

CATHOLIC COURIER



This woodcut, titled "On Behalf of the Crushed and Lonely," is by artist Fritz Eichenberg.

A half-century of hands-on Christianity

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A local facility is celebrating a half-century of receiving the ambassadors of Christ.

According to the philosophy of Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, those ambassadors are dispatched in the guise of homeless and hungry persons at shelters and soup kitchens.

"(T)he Greeks used to say that people in need are the ambassadors of the gods," Maurin wrote in 1933. "Although you may be called bums and panhandlers you are in fact ambassadors of God."

Together, Day and Maurin founded the Catholic Worker Movement, which spawned a network of hospitality houses throughout the United States. Next month, the Rochester facility, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, 402 South Ave., will celebrate its 50th anniversary.

During those years, St. Joseph's has spun off other hospitality houses as well. Bethany House, a shelter for women, was established in the 1970s by former St. Joseph's staff members. Jubilee House in Trumansburg was founded in the early-1980s by a married couple who met while working at St. Joseph's.

The house's anniversary celebration will take place the weekend of October 4-6, according to Pat Mannix, a member of St. Joseph's board of directors. One highlight will be an Oct. 5 picnic at Penfield's Harris Whalen Park. During the picnic, current and former house volunteers — numbering in the hundreds — will relate their experiences in a storytelling session, Mannix said.

Today's full-time, live-in staff of five works with about 150 Catholic, Protestant and Jewish volunteers. Six days of every week, staff and volunteer workers provide free noontime meals to 100-150 guests.

Staff members commit themselves to live at the house for periods ranging from a few months to a year or more. In turn, they receive free room and board, and stipends of \$10 per week.

In addition to sheltering several men during the winter months, the house offers occasional refuge to exiles from abroad. It also operates a garment room that provides clothing to the needy.

Yet some requests fall outside of workers' designated tasks. One client may need a ride to the welfare office, and another may ask for a small loan.

"When someone needs to go to another

state, very often they'll call us to provide the ticket," remarked Sister Marilyn Pray, SSJ, who has directed the house for the last three years.

That kind of hands-on Christianity drew Sister Pray to live at the house, she said.

"It's being concerned for justice in a very overt manner — trying to live as poor people do," Sister Pray said of the lifestyle at the house.

Like the other Catholic Worker houses across the country, St. Joseph's does not accept funds from government or agency monies. It relies instead on the providence of God. Consequently, the house survives much as the poor do: sustained by donations of food, clothing and money from businesses, parishes, congregations and individuals.

The philosophy of St. Joseph's House is an outgrowth of the Catholic Worker Movement — a radical alternative to Catholicism as it is practiced by many adherents of the faith.

Perhaps the first Rochesterian to experience the movement was Father Benedict Ehmann. In 1933, the young diocesan priest traveled to New York City to attend a summer "school" of the Sodality, a national group for lay Catholics.

While mingling with other Sodality members, Father Ehmann heard one person after another remark: "Did you hear? Dorothy Day is here!"

"I don't think I'd ever heard of her before," Father Ehman recalled in a recent interview. "But something about (her arrival) seemed to electrify me."

During one of the Sodality sessions, Father Ehmann eventually met the Catholic Worker movement's legendary co-founder. Upon his return to Rochester, members of the local Catholic Women's Club asked the priest to suggest a speaker for their annual dinner. Father Ehmann recommended Day, who spoke the following October before an overflow crowd at the former Columbus Civic Center.

A former communist and journalist raised by socially conscious parents, Day had converted to Catholicism in 1927. Despite her strict adherence to church teachings, Day retained from her leftist days a longing for social change. Yet her new-found Christian faith led her to pursue such change on a path far different from the revolutionary approaches of her socialist colleagues.

In Depression-era New York, Day met

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