

# THE LONDON CATHOLIC WORKER



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## Agony in the Middle East

**A**s Catholic Workers, we are sure that, in John Lynes' words in this newsletter, 'in a situation of oppression we cannot pretend to be neutral.' The Palestinians are the oppressed people in the Holy Land. We want to respond to the call for active solidarity from Christian Palestinians in particular. But how? Such tragedy and injustice calls for what Catholic Worker co-founder Peter Maurin called 'clarification of thought'. So we are sharing articles with diverging views, in order to promote reflection and discussion which might be very animated.

We are printing a report on an act of faithful witness at Downing Street which called for 'ceasefire now', the release of hostages, and used red paint hand prints to show that we in the UK also have 'blood on our hands'. We are printing an article about a visit to Palestine which ended on October 6th, the day before the Hamas attack. And we are also printing an article that challenges us about how to express our solidarity in ways that are really helpful.

For example, we may agree that the reality in Palestine is an apartheid-like situation, but disagree on whether it is always helpful to say so. We know 'the truth will set us free' (Jesus, in John 8:32) but also that we are to 'speak the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15) and that truth without love can be violence. We believe that Jesus calls Christians to practice pacifism and active

non-violent resistance to injustice and violence. We are called to 'love our enemy' and to pray for their conversion rather than for victory over them. This is almost certainly the hardest practice of the Gospel.



*Rachel Weeping for her Children, Jacob Steinhardt, 1962*

A Catholic Worker approach includes our own complicity alongside calls for repentance from others. How do we respond to Israel being among the top 10 recipients of UK arms exports, the top recipient of US - mainly military - aid since 1945 and the complicity of the UK in Joe Biden's view that US strategic self-interest dictates unconditional support for Israel? We cannot act from a position of moral superiority, but only from a humble commitment to the good of all, especially those who suffer the most.

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# The Tragedy of the Holy Land

*John Lynes on the continuing trauma and conflict in the Middle East*

I have the mixed privilege and burden of British citizenship, a Jewish upbringing, and eight years as a human rights observer in Gaza and the West Bank with the Christian Peacemaker Team (now the Community Peacemaker Team) and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme of the World Council of Churches. So I am distraught at the news from the Holy Land. I feel with the Israelis, many themselves children or grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, hemmed in by hostile Arab nations. I feel with Israeli parents watching their teenage children snatched from home and conscripted into an army of occupation, and finding it harder, with each exchange of rockets, to see this as a true expression of their Jewish faith.

I feel with Palestinian farmers, robbed of their ancestral lands, watching the pillaging of their olive trees. I feel with the Palestinian children and their teachers I used to watch, bullied at Israeli checkpoints on their way to and from school. I feel with homeless refugees under merciless bombardment in Gaza.

## The Nakba

We Brits share responsibility for this prolonged tragedy. When Britain granted freedom to colonies in Africa and South Asia, we left behind, in each case, an elected parliament, a civil administration, and a working framework of law and order. But when Britain ended its Mandate in Palestine in 1948, we played 'God Save the Queen' and sailed away knowing that Arab armies were poised to invade, and that the new State of Israel would fight back. The outcome – the Nakba – was predictable. Jordan occupied the West Bank. Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip. There was no



*'Fath' ('Victory'), Mustafa al-Hallaj, 1968*

Palestinian State. Thousands of Palestinians became, and still remain, refugees.

## Hamas

Palestinians' recent factional divisions are at last healed. The ongoing slaughter in Gaza has reunited Palestinians in Gaza, in the West Bank and in their diaspora, in support of Hamas. They respect Hamas as a bastion of Islam, and as the provider of schools, hospitals, universities and social facilities. They contrast Hamas' resistance to Israel with the perceived ineffectiveness of their West-aligned Fatah rivals.

What of those Hamas terrorists? Every oppressed party in the Middle East has a military wing. Jewish parties under the British Mandate were no exception: remember Irgun and the Stern Gang? The

armed counterpart of Hamas is the Al-Qassam Brigades. They were responsible for the attack on 7th October 2024. This does not absolve Hamas itself from all responsibility, but does not justify damning them all as terrorists.

The Al-Qassam Brigades were proscribed by the UK in 2001 under the 2000 Terrorism Act. Hamas as a political party was not proscribed until twenty years later. The latter proscription has been pointless and unhelpful. It has obstructed direct negotiations with Hamas, hindering Britain's possible role as a peacemaker.

### Zionism

It is easy to misunderstand the relation between Judaism and the State of Israel. The Holocaust was a theological challenge to religious Jews. Jewish festivals – Passover, Hanukah, Purim – typically celebrate God's protection for His Chosen People. In the Holocaust six million Jews were slaughtered just for being Jews. Where was God in Auschwitz?

The creation of the State of Israel seemed to be God's answer – the Promised Land Restored! Many Jews (but not all) sincerely experienced criticism of Israeli politics as an attack on their faith, a rejection of God, and clearly antisemitic.

### The Language of Blame

The history of Palestine is a catalogue of appalling mistakes made by Israelis, by Palestinians and – not least – by the UK. That said, in a situation of oppression we cannot pretend to be neutral. But when we rightly speak out for Palestinian rights, we need to recognise that we are up against two traumatised communities.

How else to explain why Netanyahu's government believes that bombing Palestinians without mercy will discourage them from supporting Hamas? How else to explain why Al-Qassam launched its attack on unarmed Israeli civilians on 7th October 2024, knowing that Israel would respond against Palestinians with overwhelming force in return?

It is easy to blame this side or that. The language of blame – 'apartheid', 'genocide', 'terrorist', 'boycott' – can only exacerbate the tragedy. The Holy Land cries out for prayer, for empathy, for mutual compassion, for reconciliation.

There is no space here to spell out what that means in political terms. I attempted this several years ago in a submission to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee. If you care to read it, it is still on the Government website – <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/79412/pdf/>

John Lynes



*Untitled*, Mustafa al-Hallaj, 1980

# Blood On Your Hands

*Virginia Moffatt documents her and Chris Cole's Downing Street action*

**O**n 29th December 2023, my husband Chris Cole and I went to Downing Street with two bottles of red poster paint. When we arrived, we waited for the crowds to part, approached the fence, sprayed paint, marked our hands and made handprints on the railings and the pavement. We then stood with two placards 'Blood on your hands. Ceasefire Now', and 'Stop the Slaughter', as we read the names of dead children killed by Israel and Hamas and the reading of the Holy Innocents:

*'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'* (Matt 2:18)

Our action came after witnessing the first two months of relentless slaughter of innocent Palestinians that we had been witnessing on social media and TV since Hamas' October 7th attack. While we have protested wars for decades - the cruelty and brutality of the onslaught of Gaza has been unprecedented. The deliberate withdrawal of food, water and utilities, the bombing of hospitals, the corralling of civilians into 'safe' regions where they were then bombed, the murder of so many children and targeting of journalists and hospital workers, the Tik Toks from soldiers mocking civilians and boast of war crimes has been horrifying to watch. Even more horrifying has been the failure of the Western world to stand up for Palestine, and the complicity of our government in Israel's actions, repeatedly failing to vote for a ceasefire at the UN and continuing to sell arms.

Before Christmas I wrote several emails and tweets to Rishi Sunak and my MP. They never replied. I attended two of the national demonstrations for Palestine in London. Nothing changed. So, it was an easy decision to agree to an action at Downing Street, calling on our government to change course.



*Chris Cole & Virginia Moffatt at Downing St, Pat Gaffney*

And my resolve was strengthened after watching Rev Dr Munther Isaac's powerful sermon, 'Christ among the rubble', in which he condemned Western hypocrisy on Gaza and asked Christians to act.

Before going to London, we had agreed we would call it off if a ceasefire was agreed. But the remorseless bombardment of Gaza continued, so we went ahead. As expected, we were quickly arrested and taken to Charing Cross Police Station where the desk sergeant was very surprised to see two middle aged white people in the back of the van. He seemed to need reassurance from the arresting officers that they really had due cause to arrest us. They made it clear they had, so he walked us over to the 'cage' outside the door, the waiting area where arrestees are held until taken upstairs. There was someone already there, and he apologised that due to cuts he didn't have enough staff to process us both at the same time. Chris had to wait, and I was taken up a long slope to custody. The desk sergeant was very apologetic about lack of staff, and we chatted about government cuts to services and how rubbish they were. He was very friendly and helpful and got through the bureaucracy as quickly as possible (complaining about the new computer system which, of course, was full of glitches). Everyone we encountered was equally pleasant, and I couldn't help but wonder if they would have been so friendly if

didn't help, but eventually I was taken to my cell. It was large, clean and bright and there was a thin plastic mattress and pillow on the bench. I was able to lie down and read my book and Bible which they'd let me keep and a welfare person provided me with a blanket so I felt relatively comfortable.

The first few hours passed quite quickly – I read, had some tasteless vegetarian food and dozed a bit. My book about the intelligence of animals, particular octopi, was a fascinating read so that helped. When I took a break from it, I read some Psalms and some of the Christmas Gospels and prayed for people in Palestine. It's probably the most praying I've done in a long time, and I found it very helpful. I also thought a lot about Palestinian prisoners, particularly the activist Ahed Tamimi who was imprisoned as a teenager for slapping an Israeli soldier after her cousin was injured and the soldier had slapped her. She was recently rearrested on faked up charges and released in the first hostage exchange and her strength and determination has always inspired me. I also remembered the image I'd seen of a recently released Palestinian prisoner who had been treated so badly that in 3 months his body was a gaunt skeleton and he looked about ten years older. I remembered of all those who couldn't escape their situation including the hostages Hamas is holding. I felt exceptionally lucky to know I was being treated well and would be out soon.

At four I made the mistake of asking what the time was, as then I began to be aware of how slow time was passing. The person on welfare check didn't know when we'd be interviewed, and so I began to feel a little bit fretful, wandering up and down to stretch my legs, before settling back to read again.

Eventually at around five, two young women came in to say they'd be interviewing me. They too were very pleasant and not too frustrated by my mostly 'no comment' answers. I told them the paint was poster paint, and that it was just us who acted. And at

the end, when asked if I had anything else to say, I said that I was there because I couldn't sleep thinking about Palestine and I wanted my government to take action against genocide.

Then it was back into the cell where I could hear someone talking to Chris, so realised he was nearby. I didn't hear him come back from his police interview so I became fretful again. Time passed, 6, 6:30 and no sign of being let out. But at last they came for me and by 8pm we were both out, which was when we discovered that we'd got a good amount of press coverage. Our friend Pat had taken some great pictures, and by chance a press photographer had also been there. The messages 'blood on your hands' and 'stop the slaughter' had been clearly seen and understood. There were also pictures of Rishi Sunak leaving Downing Street by the back door, and although it was unlikely that was due to our action, he would have surely known it was taking place and what it said.

Of course, one tiny action by two people is unlikely to change the mind of a government. And sadly, despite our efforts and the efforts of millions marching, writing to politicians, boycotting, blockading and taking legal action round the world, Israel continues to bombard Gaza regardless. The situation remains bleak and yet, not without hope. The day of our action South Africa launched its ICJ genocide case against Israel, and since then we've seen more and more governments ready to condemn Israel, and more and more people out on the streets. So we hope our protest has given encouragement to others, that perhaps some Palestinians saw the images and found them comforting, and we believe it's provided an opportunity to keep talking about our government's complicity in the genocide. This is why on 24th April, the night before our trial, we'll be holding a public meeting at the London Catholic Worker, about the UK government's ongoing support for Israel and what we can do to challenge it. Please join us if you can!

**Virginia Moffatt**

# Journeying Through Palestine

*Rose Chacko writes about her visit to Palestine on the eve of war*

I went to Palestine, to the city of Nablus in the West Bank (under Israeli military occupation) for a holiday, from September 18th to October the 6th – one day before the Hamas attack and the ensuing genocide Israel is carrying out against the trapped people of Gaza.



The Church of Jacob's Well, Nablus

I lived in Nablus from June 2012 to August 2013, spending the first two months teaching music at summer schools as part of an initiative by a charity called Music Harvest, and then as an Arabic student at An-Najjah University in Nablus, on my year abroad from a degree at SOAS university.

Nablus is a beautiful city, between two mountains, Gerizim (home of the Samaritans) and Aybal. The people are so friendly, hospitable, and generous and I don't think I have met such a patient people either. We were really looked after, our neighbours became our second family there, opening their home to us whenever we wanted to come, our whole flat was furnished by another friend who called people he knew to ask if they had anything spare.

The trip in September was the first time I had been in ten years. I was nervous about the trip – Israel's violence in the West Bank

had steadily escalated since May 2021, when they had launched their last major attack on Gaza. At the time, Palestinians had united across the West Bank, Israel ('1948 lands' as Palestinians say) and Gaza in a general strike, and a number of small militant resistance groups had emerged. Israel in turn had targeted these groups, who had launched attacks on Israeli military bases and soldiers.

The result – in around 2 years, around 60 people had been killed in Nablus by Israeli military raids and operations. Around 240 had been killed, before October 7, in the West Bank. Most of these were bystanders, caught when Israel targeted the young resistance fighters, most of whom were in their late teens or early twenties. Posters of these young people are everywhere, testifying to their memory and a city in mourning for those who died trying to resist Israeli crimes against their people.

So I was nervous of the violence, amongst other things.

But once I was there, I was so glad to be back. Nablus, like all of Palestine, is under threat. My friend and I stayed with a friend and his family. We visited families we had known – everyone was so happy to see us, and prepared feasts for us. Our old teacher and his wife made musakhan, one of my favourite Palestinian dishes, and more. He is from Jenin, which has seen devastating Israeli violence in recent months.

I went to a Catholic Mass with a Muslim friend of mine for the first time in Nablus. The church was the church of St Justin – born in Nablus in 110 and martyred in 165. An ancient church. The priest was Spanish, I think. It was fascinating to observe the Catholic Mass in Arabic. My friend had never been to a Mass and wanted to come with me. He turned to me when they did the collection asking why they were collecting money, and I said they do that for the church, and he gave a donation. We went to have coffee after the

Mass and spoke to the priest and a couple from the congregation, a very elderly man and a woman, who thought me and my friend were married, asked us to come back every week! I said we couldn't. I wanted to stay and ask more about the Nablus Christians, but didn't get the chance to return the following Sunday.

I also visited Jacob's Well - the well where Jesus met the Samaritan woman is under the church, where you can go and drink the water. This Greek Orthodox church is close to Balata refugee camp, the biggest camp in the West Bank, which suffers horrific levels of Israeli violence on a regular basis. The Israeli army accompanies settlers who come to visit a tomb nearby called Joseph's tomb, and the army often raids Balata camp at the same time, often injuring or even killing residents, or raiding homes and smashing everything up. Someone I knew was killed a few months ago. He had worked at the Jaffa centre in Balata when I was there, where I taught violin as a volunteer. The army killed him in November when they

raided and he fought back with other residents.

The priest at Jacob's Well is in his eighties, and replaced the last priest, who was murdered by Israeli settlers in 1979. I heard that they killed him next to the well with an axe after warning him he needed to vacate because the site was rightfully theirs. The current priest has painted biblical scenes which cover the walls of the church, and in one of them, he depicted the late priest with the settler raising his axe over him, as though a biblical scene. The doorman is Muslim and local, and he was the same as there ten years ago. He said there had been escalating violence in the last few years, with tear gas fired into the grounds, and the priest tended to call him whenever something happened, as the Palestinian Authority won't help when it comes to violence by Israelis. I told him my sister was having a baby soon, he gave me some water from the well which had been blessed for the baptism.

What has happened to Palestine and the Palestinians was a horrific injustice which

continues. They should never have been forced out of their homes in 1948 - what gave Britain the right to sign their land away?

75 years on, Christians need to stand with the people of Palestine and call out the ethnic cleansing, as well as Israel's apartheid system and occupation.

Most of all, Christians need to unequivocally call for an immediate ceasefire and call what is happening to Gaza what it is - genocide, collective punishment, and the result of Zionist ideology, which has not been critiqued properly by Christians here.

The failure of the collective West to impose any boundaries on Israel, especially since the Oslo Accords in 1993, has led to the genocide we are witnessing now. Acting as though it is okay to ignore Palestinian rights, or that it's just a given that they don't have rights whereas the Israelis do, is not an okay stance for Christians - or any human being - to take.

**Rose Chacko**



*Untitled, Mustafa al-Hallaj*

# The Problem of Riches: A Call to Conversion

*Martin Newell on the West's need to repent and renounce its ill-gotten gains*

**W**e have two new priests at our local parish of St John Vianney. Fr Jerome Oduntan and Fr Vincent are members of the Spiritan Religious Order. They are also from Nigeria. Like most Catholic parishes in London, many in the congregation are also from one African country or another.

Africa is the part of the world where the Catholic Church is growing fastest. In terms of explicitly Catholic and Christian faith, Europe is very much in decline. The Catholic Church in England is once more an immigrant church, as it had been ever since the days of the Irish potato famine, made worse as it had been by the British colonial masters. Europe is generally rich, Africa generally poor, in material wealth. It seems God is choosing Africans, and the poor. This should not be surprising.

Living and working among refugees and migrants is a help in understanding these things. So is trying to live the voluntary poverty that Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin talked about. They did not mean destitution. St Francis talked about Lady Poverty. It is a call to conversion away from the comforts and material addictions of our culture.



*The Call of Matthew, Caravaggio, 1600*

Voluntary poverty, real simplicity, is blasphemy to a culture of greed. If we take less, there is more for others who need it. If we can cultivate the virtue of needing less we are free to do what is needed and anything is possible, if we put our minds and hearts and backs into it.

In the Catholic Worker movement we seek to share life with, for and among the poor, and to live in, at least a relative, poverty. For God is there. As the estate agent said, there are three things that matter: location, location and location. We locate ourselves among the poor and marginalised, which is all the better to read the Scriptures and hear the voice of the Spirit. The Scriptures were, after all, overwhelmingly

written from the margins, from places occupied and oppressed. So such a place should be a good place to read them and understand what God is saying to the Churches.

At this time in history, when riches are at least as great a problem as poverty, that certainly includes the Psalmists' refrain, 'In his riches man lacks wisdom, he is like the beasts that are destroyed.' (Psalm 48)

Pope Francis, coming from Argentina, is also bringing us a view of the world from the Global South, from the poor. In this way we can understand his reminders that migrants seeking access to the riches of the world (that have been



plundered from the south to the north) must be welcomed as Christ. And that the rich must stop destroying the life of God's Earth that the poor most immediately rely on. As well as his repeated calls for the powerful to stop building and using their armies and building their wealth on the trade in blood that is the arms trade. From the perspective of the poor in the global south this is not controversial. In the words of Pope Francis, as well as the relative life and dynamism of the Church the respective regions, we can discern the perspective from which God sees the world.

It seems obvious that the rich will find it hard to connect with a God who blesses the poor, calls for justice, and critiques riches. A God who calls for simplicity of life to make space for true spiritual experience. It seems obvious that in order for the rich to hang on to Christian faith identity, they – we – might have to distort the Gospel of Jesus. That distorting might be to say that riches and poverty are of no concern. Or, it could be to say that God blesses riches and curses the poor – that is to say, their poverty is their own fault. This is a form of blasphemy, of 'using God's name falsely'.

We live in a culture that increasingly believes it has grown out of a need for God. But no amount of material prosperity and possessions can fill the spiritual void. And so

addiction follows. We live in an addictive society: addicted to more things, more experiences, more comfort, more luxury, more profit, more of everything except those that really matter. We talk about 'comfort eating' and can see very clearly the effects of obesity. But with buying things we hide the truth by calling it (with a touch of irony, admittedly) 'retail therapy', when 'comfort shopping' would be more accurate. We cannot see the effects of comfort shopping as easily as comfort eating, but it has similar life-denying, self-harming effects on our spiritual selves, on the planet and on others. In fact it is worse because there is a limit to how much we can eat.

We talk about people suffering from addiction, but we live in a culture of addiction, promoted all the time by saturation-advertising in the name of profit. It is only the most extreme addictions that stand out. In a culture of addiction to hedonism, where this is lauded and celebrated, even the poor become hedonists. And all this is promoted by capitalism with its addiction to profit and 'growth'. No wonder God is choosing the poorest, even if sometimes we – I – find it difficult to understand.

We are like the rich man tearing down his barns to build bigger ones in which to store his hoarded wealth while

the poor starve ( Luke 12:16-21 ) . People in this country nowadays 'need' bigger houses because they 'need' the space to keep all their stuff. And the corporations are continually tearing down their barns – their towers in central London and elsewhere – to build taller ones, all the better to accumulate more riches while the poor still starve. Very soon, the demand will be made for our souls.

Please God, the climate and environmental emergency will be a reality check that will bring us back to our senses. Please God, we will hear this call to conversion. Please God, we will hear the cry of the poor, the planet, and of peace, and begin to realise what it means to live simply and embrace Lady Poverty, so that all people and all creation may live life to the full.

**Martin Newell**



*Parable of the Rich Fool,  
Rembrandt, 1627*

# What Your Right Hand is Doing

*Thomas Frost writes about the hidden solidarity at the heart of the refugee crisis*

A few weeks ago, a group of pregnant women were driven into the desert by Tunisian authorities and abandoned there. Their phones were stolen, and if the Tunisian authorities followed their usual practice they were left with little or no food or water. If they were not beaten and tortured in detention as Black African migrants in Tunisia often are, that was the extent of the concessions. In all likelihood, such generosity had not been made to the hundreds of others from whom the pregnant women had been separated when they were arrested in trying to leave Tunisia to reach Europe by boat in order to claim asylum. If you are a European citizen, this was done for your benefit – the EU gave upwards of €100 million to the Tunisian government between 2015 and 2022 for the purpose of strengthening its borders, and last year proudly announced a ‘strategic partnership’ with the increasingly authoritarian regime, pledging €1 billion as part of its program of cutting off routes for refugees by outsourcing the necessary violence to the North African countries from which African migrants usually depart. All this fits very well with the British government’s own policy of hostility towards refugees, and it has raised no objection. There would, of course, be no need for refugees to pass through Tunisia anyway if British and European governments provided them with safe and legal routes, but we have chosen instead to turn the Sahara, as well as the Mediterranean, into a graveyard. The Tunisian authorities out of sight, the women started to walk back toward the coast.

Days later, I happened to be one of the people on shift with the Alarm Phone. The Alarm Phone primarily exists to support migrants crossing the Mediterranean – people travelling, usually already at sea, can call the number, and if they are in distress the team on shift can relay information about the boat to coast guards which are generally reluctant



*Refugees, William Kentridge, 2018*

to rescue boats of migrants from the global South, to civilian rescue ships, or failing that, to commercial vessels. A degree of pressure can be placed on authorities to refrain from human rights abuses if they know that an external observer is aware of the situation. The work of the Alarm Phone is vital and undoubtedly saves lives, but there is always a limit to what it can do remotely in the face of persistent governmental efforts to restrict any civil measures to make the crossing safer. On this occasion, a man who had managed to evade capture to a sufficient extent to have retained his phone, and was now accompanying the group of women, was in contact with us. One of the women was about to give birth, and he wanted us to contact NGOs who might have been able to help. No relevant NGOs were able to operate in the area; we could offer nothing except the numbers of local health authorities which the group, after their recent encounter with Tunisian authorities, were understandably reluctant to call. We heard nothing from them for a while.

This took place a few days before Ash Wednesday, when Catholics heard at Mass the Gospel reading advising us, less on what we should give, than on how we should give when we do so. When you give alms, do it secretly. When you pray, do it secretly. When you fast, do it secretly. The King James Version refers, strikingly, to the recipient of

our prayer as 'thy Father which is in secret'. For most British Catholics, this is a free choice. We live in a democratic country with a law which acknowledges, even if it inconsistently practices, an obligation to secure our rights. Part of our privilege – especially those who are citizens, and those who are white - is that secrecy is not imposed on us. It is easy for us to avoid persecution; we can live our lives in public view and it is up to us how much we do in public. For the many people whose presence in this country is criminalised by our immigration laws, who cannot legally rent or work, who cannot make themselves known to authorities without grave consequences, secrecy is not something they can opt out of. Jesus' own situation had more in common with theirs – toward the end of his ministry he could not heal or preach in public without the risk of apprehension by political authorities. In that way he is closer to them, just as we know that the itinerant preacher is closer to the poor than the rich. Our ability to live openly is another thing that separates us from the child refugee, the adult fugitive, the member of an occupied people who God was when he came down to us.

From Tunisia, the man contacted us to say that, as the baby started to crown, he had carried the woman giving birth on his back to a road, and found her and another woman with her a taxi to take her to a hospital. After walking for days through the desert he had found strength to carry a pregnant woman; having narrowly avoided imprisonment and abuse by authorities he had exposed himself to the risk of capture for the sake of a woman and child to whom he owed no special obligation.

His act of heroism will never be known, let alone rewarded, because he remains one of the thousands of people obliged to remain hidden due to the threat of persecution. Probably he still faces the lethal crossing, and then years of the dehumanising bureaucratic nightmare of European asylum processes, the end result of which may well be the decision that there is no sanctuary for him here.

His act of heroism was not unique; marginalised people cut off from mainstream protection and support are obliged to rely primarily on solidarity with each other. I think of the two migrants we know to have drowned this time last year rescuing others from the sea before any help arrived. We should use such privilege as we have as usefully as we can, but must keep in mind that, when it comes to the experience of those crossing borders, we are the ones at the periphery. We all know of the grandstanding charity of the powerful – the kind that has its place on television – which imposes a narrative convenient to power, of a global poor indefinitely dependent on the generosity of the global rich, concealing the unjust relations which create the need the charity only partially fulfils. God is in secret; God's work is done in secret. If our work does any good, it will do good just to the extent that it was done without regard for the approval of power, which usually means that it will remain obscure. So be it – the more we are in secret the closer we are to God, and to the people to whom he is closest. Perhaps this is all to say just that we should expect to find him where he told us he would be, but I find that I need to keep being reminded.

**Thomas Frost**



*Untitled*, Mustafá al-Hallaj, 1967

## Martha Hennessy Interview

*Martha Hennessy is a prominent US peace activist, Catholic Worker and granddaughter of Dorothy Day. Here she talks to Tom Dennehy-Caddick ahead of her 90th anniversary Catholic Worker talk, which was held at Giuseppe Conlon House last December.*

**So, 90 years on from its founding, what is the message that the Catholic Worker movement has for today?**

I believe the message remains the same. We work with the Catholic social teachings, providing the works of mercy, houses of hospitality. Also, the parts of Peter's programme. You know, agronomic universities, where scholars can come to work and workers can become scholars and study. A method of breaking down the class structure of the United States. So, I think that the mission is always the same. The gospel teachings of Christ. How do we work as disciples of Christ in the 21st century.

Immense technological changes have occurred, especially since the 1930s, but Dorothy and Peter spoke to the immediate needs of the person in front of you. Dorothy was very practical. Peter had the theoretical underpinnings and the Gospel teachings. You know what I always remind myself of? To keep it very simple: to love God with all your mind, heart and soul, and to love your neighbour as yourself. That's the basic Christian teaching. And so, we do hope that the Catholic Worker continues to display



Dorothy Day and Martha Hennessy

and further that message in the movement.

**If your grandmother, Dorothy Day, and her co-founder, Peter Maurin, were to see the movement today, what do you think would strike them? What would make them be joyous? What would they want to call us back to?**

I think they would be very grateful to see the soup lines. You know, feeding the people who can't fit into the houses. The soup lines, I think are very important. And also the hospitality that is provided in the houses, you know, to the best of everyone's abilities. I mean, they would recognise the scene in the kitchen of cooking a big pot of soup to be distributed. So, I think that that hospitality aspect is still quite obvious and intact.

I think they might wonder what's going on with some of

the houses that may not be doing in-house hospitality and speaking truth to power. Though there are houses and communities who definitely hold on to that message. And, you know, we have to evolve. Things change over the decades and over the generations.

**You have spoken before about how your peace work with Kings Bay Ploughshares - being imprisoned for entering a US nuclear military base - differed from Dorothy's more restricted view of direct action. Is there something about today which you think requires us to act differently?**

She recognised the horror of the bomb. She witnessed it in her lifetime, unlike us. But I think the two principles that she had concerns about with her dear friends, Phil and Dan Berrigan, were the question of

secrecy and destruction of property. So, I had to discern in my own heart and mind what that meant. This question of the nuclear weapons being right in front of us, hidden in plain sight. The secrecy behind the whole programme just was unbearable to me. And Dan Berrigan spoke to the question of property. What is proper to the common good? Nuclear weapons are not proper to the common good. So that answered my question of the so-called destruction of property. And, you know, for our situation with the US military, you're not going to get onto those bases if you announce that you want to go onto those bases. So that was it. What will resistance to nuclear weapons require? It may look different in my grandchildren's time. We're praying to God that they'll be abolished within my lifetime.

**Catholic Worker communities are very beautiful but also very challenging places to be. What was it like to grow up within the Catholic Worker movement?**

The Catholic Worker movement is not an NGO. It's not an agency. It's a family. And I certainly grew up with the definition of family being beyond biological. So, I think it's very important to keep that spirit within the houses of making people feel comfortable and welcomed and that you're willing to share, you know, all that you

have with them, including yourself and your time and your space.

A real challenge is growing up in a large city. Tamar, my mother, loved the countryside. And so her first two children were born at the Eastern Catholic Worker Farm, and the next two were born on their own farm. And then my sister was born on the Peter Maurin farm. So we had a variety of experiences of being a family unit within the community, but also having our own space. But, you know, there are issues. There's a lot of mental illness in the Catholic Worker houses due to the situation of those who are left behind, who fall through the cracks. But my mother had wonderful memories of her childhood. Just the warmth, the camaraderie, the family style that Dorothy managed to evoke, for everyone. Now, how beautiful is that compared to state institutional approaches.

**When you grew up, you moved away for a time from both the Catholic faith and the Worker movement. How did you find yourself journeying back to faith and back to the Catholic Worker movement?**

It's hard to explain conversions. Conversions are mysterious things. My father left the family when I was six. My mother kind of left the church. She had all kinds of questions of how the Church

treated women and children. My grandmother was heartbroken to see us just drift away from the Church. But later I just found myself returning. I really can't explain it. Dorothy was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2002, and I had to give a little acceptance speech, and my life changed drastically after that. I was just hit over the head. I was living in Vermont, working as an occupational therapist, raising my children, getting them through college, living a normal life, paying my war taxes. And then I had to give this little speech and I realised what this legacy meant... the kind of soapbox I was given and how I should start using it. So that was kind of the beginning.

Later I struck up a correspondence with Daniel Berrigan, and he really did help me in very mysterious ways to return to fundamental questions. What does your baptism mean to you? What are you going to do with this? The answer was: you're a Catholic and you're within the Catholic Worker. Still, I was totally terrified of going back to Maryhouse. I hadn't set foot in the house for 24 years after Granny's funeral, but now I can see that all of these little seeds were planted to bring me back somehow.

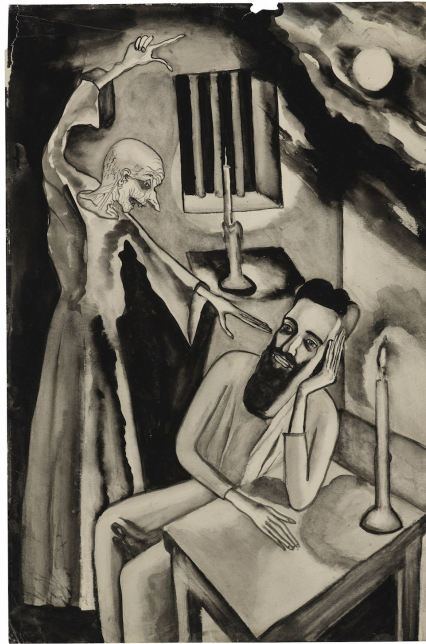
*Reprinted from Independent Catholic News, 15/12/2023*

# Count Up the Almonds

*Tom Bennett ponders the meaning and meaninglessness of suffering*

In a Christian context, the question of suffering has always been difficult. How does one reconcile the idea that ‘suffering and death - considered in themselves - have no true meaning or purpose at all’, as David Bentley Hart puts it, with the contention that there is ‘nothing, not even suffering or death, that cannot be providentially turned toward God’s good ends’? Does the latter not mean all suffering will be somehow balanced out or justified in the end? When David Bentley Hart speaks of suffering and death ‘providentially turned’, he does not completely align himself with Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, who inveighs against a God whose ultimate vision is predicated on the torture of infants. Hart is in fact, rather strangely, endorsing Ivan’s views. Ivan is right to resist any call to rationalise evil or suffering. But that resistance, as Hart argues, is not incompatible with the belief that forces of ill will never thwart the will of God in the end.

Where does this leave us? Hart’s argument is a rather neat and intellectually satisfying one. But the shadows of suffering haunt us still. Ivan’s horrific stories, which Dostoevsky lifted from contemporary newspaper articles, would perhaps struggle to make our front pages today, competing for a place with unprecedented acts of destruction and terror across the world. What can we do as a community when faced with a world shot through with suffering?



*Ivan's Dream, Alice Neel, 1938*

Perhaps it is a category mistake to speak of doing something with a concept devoid of meaning, a nothing. We may, like Hart, render it theologically coherent, but that does not seem enough.

Beyond more concrete efforts to alleviate suffering, like volunteering one’s time to help the less fortunate or donating to charity, there remains the challenge of existing with suffering. At this juncture, Theodor Adorno offers a potentially useful interpretive avenue in *Negative Dialectics*. In one particularly excoriating passage, reflecting on life for mankind after the Holocaust, Adorno speaks of the way in which ‘our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of experience as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims’. Any attempt to position those deaths within a broader

framework of sense or meaning would fall woefully flat. Like Ivan, Adorno rails against any attempt, secular or religious, to justify horrific suffering in relation to the rewarding ends.

But there is some hope. In light of what Adorno refers to as ‘the new imperative’—‘that Auschwitz will not repeat itself’—we are left with a ‘bodily sensation of the moral addendum’. In other words, we can no longer place at ourselves at a remove from the horror; it strikes us at a physical level. In this sense, Adorno is imploring us to feel the wrongness of suffering, not to try and explain it away. As Lear demands of us all: ‘expose thyself to feel what wretches feel’.

The brilliance of Adorno’s thought lies not merely in his ethics, but his delicate approach to the metaphysical. Alongside his call for a bodily proximity to suffering, he insists that we find a means of discussing suffering that neither denies nor affirms the transcendent world beyond. In denying this world beyond, we risk ignoring the suffering around us crying out for change; in affirming such a utopia we render null and void the current efforts being made to effect this change. With the latter, Adorno poses his challenge to thinkers like Hart. Is it tempting to turn a blind eye to present suffering with the knowledge that God

God rescues and redeems creation from a fallen world? Perhaps. Though it is Adorno himself, not Hart, who argues that 'no light falls on people and things in which transcendence would not appear'. For all of his concerns, Adorno appears to cling to a radical hope.

As an antidote to Adorno's reservations about a potential utopia, there is, of course, a rather straightforward, Christian solution. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, who dedicated a great portion of his life to both relieving suffering and writing

about it, puts it most clearly: 'in itself suffering is not redemptive – it is only redemptive if it is connected with love'. This is not offered up as an easy way out of dealing with the crisis of our 'post-Auschwitz' state, but rather a natural extension of Adorno's call for greater approximation to those in agony.

Suffering should not be explained or justified. Though if we are to co-exist with it, we must do so in a spirit of divine love. Yet in seeking the right words for such a call to loving

proximity, words can quickly turn glib. They can wither into what the poet Paul Celan would call 'maxims that never reached anyone's heart'. But it is Celan himself who offers us the best alternative to empty clichés, as he reflects on his relationship with those murdered in the camps.

*Count up the almonds,  
Count what was bitter,  
what kept you wakeful,  
Count me in with them all.*

**Tom Bennett**

## GCH House Update

We were very blessed at the end of 2023 to celebrate 90 years of the Catholic Worker movement with a fun-filled gathering at Giuseppe Conlon House in December. It featured a great conversation between Martha Hennessy (see pp. 12-13), Dorothy Day's granddaughter, and Anna Blackman, a researcher on the UK Catholic Worker movement, which was facilitated by Madoc Cairns from Plough magazine. It was lovely to see so many people there and to have a chance to share memories and stories of the Catholic Worker, which we are all so proud to be a part of.

We have also been blessed with new guests, bringing the total now to twelve, and one of our guests recently received their leave to remain from the Home Office. Deo gratias!

## The Catholic Worker in the UK

London CW: Giuseppe Conlon House, 49 Mattison Road, London N4 1 BG ; Tel: 020 8348 8212; E: londoncatholicworker@yahoo.co.uk ; Web: www.londoncatholicworker.org ; Twitter: @LndnCathWorker ; Facebook: London Catholic Worker

*At Giuseppe Conlon House we run a house of hospitality for homeless and destitute asylum seekers who are not allowed to work or claim benefits, and organize acts of prayer, witness and nonviolent resistance.*

The Catholic Worker Farm: Lynsters Farm, Old Uxbridge Road, West Hyde, Herts, WD3 9XJ ; Tel: 0923 777 201 ; E: thecatholicworkerfarm@yahoo.co.uk ; Web: www.thecatholicworkerfarm.org

*The Farmhouse offers hospitality, accommodation and support to destitute women and children, and have a poustinia and hermitage retreat.*

Glasgow Catholic Worker: email: glw@catholicworker.org.uk; website: www.catholicworker.org.uk

*The Glasgow Catholic Worker offers a place of welcome for asylum seekers and destitute refugees in the centre of Glasgow at the Garnethill Multicultural Centre, open Sat 9:00 – 1:00. and a soup kitchen on Friday nights. We keep a regular vigil at Faslane Nuclear Base as well as having monthly meetings and prayers.*

**When you have finished with this newsletter, please pass it to others!**

# Giuseppe Conlon House Wishlist

## FOOD

- Chopped tomatoes
- Peanut butter
- Cooking oil
- Kidney beans
- Lentils
- Chickpeas
- Instant coffee
- Sugar
- Oats
- Noodles
- Soy sauce
- Honey
- Cereal
- Juice and squash
- Herbal teabags
- Chilli sauce
- Nuts and seeds
- Tinned kidney beans & chickpeas



## TOILETRIES

- Toilet paper
- Toothbrushes
- Toothpaste
- Deodorant
- Shampoo
- Razors



## CLEANING

- Eco-friendly products
- Bicarbonate of soda
- Multi-purpose cleaner
- Toilet cleaner
- Laundry detergent



## MISCELLANEOUS

- New Men's underwear
- Candles/tea lights
- Umbrellas

## SUPPORT OUR WORK

At Giuseppe Conlon House we run a house of hospitality for destitute asylum seekers unable to work or claim benefits. We are a part of the radical, Christian, pacifist Catholic Worker movement started in 1933 in New York by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. For more information visit: [www.catholicworker.com](http://www.catholicworker.com).

## DONATIONS WELCOME!

We are not paid for this work. We receive nothing from the government. We rely on our readers' donations to pay bills, volunteer and guest expenses, building repairs, printing, and household supplies.

## WAYS TO DONATE

**Cheque:** send cheques payable to 'London Catholic Worker', to 49 Mattison Road, London N4 1BG

**Online banking:** London Catholic Worker, Triodos Bank, Account No: 20066996 Sort Code: 16 58 10 IBAN:GB98NWBK60000410 018573

**Paypal:** visit our home page [www.londoncatholicworker.org](http://www.londoncatholicworker.org)

**Standing Order:** to arrange a standing order use the adjacent form on the left.

Please do not donate pork products! Many of our guests do not eat pork for religious reasons. Also, please do not donate pasta as we already have enough.

Standing Order Form <small>Please use block letters</small>	
I wish to pay the London Catholic Worker £10/ £20/£40/other amount <input type="text"/> per month/ other <input type="text"/>	
Payments to be made monthly/ other First Payment to be made on: / / 14 and monthly thereafter	
Name of your bank	<input type="text"/>
Address of your bank	<input type="text"/>
Your account name	<input type="text"/>
Your account number	<input type="text"/>
Your bank sort code	<input type="text"/>
Please pay:	For the Credit of: London Catholic Worker
Triodos Bank	Account Number 20066996
Deanery Road	Sort Code: 16 58 10
Bristol BS1 5AS	Until further notice the sum of the value indicated above
Signed	Date
Your email address:	Your Name and Address
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<b>Please return to :</b>	
<b>London Catholic Worker</b>	
<b>49 Mattison Road</b>	
<b>London N4 1BG</b>	