

- When the Spirit says “Move,” you gotta move**
- Report on the May 18-20 Ohio Valley Catholic Worker Retreat**
- A few new community profiles**

Dear Friends in the Nurturing Communities Network,

As usual, when I make a trip I invite someone to ride along to keep me awake and to probe the depths of whatever topic the Spirit might bring up. David Hersh, in his 20’s, jumped at the chance to join the Ohio River Valley Catholic Worker Retreat on May 18-20. He’s living in his van in the Reba neighborhood these days because his fiancé has moved into one of our households, and because he is testing a longer-term call to community. On the way through down-town Chicago, David’s friend, Adam Gianforte, jumped from his job into our car with his back-pack and tent, ready to share the miles and join our conversation on homelessness and community.

While David snoozed in the back seat, Adam shared how God had told him to pitch his tent under the Wilson Ave. Lake Shore Drive viaduct and live there with a village of homeless folk for half a year until the police kicked them all out to make way for a construction project. This was a life transforming experience for Adam with a new circle of friends, and the gift of a clear calling. Since then Adam and an entrepreneurial room-mate have offered hospitality to a formerly homeless friend (also from under the bridge) and are organizing a non-profit corporation to own a house in order to do this ministry of hospitality on a larger scale. Adam was eager to meet and make friends among the Catholic Worker



communities with others of a similar calling.

Now a refrain from the Retreat is stuck like an earworm in my head: “When the Spirit says move, you gotta move.” I was blessed to ride to Bloomington and back with a couple of millennials who are taking that advice to heart.

We landed at Solsberry Hill Retreat Center, ten miles into the hills west of Bloomington IN, on a verdant spring weekend



next to a pond that invited swimming, fishing, and long conversations under the pavilion -- rain or shine. The annual Ohio River Valley Catholic Worker Retreat gathers a network of friends from Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and beyond.



We began each morning with worship in the austere beautiful upstairs chapel, forty-five of us seated on the floor, backs against the wall -- with one exception granted to this sore-kneed grandpa who was permitted a chair. The Bloomington Catholic Worker community, with their fine musicians and traditions of spirited intergenerational worship, led the way for us all. I was moved by how securely the many children belonged,

joining in singing the songs, reading scriptures, and reflecting on the readings.

The Catholic Worker movement allows for quite a bit of slack in how events are organized. But if the members have read their Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, they've learned the principles of gentle personalism, which means, among other things, that if you see something that needs doing, you are the one to do it. So chore charts for food prep, clean-up, and child care appeared and got filled in. Two big welcome dogs made the rounds,



sniff-testing all the guests for bombs and contraband, and then approved our CW status with an official lick. Food did show up because someone planned ahead for the main dish and everything else was potluck. When the meals would appear was a bit suspenseful, so hungry folks sat in the porch windows of the dining hall waiting for the lunch call, which eventually came. The Lord provided, we all had enough and there were twelve basketfuls left over at the end -- something like that.



The Solsberry Hill Retreat Center hosts were greatly biased in favor of Catholic Worker folks, giving us the sweet deal of \$10-a-night-lodging if we'd lend a hand on a Saturday morning work project. We put our muscles to work straightening up some flopped trusses that will, hopefully, eventually make a roof over the campground amphitheater stage.

We had a talent show, two rounds of impromptu workshops, water fights, chess matches, and serious playing with the dogs. "Honey," the massive Golden Lab from the Martinie Eiler household in Bloomington, seemed exhausted from all that play and is caught taking some quiet time for philosophical reflection as a game of ultimate Frisbee swirls around her and the photographer. Her thoughts on the event would, no doubt, be profound if we had a translator.



For me, however, the high points of the retreat were two kinds of conversations – with old friends and with new. The first was listening to individuals share their discipleship journeys and their community's welfare since our last meeting.

Many of us heard about the Bloomington Catholic Worker Community's transition as they are releasing long-time members, David and Laura Lasuertmer, to launch a farming community with others interested in a life closer to the land and more open to an interfaith make-up. The Lasuertmers plan to sojourn at Solsberry Hill Retreat Center till the community and the farm come together.

Meanwhile, the three families who remain in Bloomington (Martinie Eilers, Elams, and Gershons) are looking ahead to a September visitation of "Yours Truly" with a few other local supporters, hoping for more clarity on the next chapter of life together as a radical Christian community of hospitality for persons recovering from homelessness. I see how these two groups, those staying and those departing, are very deliberate about blessing each other in this move.

I was impressed by the cohesiveness of the Bloomington Catholic Worker's teamwork which led the way in feeding us all, offering times of worship, and animating our common activities through the weekend. The Catholic Worker regional gatherings across the country tend to be welcoming of all kinds of spiritual and non-spiritual traditions -- with a respectful nod to the Catholicism of Dorothy Day. But the active role of the Bloomington CW folks in this regional circle results in an unabashed enthusiasm for Jesus and his way of gathering the poor, lost, and outcasts of the world, making room for diehard Catholics, Orthodox, Anabaptists, and other types in between.

And now I want to introduce to you a few communities that I'm just getting to know:

**Little Bear Creek Farm** is anchored by three single men, Hans, Jubal, and Elijah, with a couple of fiancés in the wings. They have roots in the Old Order Baptist Brethren, who number several thousand in the Dayton Ohio, area. They make their living as produce farmers, selling most of their goods from a road-side store. They are grateful for their Brethren inheritance of fidelity to Jesus, a strong work ethic, and a network of highly functional families. But they feel called to go all the way with community of goods and a life of solidarity with the poor they see modeled in Jesus and the Early Church. They show up at Nurturing Community events and Catholic



Worker retreats, looking for other “cousins” who can sustain them in their uniquely communal calling. These brothers seem on the lookout for good deeds to do, especially during the off season. Recently, after a five-hour drive, they showed up with carpenter tools at our Reba outpost in Ford Heights (a South Chicago suburb) where they helped re-shingle the fire-damaged roof of Chico and Tatiana Fajardo Heflin's house.

**Lydia's House** has at its core a community of six women (and one husband) who have hosted a center for homeless moms and pregnant teenagers for five years now, long enough

that a community of mutual service has grown up. Typically, in these kinds of “shelters” the women who receive support are expected to “graduate” and move on to an independent existence. However, the experience of Lydia’s House has been that such close-in relationships create a mutually beneficial community where differences between the helpers and helped tend to blur. (“What do you do when one of the formerly homeless mothers wants to be baptized and join the community?”)



In order to provide a long-term context for community, Lydia’s House has acquired a run-down eight-unit apartment building in their Norwood enclave encircled by the city of Cincinnati. They have wrestled funding from the County and other sources, to thoroughly renovate it for families in need of decent long-term homes. Thank God, the one married woman among all the sisters of Lydia’s House is hitched to Ben, an architect with plenty of experience in project development and oversight. He felt called to quit his down-town job to take over whatever is needed (from broom-pusher to general contractor to City-Hall desk-banger) to see this project through. God seems to be moving mountains (mountains of plaster right now -- a dozen dumpsterfuls) to bring about the beautiful restoration of a neighborhood eyesore, to provide for mothers and families in need of affordable community housing. As a former affordable housing developer, I’m eager to hear what comes next. Check it out at [stlydiashouse.org/](http://stlydiashouse.org/)

**The Parish Farming School of Eucharistic Discipleship:** Finally, I want to introduce a group from Cincinnati whose quirky name obviously begs further explanation. Apparently every good thing that they are about should fit into the name somewhere. The community is serious about recruiting interns to learn urban farming and Christian discipleship within the Orthodox



tradition in the parish of Christ the Savior Holy Spirit Orthodox Church. Some of their produce ends up in a once-a-week free pizza café. This cheeky subversion of the capitalistic spirit also tends to be a community-wide gathering and celebration. Learn more about them at

<https://www.christthesavioroca.org/parishfarmingschool.html>

I always hope to come home from a communities gathering like this with some new joke or ditty. I offer you the worst groaner from our (lack of) talent show. You have to imagine the beat and the tune.

Benji met the bear.

The bear met Benji.

The bear was bulgy.

The bulge was Benji.

I come home filled (bulgy?) with fresh inspiration about how the Holy Spirit keeps gathering new communities of ardent souls eager to seek the Kingdom of God in a life together.

Yours in his service,

David Janzen

P.S. If you want to learn more about our NCN fall retreat (October 19-22) on mentoring partnerships, please drop me a note at [dhjanzen@gmail.com](mailto:dhjanzen@gmail.com).