Empire Falls: Practical Strategies for Living the Green Revolution
The Fourth Biannual Catholic Worker Farm Gathering
By Bob Waldrop, Oscar Romero Catholic Worker

Representatives from 19 Catholic Worker farms and houses, from ten states, gathered in the basement of the First English Lutheran Church of Platteville, Wisconsin the weekend of February 17-19 for the fourth biannual Catholic Worker Farm Gathering. The event was hosted by St. Isidore Catholic Worker Farm, located just outside the town. There were about 70 people there at one time or the other during the weekend, including at least a dozen kids. I say “at least” because the kids were pretty much in motion all the time and it was hard to get a count of them. Maybe 8 or 10 of us had grey hair (well, if we had hair); the rest were all young people, the millennial generation.

In the call to the meeting, the St. Isidore workers wrote:

Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day believed the Catholic Worker movement was a light amid the darkness of modern empire. The same holds true today just as it did in 1933. This weekend of fellowship, roundtable discussions & presentations, a barn dance, St. Isidore farm tour, prayer, and great food will be rooted in an awareness that now, as always, we desperately need to simultaneously resist empire and build constructive alternatives, rooted in the land.

The meeting lived up to these words and then some. Cult, Culture, and Cultivation were woven throughout every activity.

Folks trickled in the evening of Friday the 17th and the morning of the 18th. The basement of the First English Lutheran Church was comfortably furnished with a variety of tables and couches and came with a great kitchen of which we made ample use. This was a gathering of Catholic Worker farmers, and most everybody brought food, the work of their hands, and the produce of their farms. Brian Terrell gave a stirring keynote address, but he and Betsy also brought goat cheeses – hard and soft – from the Strangers and Guests Catholic Worker Farm herd, and surely the most expensive restaurants would not have cheeses as fine as those.

Mike Miles and Barb Kass brought beef from their farm in Wisconsin, and a gallon of maple syrup they made from the trees on their land.

The traditional “seven sours and seven sweets” were in ample supply as people brought out their home preserved pickles, jams, and jellies.
Besides roundtables, we shared copies of our newsletters, flyers, and other printed items and seeds were also shared.

Saturday morning we began with prayer and then Brian Terrell shared with us a keynote address, with the theme – Peter Maurin’s Vision for the Catholic Worker. Brian spends about half his time at the Strangers and Guests Catholic Worker Farm in Maloy, Iowa, and the other half of his time on the road involved with protests, vigils, witness, and time in jail. He reminded us that for some time after the death of Peter Maurin, into the late 1980s and early 1990s, the “Cultivation/back to the land” aspect of the original Catholic Worker program of Peter and Dorothy was fairly marginal within the Catholic Worker movement. He said that when they moved to Maloy, Iowa in 1986 to start Strangers and Guests, some thought that they had left the movement! Others challenged their decision to live in such a rural area. “What need is there for a soup line in such a small town?” He remembered attending a national Catholic Worker gathering in the 1980s, and the farm roundtable was attended by only a handful of farmers. The primary question of non-farmers who attended was to wonder why anyone would bother to farm or garden when so much food was available for free.

But that attitude has passed and these days the farm roundtables at national gatherings are among the liveliest and best attended. Brian reminded us that those free vegetables come to us courtesy of farm workers who work long hours with no benefits for small pay, and are often exposed to toxic doses of pesticides and herbicides.

Brian said: “Some criticize such changes in the movement as if they are evidence that we are losing our way. My perspective is that, with some growing pains, the Catholic Worker is rather finding its way now after so many years. ‘Our houses of hospitality are scarcely the kind of houses that Peter Maurin has envisioned in his plan for a new social order,’ Dorothy Day wrote in her column in September 1942. ‘He recognizes that himself, and thinks in terms of the future to accomplish true centers of Catholic Action and rural centers such as he speaks of.’ Perhaps it is true that Peter Maurin’s role as “co-founder” of the Catholic Worker was exaggerated in the past. If so, it might also be true that he is now posthumously growing into that role as the movement matures into the dynamic revolutionary social force it was meant to be.” Brian’s full text is available online at http://www.justpeace.org/maurinvision.html.

As we moved into the times for the roundtable discussions, I found myself praying for bilocation as I wanted to go to all of them, but obviously could only be at one place at any given time. All of the round tables I attended were interesting and informative and it was helpful to
see how others were adapting to the situation in the present world. I especially enjoyed hearing how the White Rose Catholic Workers in La Plata, Missouri were endeavoring to live without electricity or automobile transportation. Mike Miles was both hilarious and challenging in his discussion of the critical role in coming decades of agriculture and livestock production in our adaptation to the realities of climate change.

Roundtable sessions were:

"Craft, Skill, and Cottage Industry" - Betsy Keenan, Strangers & Guests CWF (Maloy, IA)
"Permaculture DeMystified" - Bob Waldrop, Oscar Romero CW (Oklahoma City, OK)
"Saving Seed" - Alice McGary, Mustard Seed CWF (Ames, IA)
"Market Farming" - Sara and Paul Freid, Lake City CWF (Lake City, MN)
"Toward Fossil Fuel-Free Living" - Regina Rust, White Rose CWF (La Plata, MO)
"Cows Can Save the Planet--Or How 'Cowspiracy' Gets It All Wrong" - Mike Miles, Anathoth CWF
"Indigenous Sovereignty and the Land" - Ashley Hand, Red Earth Gardens (Iowa)
"Coping with Climate Instability" - Joanna Hoyt, St. Francis CWF (NY)

Saturday night featured the traditional CWer gathering talent show. Many amazing acts were featured. One young person walked through a piece of paper! And then he showed the rest of us how to do the same! There was music (Beethoven, a piano medley), a Bach violin sonata, a capella singing, and an incredible dance number that involved all of us.

Sunday morning we had free time. Many of us went to Mass (there were two Catholic churches within walking distance), some attended one of the services of the First English Lutheran Church. Others simply sought some quiet time. That afternoon, we headed out to St. Isidore CW Farm where community members Eric and Brenna Cussen Anglada and Mary Kay McDermott and Peter Yoches gave us a tour. They are in the beginning of their stewardship of this land -- it has a lot of possibilities and many challenges, which is something that could be said of all farms.

Culture came to the fore as we gathered in the late afternoon for a barn dance. Music was provided by Mike Miles on the banjo, Barb Kass on the accordion (both Anathoth Farm), Alice McGary (Mustard Seed CW farm) on the fiddle, Dan from Dubuque on the string bass, and Daniel Loiacono (Madison, WI CW) on guitar. The dances were taught and called by Mary Kay McDermott of St Isidore.

We finished that afternoon with another fine meal including lots of leftovers from the weekend, and enjoyed a
considerable amount of conversation. Some headed out that afternoon or evening (2 left for Standing Rock, to join people who were getting evicted that week) and the rest of us left the next morning after even more late night conversation.

The conventional cliche comment about something like this is that “a good time was had by all.” That was certainly true, but the “good” of “good time” was more than just fun. There was a true Goodness about this gathering of Catholic Worker farmers and friends. Beauty and Wisdom were also on hand. Perhaps Brian should have the final word from his first words:

“We are gathered here, Catholic Worker farmers and friends, at a time of extraordinary uncertainty and peril. It is unclear if the damage our wars and industrialized lifestyles are inflicting on the planet can be reversed at this late date. Never have so many people been displaced and the danger of nuclear war is more imminent now than ever before in the lifetimes of most of us here. If previous generations of Catholic Worker farms have measured in the end as “somewhat less than history,” our efforts today must be of historic proportions, God help us, if we are to contribute to the continuation of life on earth.”