donovan House. For these needs, the Workers referred guests to other agencies who were already active in these areas. There was a battered women’s shelter and many women were referred there. The Salvation Army had a hot lunch program and job search facilities. Catholic Charities also had programs to service the poor like job and housing searches and financial aid for utility, rent and medical bills. Even with all of these existing resources, the Jean Donovan House still had plenty of business.

---

76Dan Repinski, telephone interview by author, 16 Feb 2000.
The continuous needs of the poor in St. Cloud and the varying, though largely sufficient donations caused a lot of stress for the Workers. It was in the September issue of 1984 that the St. Cloud community learned, "Margie, one of the original Workers in St. Cloud is no longer with the Community. She has taken a position at St. John the Baptist Parish, Collegeville and is living near Avon. Margie will still be involved with many of the activities of the house and her spirit will always be with the community."\(^7^7\) She left no reflection that shared her reasons for leaving. This could suggest a command decision made to leave which left her little time to reflect. Her absence probably left the house busier than ever as her leaving the house meant that someone now had to do the work that she had done. This, or possibly a request by Margie for little fanfare, probably kept the other Workers from writing a detailed farewell to her as was written for other departing community members. Dan speculated that the project of the Jean Donovan House just did not fit Margie's temperament.\(^7^8\) Being devoted to living and working in the same community was a taxing experience, as many of the Workers grew to understand. Bob later came to realize that Margie had probably intended her tenure at the Jean Donovan House to be a temporary one as opposed to a long-term commitment.\(^7^9\) Her move into a local parish position reinforces the idea that she remained committed to her religious convictions and ideological foundations.

The house continued in her absence and most of the Workers found that incorporating their exterior interests with their life in the house helped them sustain their interest in the project. Maggie and Dan continued to explore their identities outside the house by being involved in many projects. The Pledge of Resistance was an organization that opposed any US military

\(^{77}\text{Jean Donovan House newsletter, Vol 2, No. 6, 10 Sept 1984.}\)
\(^{78}\text{Dan Repinski, telephone interview by author, 16 Feb 2000.}\)
\(^{79}\text{Bob Stuber, telephone interview by author, 7 March 2000.}\)
invasion into Nicaragua. The Honeywell Action was an annual event. Honeywell is a corporation who at the time was making guidance systems for nuclear weapons for the United States government. Maggie was arrested during one protest in 1983 and had faced arrest again in April of 1984. In her reflections, she stated her motivation. "I act because of my understanding of history and my feelings of anger and frustration." Her reaction to this frustration was a very direct and personalist approach in that she was willing to speak her mind by the example of her actions. Though it was not the position of everyone at the house, Maggie expressed her frustration through active civil disobedience, and programs like the Friday night conversations allowed for discussion and reflection on topics such as this one.

Maggie and Dan also conducted numerous speaking engagements to church groups, bible study groups, civic action groups, and many others. The range of topics was extensive. It included nonviolence, the arms race, United Farm Workers, human rights, family violence, and many others. Dan said that the demand for these talks was great. "It was the Reagan era and many people were concerned with nuclear proliferation." He said that they were called to talk to PTAs, women’s groups at local churches and kids groups in schools. Often the talks focused on incorporating the ideals of personalism and hospitality into one’s everyday life.

At the same time, there were plenty of opportunities to relax at the house. Part of the ideal of hospitality is to maintain a space where people felt comfortable to be there. Spending time with the guests that came to the house was an essential part of the daily life at the house. Bob said: "Time moved pretty slow for us at the house...we never had to be constantly working. ...we could just hang with people... Because we weren’t in this rush... , we could just really

82Dan Repinski, interview by author, 16 Feb 2000.
hang out and talk to people. We were able to slow down and go at the place that the people who were coming were at. In listening to their stories and being open to anything that came along, the Workers were able to connect with people on a very personal and intimate level. They were also able to observe people coming together on their own accord with a direct and personal response to any need that arose. Examples of this were included in the newsletter when Bob reflected on some of the guests the community had during the first year of existence.

There was a Native American Woman who I found at 2:00 am on highway 10. She was hitchhiking to her mother’s funeral. She was barefoot. Her last ride had taken her shoes... I fondly think of Kathy, the first woman to stay with us. She seemed very tough and cold from the many troubles in her life. When a 17 year old came to us after being asked to leave her foster home it was Kathy who comforted her and made sure she got through the experience all-right.

Dealing with these individuals was undoubtedly a rewarding experience, but was also very demanding due to the sheer numbers of people who visited the Jean Donovan.

The number of people who came to the house in the first few months of the Jean Donovan’s operation were staggering. The first-year anniversary issue of the newsletter in January of 1985 noted that: "Since early January when the house opened we have had about 250 individuals and families as our guests. The number of guests who are with us at any one time is steadily increasing.” The numbers of guests to the house would increase steadily which was possibly a reflection of increased awareness about the house or an actual increase in need, but was also due to the fact that after they moved, they could accommodate many more people.

The high numbers of people being served at the house caused tension, fatigue and

---

85 Ibid.
frustration for the Workers. Dan described the personal costs of living and working in a house like the Jean Donovan House as varied and weighty. Privacy was at the top of the list. “You had *strangers* in your house. You’d deal with guests that had problems. Some of them were homeless and struggling, some of them were homeless and a little crazy.” This variety of guests in the house led to issues of safety. Once he and Margie had a knife pulled on them in the kitchen. “Another morning, we woke up and somebody had taken all of the food out of the refrigerator and put in the cupboards and put all of the stuff in the cupboards in the fridge and the freezer.” There were also times when “the police would call at 3 a.m. and they’re bringing someone to the door for shelter and you don’t quite know the story.” Incidents like these illuminated the lack of control that came along with living in the house. “You never quite knew what was going to happen and who was going to be around.”

Eventually, for Maggie and Dan, these costs added up to a decision that needed to be made. They had come to a point in their lives where as Maggie said, they recognized the risk of ‘burning-out’ and were ready to pledge their lives to each other and "do something different." Dan also felt that it was time to move on because the Jean Donovan taught him important lessons about himself.

Once I got there and was living there and doing the day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month routine, I got some clarity. . . . I wasn’t of the temperament to make a long term commitment to that lifestyle. . . . I draw the analogy to the goodness of fit. It just didn’t fit. . . . In terms of the safety issue, I felt anxious. In terms of the privacy issue, I didn’t have enough space and I felt irritable and ornery. . . . In that year I developed an understanding about myself. I have a fairly intuitive sense about people’s mental health. . . . I was seeing lots of people were kind of crazy and I’m uneasy with that—having this sense of, ‘wow—this person is potentially volatile,

86 Dan Repinski, telephone interview by author, 16 Feb 2000.
87 Maggie Cashman, telephone interview by author, 10 November 1999.
this person is potentially delusional,' that made me really uneasy. I wasn’t comfortable.  

Maggie and Dan had come to a point in their personal development where their transitional time at the Jean Donovan House had reached fruition. The frustration they felt outweighed the personal benefit they received from their participation. Maggie and Dan were married in May of 1985. They decided to move out of the Jean Donovan House and spent the summer in an apartment in St. Cloud. After that summer, they moved to Vienna where Maggie was able to teach for a year.  

At that point, the only original member of the house was Bob Stuber. He was still motivated by his ideologies and dedicated to the success of the house. He remembered that: “I had convinced myself that I could do that forever.” He was accompanied by a handful of volunteers, but by the end of the summer of 1986, the Jean Donovan was too short-staffed to operate efficiently. The house had fallen into disrepair and the condition of the yard provoked complaints from the neighbors. Bob did not have the energy to fix everything anymore. “I was just at the end of my rope. I was pretty fried by that point” Kate McPherson and Ann Mulcahy, two residents who had been involved with the house during the summer also planned to leave. Finding new volunteers can be problematic enough, but as Bob stated, “the house is first of all a community.’ To organize new volunteers into the community will take ‘a lot of energy . . . I don’t have the energy to start over.” The changing economic and political climate probably inhibited the search for new residents. A recovering economy may have made a life of voluntary poverty

---

88 Dan Repinski, interview by author, 16 Feb 2000.
89 Maggie Cashman, telephone interview by author, 10 November 1999.
90 Bob Stuber, telephone interview by author, 7 March 2000.
91 Ibid.
less appealing in comparison to the possibility of future prosperity. The end of the conflict in
Nicaragua also pulled Central American concerns from the national spotlight. Though this had
little effect on Bob’s personal decision to leave the house, it served to remove the memory of
Jean Donovan and the need for dramatic direct action from the forefront of the American
consciousness.

There were people who had been involved with the house but, Bob said that “people
came and people left and I think a large reason people didn’t stay was because I was there and I
was pretty well entrenched and I was pretty dogmatic about –this is what a Catholic Worker is
and this is what we need to do.”93 He went on to say that he believed that Rick and Cathy Endres
probably refrained from moving into the house because he was there. No volunteers appeared
before Bob decided to leave, so the house closed temporarily on Labor Day, 1986.

Helen Gaebe, along with Rick and Cathy Endres assumed management of the Jean
Donovan House on October 1, 1986. They were very forward in the newsletter about the fact
that they intended to make changes in the way the house was run from the beginning but not
specific about what or how things would change. The changes they made developed over time in
reaction to their circumstances, but were also manifestations of their individual perspective. The
new Workers formed a community that was distinct from the original founders but that was
nevertheless equally as effective at ministering to the needs of the poor in St. Cloud.

Rick and Cathy Endres moved in with their one-year old son, Lucas. They had
volunteered with the community for a long time. Helen, 46, is originally from Iowa City, Iowa
and after working on her PhD at the University of Minnesota, had been a guest at Saint Joseph’s

93Bob Stuber, telephone interview by author, 7 March 2000.
Hope, a Catholic Worker House in Minneapolis. She moved to St. Cloud after recovering from an illness and had already spent a year volunteering at the Jean Donovan. Her goals for the house were simple. "My hope for the house was that I could return to the homeless people who came there what had been given to me at St. Joseph's Hope." At that point in her life, she felt like she needed, "some real hands-on direct things to do for other people instead of continuing to look so much into myself." 94

Helen described the daily workings of the Jean Donovan house as something that, "encompassed everything that goes along with giving hospitality. There was a real attempt there to follow through with the Catholic Worker philosophy of treating the guests who came there as though they were Christ coming as a guest." 95 Providing a safe and comfortable place for people who needed somewhere to go does this. There was a lot that went into being able to do that. Helen would wake up early, put rolls on the table, make coffee and wait for the rest of the volunteers to wake up and make breakfast.

The typical day at the house in this stage was very similar to the schedule that had been used from the beginning. The guests were expected to leave the house by 10 o'clock in the morning. They would go to the library, run necessary errands or look for jobs during the day and return to the house around four in the afternoon. During this time, Helen and the other volunteers would do household chores, publish the Jean Donovan House newsletter, collect food and donations, speak for groups, and prepare the evening meal.

For the most part, dinner was community time, but this community was different from the original founders in that they had a different way of coping with the stresses of this lifestyle.

94 Helen Gaebe, interview by author, 2 Nov 1999.
95 Ibid.
They realized the limits and costs of complete and selfless individual devotion to the project. For this reason, evenings were sometimes used for relaxation and escape. Helen said, “sometimes we would just go out and have a nice dinner, all of us, and get totally away from the Catholic Worker house because people need a break and it made us better people to be there.”96 There were also community meetings that Helen had organized to allow time for educational films and speakers in the house. These were similar to the Friday night conversations and usually dealt with social justice issues. The house attempted to start a local chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international peace organization, whose meetings were held at the house. The push for this initiative stalled as Helen’s health declined. Nevertheless, there were still meetings among the volunteers to discuss their goals, experiences, and the guests.

The guests added a lot to the atmosphere of the house. Guests came from anywhere, under any sort of circumstances. The Jean Donovan saw Vietnam veterans, battered women, abusive husbands, mentally ill persons, teen runaways, families, and many other people who do not fit in any designated category and were consequently refused by the “system.”

The space the Workers had created allowed people to step out of their traditional defenses and step into themselves. Helen reflected on one of her experiences with a guest which was representative of the kinds of interactions that happened at the Jean Donovan.

> We had things happen, like we had a piano at the house. I came in one night and there had been this man in the house who was much taller than I was, and very broad shoulders, had kind of an ominous look about him and I always kind of, I hadn’t gotten very close to him. And I came into the house one night and as I came in, I heard someone playing the piano they were playing all of this classical music, it was just absolutely beautiful. I sat down on the couch and just listened for a long time and wondered who was playing. I got up and went into the room where the piano was and here it was

---

96 Ibid.
this man who I had this fear of. And I am still friends with that
man now. I see him around town and he still looks a little ominous
and people are still a little afraid of him, but I still am friends with
him. And he always speaks to me on the street. He always, if he
doesn’t speak to me, I speak to him, and he always looks so
surprised. There were good things that happened like that. There
were good interactions with people.\textsuperscript{97}

This reflection revealed a very personalist reaction to the happenings at the Jean Donovan and
also reinforced Helen’s belief that exclusive classification of individuals and strict regulation of
the resources given to them is not an effective way to treat people. She believed that “in a state
or county system . . . people are pushed into being self-sufficient and economically self-
supportive . . . But in a Catholic Worker, you just try to accept people just as they are at that
moment and treat them in a kind and loving manner, and doing that is what enables them to do
something about whatever problem is causing their homelessness.”\textsuperscript{98} This is what the Catholic
Worker definition of hospitality is all about and is the greatest project of a Catholic Worker
House; maintaining a community where all feel welcome.

The structure, or anti-structure of the Catholic Worker movement along with personal
trials and tribulations, can make this project difficult to accomplish. Helen suffered a broken
shoulder in 1988 from a fall on the ice, which left her with a lot of time for reflection. After she
recovered, she began to order food for the Jean Donovan House from the Minnesota Food Bank
through which they could purchase food at a low cost with donated funds. This allowed them to
act on their care for the guests at the house by having a constant supply of good food to eat and a
full stock in their food shelf.

This decision indicates a philosophical shift from living exclusively off of society’s waste

\textsuperscript{97} Helen Gaebe, interview by author, 2 Nov 1999.
\textsuperscript{98} Helen Gaebe, interview by author, 2 Nov 1999.
to making sure the community would always be able to provide healthy food for people. The response is not entirely personal as it necessitates a dependence on an outside agency as opposed to the reliance on individuals. At the same time, Helen’s original attraction to the movement was through experience and not ideology. For this reason, she was probably not so moved to follow traditional Catholic Worker ideology as dogmatically as the original founders. The decision to provide consistent good food also shows real concern for the needs of the guests and a dedication to provide the best for them that is available.

The food shelf and outreach programs that developed within the house became even more necessary as the Jean Donovan community’s limited resources were stretched to the limit by the demand for their support. In September of 1989, Helen made the decision to limit the amount of people they would serve at dinner. She tacked a sign to the back door of the house that said, “As of Saturday, September 9, we will no longer be serving the evening meal to persons who are not staying at the Jean Donovan House.” Helen explained to the St. Cloud Times reporter that, “When there are 45 people, it’s no longer a family atmosphere where people can sit down and talk to each other.” For this reason, having a fully stocked food shelf became an important priority.

During this time of restructuring, Helen also established community gatherings that served to educate the Workers and the public about the Catholic Worker philosophy and other social justice issues. “We would show films of peacemakers around the world or in the US of their lives and what they had done and sometimes what they were still doing. People would come from St. Ben’s or St. John’s or some of the local churches in St. Cloud and sometimes

---

99Debra Olson, "Donovan House Curtails Dinners." St. Cloud Times. 16 Sept 1989, sec A.
speak and do educational things themselves." Again, the phenomenal support from the community is seen by all of these activities that the house was able to accomplish with such limited resources.

Though the house was thriving at this time, there was a renewed need for volunteers. Helen had found the best solution to the volunteer shortage to be inviting former guests to live and work as residents at the Jean Donovan. To facilitate this process, she became titled the Director of the house and she established a board to which she and the other Workers could be accountable. The advisory board was comprised of a Sister from the Benedictine Monastery, a Campus Minister from the College of St. Benedict, and two men from the community. The board’s job was to advise Helen and to make sure these Workers remained accountable to their goals. Helen relied on them for support and encouragement. Though, the establishment of a board and the assumption of the title of “Director” can also be seen as contrary to the anarchic style of the Catholic Worker Movement, a consistent lack of residents to help run the house had left the house with little choice and these steps were necessary to continue with the project.

There also seemed to be some tension between the Workers and the owners of the actual structure of the house. In one newsletter, Helen wrote a strong plea for someone to help them buy the house for themselves. The Workers had by that time been requested to provide the owners with detailed records of how many people they served and what they had served to them. This is very contrary to the Catholic Worker Movement’s style and nature. Probably for these reasons and others, Helen does not like to speak of her relationship with the owners of the house which leads me to believe that the personality conflict between them was strong and lasting.

---

100 Helen Gaebe, interview with author 2 Nov 1999.
Another challenge presented itself in the last year of the house; a severe shortage of funds had resulted from improvements on the house that became very costly. The property taxes and some unusually high winter utility bills had come due and they did not have the funds to pay for them so they borrowed $2500 in February of 1990. By April, their financial problems had not been resolved and an appeal for donations was found in the last newsletter published by the house. "We would like to pay this back as soon as possible. We are not going into the summer season which usually means that our financial support is less. Unless we receive a large gift donation, I don't see how we will be able to pay back the loan due April 15th."  

It became clear through these appeals for money and volunteers that interest in the Jean Donovan House project was declining. The reasons for this could have been much larger than any individual in the project had anticipated. The continual economic improvement seen during the rest of the decade of the 80s probably dissuaded volunteers to adopt the life of simple living.

The "solution" to the homelessness problem was also changing by the time the Jean Donovan closed. Darlene Johnson of the St. Cloud Housing Coalition, the organization that took over operation of the Jean Donovan as an unaffiliated shelter, said that the Jean Donovan could not get a significant amount of funding from individual sources because, "they were just Band-Aids. ... It just became a dinosaur in its type of shelter." Though all of the Workers admit that their aim was never to solve the problem of homelessness, the regression of public understanding about what a Catholic Worker house is and does resulted in a lack of funding. At that point, homeless people had to prove that they did not want to be homeless.

Another consideration for the decline in volunteers to the Jean Donovan House could

---

102 Jean Donovan House Newsletter, April 1990.
103 Darlene Johnson, telephone interview by author, 6 Mar 2000.
have been the escalation of the unrest in the Middle East, people's attention shifted even farther from concern for Central Americans and the movements that the conflict had inspired. Thus the image of Jean Donovan herself had faded a bit in the public memory. As these factors reduced the amount of interest people had in devoting themselves as wholly as a project like the Jean Donovan House required, it is no surprise that a national search for a new coordinator conducted through Catholic Worker newsletters produced little results.

These stresses had an intense effect on Helen's health and her diabetes was getting too severe to ignore. The advisory board had the final say in whether or not the house stayed open and in their final meeting, when they learned of Helen's recurring insulin reactions, they immediately decided to close the house. The house closed officially on June first of 1990.

The Jean Donovan House began, much like the original Catholic Worker Houses during the Great Depression, out of a desire to address the needs that resulted from the recession of 1981-82. The ideals of the Catholic Worker Movement which had been part of the life curriculum of the Jean Donovan House founders were espoused and adhered to during the house's establishment and the first few years of its operation.

Maggie, Margie, Bob and Dan followed their individual consciences to the Jean Donovan House, but shared varying degrees of a common ideology. Personalism was at the core of their personal and professional operation. It was also their principle tool for meeting the needs of their guests as well as spreading their message of peace and justice. Non-violence was their method of making and maintaining peace in the outside world and inward reflection was their way of keeping internal peace. The stress of living in community and serving the specific needy
populations in St. Cloud helped teach each of them as individuals what their paths truly were. Ultimately, their paths met and diverged at the Jean Donovan House.

Helen, Rick and Cathy also followed inner direction to the Jean Donovan House. The changes they made to the structure and organization of the Jean Donovan were made to ensure the success of the project and to provide the most and the best for as many people as possible. These changes reflected that their perspective of the role of specific facets of Catholic Worker ideology differed from the founders in that they remained committed to the goal of maintaining hospitality through loving and personal ways but with the additional support that the established system could provide.

The largest lesson to be learned from the experience of the Jean Donovan House is that personality does matter. In a project that is anti-system, like a Catholic Worker house, personality matters even more. Though the ideology of personalism may guide one’s everyday life, the Workers were individual people with different needs and their personalities and needs were not always congruent. The success of the community in serving the poor, raising awareness of poverty and social justice issues, and the establishment of extensive networks of support demonstrated that as long as the community remained strong and functional, the personalist ideology was just as effective of an approach to alleviating the suffering of the poor as any other traditional method. This proves that the personalist philosophy, though not always called upon to resolve personal differences, works as a solution to social and economic problems on a local level. The Jean Donovan House fulfilled many needs of the St. Cloud community and also led by a very powerful example of personal and direct action.

The downfall of the Jean Donovan house was a volunteer labor shortage that more than
likely grew from changing international dramas, an improved economy and changing attitudes
about homelessness and its solutions. The conclusion of large scale fighting and overt US
funding in Central American civil wars and the lessened threat of nuclear war threw a dark
shadow on the memory of Jean Donovan and on the peace agenda of the Workers at the Jean
Donovan House. An improved economy allowed people to return their gaze from overwhelming
concern for their unemployed family, friends and neighbors to the more trivial concerns of
‘getting ahead.’ This change in perspective led to a new attitude toward the poor, namely that
they chose that lifestyle and chose not to try to change it. The policy changes that followed
changed the system to require that individuals seeking assistance prove they did not want to be
poor.

The Jean Donovan House filled a vital void in this system. This was a place where a
needy person could go for shelter, soup and a shower and not have to answer any questions about
his/her life situation. No one tried to “fix” anyone’s lifestyle or problems. If a person wanted
share his or her story, there were Workers willing and eager to listen and accept them for who
they were. Operating outside of the system allowed them to do all of this. The Workers did this
for strangers-for brothers and sisters of humanity-in the name of the complete and persistent
revolution of Jesus Christ manifest in the example of Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and Jean
Donovan.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


"Catholic Worker, Abbey Continue Friendship." *St. John’s Abbey Quarterly*. April 1984, pg 1.


"Donovan House Fills Serious Need." *St. Cloud Times*. 1 May 1990, sec A.


- - -. Interview by Tricia Larson. 2 November 1999.


104 Note: According to Phil Runkel, the archivist at the Catholic Worker Archives at Marquette, "Richard was a volunteer at the New York Catholic Worker in 1970s, and was a member of the Des Moines community in the early ’80s. He originally wrote "CW Positions" for the Des Moines Catholic Worker paper, Via Pacis, which he edited. An expanded version was published under the title NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH: PRACTICAL ESSAYS ON THE CATHOLIC WORKER PROGRAM by Rose Hill Books in 1993." (E-mail correspondence 27 Sept 1999.)
- - -. "Definition May Save House for Homeless." St. Cloud Times. 14 Mar 1984, sec. C.


- - -. "Catholic Worker House to Move to Roomier Quarters." St. Cloud Times. 5 Jul 1984, sec. C.


Jean Donovan House Newsletter.


Jean Donovan House Pamphlet


Lang, Sylvia. "Short Term Home for Homeless Sought." St. Cloud Times. 5 Dec 1985, sec A.


Murphy, Terry. "Community Must Find Compassion for Needy." St. Cloud Times. 9 May 1990, sec A.
Myers, Susan and Bryan Busch. "Catholic Worker House Fills Vital Void in City." 
St. Cloud Times. 16 Feb 1984, sec. A.


---. "Donovan Shelter May Close July 1." St. Cloud Times. 30 April 1990, sec A.


---. "Homeless Shelter to Close June 1." St. Cloud Times. 24 May 1990, sec A.


Ruff, Joe. "Donovan House Makes Room for Holiday's Homeless." 
St. Cloud Times. 23 Dec 1986, sec A.


"Volunteers to Reopen Jean Donovan House for Homeless Oct. 1." 
St. Cloud Times. 9 Sept 1986, sec B.

Secondary Sources:


