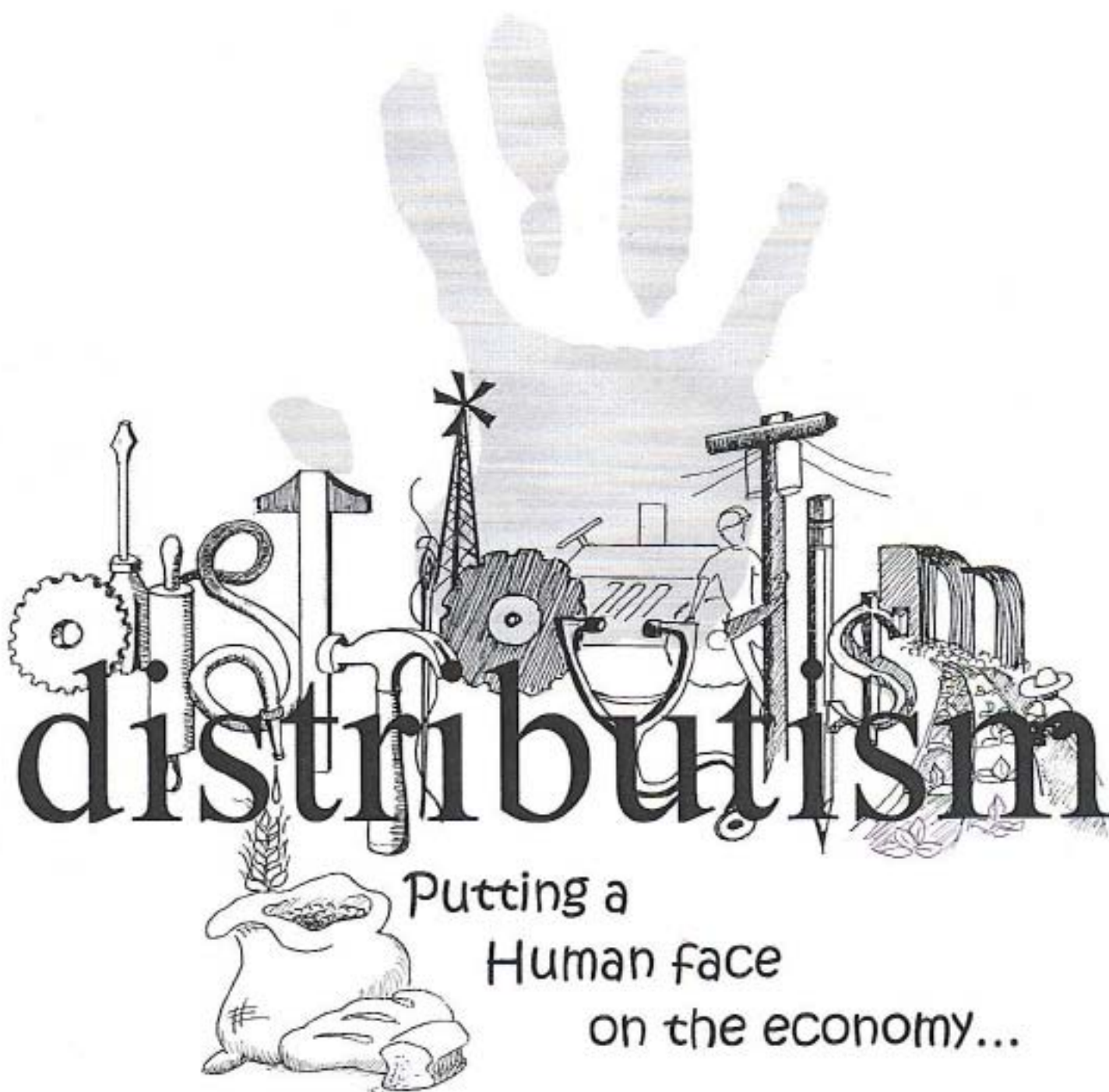


# THE Round Table

Winter 2010

"...a path from where we are to where we should be." --Peter Maurin

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# Why This Issue?

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More often than not, when we sit down together to discuss what the next issue of the Roundtable should be, we begin to brainstorm and soon enough an idea starts to form. The idea begins to take on a life of its own and it becomes obvious why this is the issue we should be writing. Things begin to fall into place and pretty soon we have the whole issue planned out. That was not the case with this issue on distributism. We brainstormed for a long time and once or twice almost had a different issue planned. However, we kept coming back to the question of what do we need to say right now, what is the root of the problems we see around us? If you look back at several of our recent issues there is a common theme woven through all of them. It may have been difficult for us to see, and I fear it may be difficult for you to read, but the truth we have come to is that capitalism and the influence it has over our society is breeding the worst of the world's problems. We have mentioned it many times in recent issues, and it became clear that we also needed to address capitalism head on. We didn't want to write a whole issue on why capitalism is bad though; we already touched on that through immigration, the criminal justice system, elections, and even our food system. We wanted to give something positive as an alternative. Standing on our soapbox and preaching why something is bad doesn't make anything good, and so we set out to offer an alternative to capitalism that we as Catholic Workers could support. Luckily, we didn't have to look far as the Catholic Worker has been talking about distributism for years, and many of the roots of distributism are found within the teachings of the Catholic Church.

So we set out to write an issue on distributism. We then saw that like any economic system it is large and complex. Undaunted, we set out to learn more about distributism and then we wrote an issue on it. Therefore, Jenny Truax offered a primer on distributism to catch us up while Teka Childress asked tough questions about distributism, James Meinert explored the spiritual roots of distributism and Megan Heeney showed us how distributism is personalist. Carolyn Griffeth, James Meinert, and Christy Finsel took a look at many existing business models that are distributism-friendly. Carolyn also wrote this issue's Catholic Worker Thought and Action on Personalism. Tim Pekarek wrote From Karen House, Robert McGee wrote From TC House, and Colleen Kelly created this issue's centerfold.

So again we are back to the question of "Why THIS issue?" and still I struggle with finding an easy answer. This was not an easy issue for us, not only because it is difficult content to express but it is also difficult to take in. Perhaps we were inspired by our last issue on prophets, but I feel we finally decided we had to speak truth about the reality we see. The reality is that we see suffering day in and day out. We get many more calls for shelter than we could ever house, and since the recession many are "first time callers." Our current system, capitalism, ignores those we love and call friends. It isn't offering any new housing or even new jobs it seems, and so we are speaking the truth that there is another way. "Why this issue?" Because we want the suffering to end; we want the people we see to have dignity again and so we offer distributism as an alternative.



- Timmy Cosentino

Cover: Jeff Finnegan  
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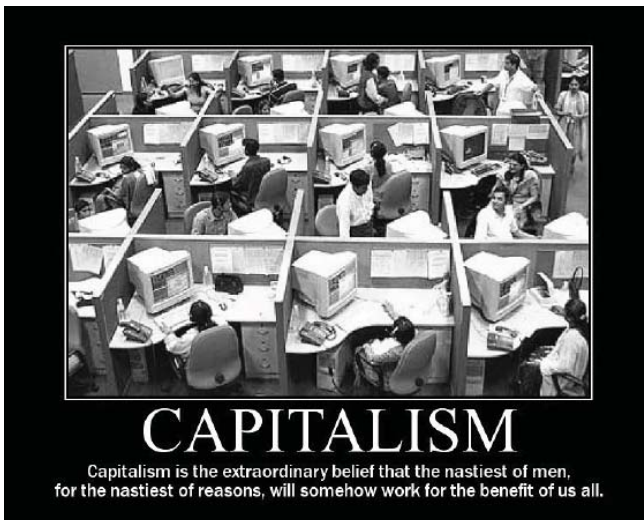
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# Distributism Made Ridiculously Simple

by Jenny Truax

Our economy is in a crisis, so what's a well-meaning RoundTable reader to do? Is there any alternative to this capitalist monster of sub-prime lending, rampant unemployment, and bursting housing bubbles? We seek short term fixes in tax relief and corporate bailouts, but there must be a better way for us to live. The Catholic Worker promotes distributism as this better way.

First, let's cover some definitions involved in distributism:



**Economy:** An economy is the organization of how we allocate our resources; how we produce or make things, how we distribute these things to those who need them, and how we consume or use these resources. Our human history is filled with various types of economies, each determined by our technology, abilities, and attitudes. Back in 2500BC, the economy was based primarily on subsistence farming, and the exchange of goods (say, for example, my corn for your firewood) occurred mostly through social relationships. From the 16th to the 18th century, economies were generally guided by mercantilism. Today, the economy of the U.S., and the majority of the world, is based on capitalism. In basic terms, capitalism is characterized by: 1) a division of labor between

worker and owner (that is, owner doesn't grow his own tomatoes, he pays someone else to do it), and 2) owners, not workers, owning the means of production (the land, tools, and equipment).

Most economies historically have been based on consumption – after all, the reason we produce food is for people to consume it. Our current capitalist economy, however, reverses this equation, and is based on the production of goods, regardless of how useless or destructive they are. This reversal necessitates aggressive advertising promoting materialism; citizens are thus swayed to buy goods they don't really need. In the U.S. our "real economy" functions by the production of real wealth. This production includes things like furniture factories and corn fields. Our "financial economy," on the other hand, deals with the representation of wealth: money. This dominant form of economic activity in the U.S. involves the realm of trading, insuring, lending, and otherwise manipulating money. The financial economy adds no actual wealth to the real economy.

**Wealth:** We often think of wealth as how much money we have, or how many vacation homes, stock options, or vehicles we own. Wealth, however, is technically defined as the useful things required to meet our needs and to enhance our lives, or the transformation of raw resources into useful products. For example, in growing her peach crop a farmer is producing wealth, as is the carpenter who fashions wood into doors and furniture.

**Labor:** Labor is our work; the time and energy spent in our chosen expertise. We produce wealth through our labor.

**Capital:** Capital includes things like the baker's mixer, a farmer's land, the nurse's clinic, and the carpenter's wood shop. It includes the tools and things we need to do our labor.

**Money:** Money is simply an agreed-upon measure used to exchange with wealth. We decide, for example, that ten dollars is a fair exchange for both a pound of coffee and a bottle of wine. Money has no inherent value; no amount of that green paper will keep our stomachs full if we don't have real wealth for which to exchange it. Our current system places more emphasis on money

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Jenny Truax continues to surprise us with the variety of her talents, most recently organizing Jetimbe Feast, a meal prepared for the community by Jenny, Timmy and Becky.

accumulation than real wealth accumulation. "We are producing less real wealth, and spend more of our time passing money back and forth and pretending that we're adding value to it every time it leaves our hands."<sup>1</sup> Our current financial crisis might be considered a result of this pattern.

#### What are the major ideas behind distributism?

Distributism is a common-sense approach of how we should organize our economy. In broad terms, it includes these ideas:

**Widespread ownership of capital:** In the distributist model, those who work—nurses, teachers, farmers, researchers, those in care work, and doctors—are owners of the tools or means to accomplish their work. Families and individuals either own their own business, or are part owners, along with other families, of larger co-operatives (this is a stark contrast to our current model of billion-dollar super stores.) We again have a bread baker, a produce seller, and a clothing maker. Distributism regards land as one of the most important forms of capital since it enables us to meet many of our basic needs. In our current capitalist model, most of us work for someone else, with little say in how things run. We use tools – computers, machinery, and equipment – owned by someone else. G.K. Chesterton, one of distributism's early formulators, commented on this phenomenon, saying "Too much capitalism does not mean too many capitalists, but too few capitalists."

**Local living:** A distributist society is embodied in networks of neighborhoods, communities and regions; it is a sort of village economy. Distributism is based on rediscovering the small—the local economy, family farms, and cooperation. It takes the overly-cerebral value of subsidiarity (the principle that matters should be handled by the smallest adequate group possible) and puts it into action. We are so far from right relationships in our capitalist economy; the average American meal travels 1,500 miles to get from farm to plate. Distributism says that production of that meal, toaster, or mattress should happen as closely as possible to where it will be used. This is local production for local consumption, as opposed to production wherever the company can make the greatest profit (most often, this means production in a sweatshop). Bringing together production with consumption places the right of the individual to earn a living wage over the right of the multi-national corporation to earn a profit.

**Appropriate property:** In a distributist economy, the amassing of property will have limits placed on it. This goes along the lines of an ancient Roman law that granted each retiring soldier only as much land as his family could farm. It also mirrors the message of the Gospels, and the oft-quoted St. Basil: "You with a second coat in your closet, it does not belong to you. You have stolen it from the poor one who is shivering in the cold." Distributism encourages the creation of multiple, small, worker-owned cooperatives, organized into guilds, and aimed at the

common good. If the co-ops grow to a certain size, they are encouraged (probably by specific tax policies) to break up. The radical idea here is that our economic system should be focused on making our lives healthier and happier; that people should be able to earn a just wage, have input into decisions that affect their lives, and meet their basic needs. This isn't some anti-business, fascist idea—even the U.S. government has tried at times to limit monopolies and corporate domination. G.K. Chesterton observed that the institution of private property no more means the right to unlimited property than the institution of marriage means the right to unlimited spouses. Along those lines, author Randy Cohen noted, "When a thief, having stolen your wallet, hands you back carfare, it's tough to mutter much of a thank you. Similarly, nice as it is that Bill Gates gives money to libraries, a decent country would tax Microsoft at a rate that lets cities buy their own books."

**Worker cooperatives:** In distributism, worker co-ops are the standard model of business, and are one vehicle for workers (plumbers, software developers, receptionists and factory workers) to have dignified work. The Fair Trade coffee company Equal Exchange describes the worker co-op as "an alternative for-profit structure based upon standard democratic principles. It is not designed to maximize profits, nor returns to investors, but rather to bring to the workplace many of the rights and responsibilities that we hold as citizens in our communities. These principles include one-person/one-vote equality; open access to information (i.e., open-book management); free speech; and the equitable distribution of resources (such as income.) [Equal Exchange maintains a top-to-bottom pay ratio of 4-to-1. In contrast, the U.S. ratio of CEO pay to average worker pay is about 301-to-1.] A worker co-op is not owned by outside shareholders or a small group of founders or partners, but by all the employees in equal portions."

**Guilds:** In the distributist economy, a guild functions as a combination of a union, professional association, chamber of commerce and vocational school (whew!) The guild is a local organization, organized along expertise and across class lines. It is subsidiarity put into action, as a local group performs many of the functions that national or multi-national groups currently do. Before the advent of capitalism, guilds were associations of self-employed craftsmen who owned the capital they needed to produce their goods.

**Right relationships with the land:** In the United States, about 2% of citizens are farmers. Our experience of food is in the super-market where the carrots don't have dirt on them and strawberries are available in January. We are dependent on far-away companies to meet our need for food. A distributist society reorders our creativity, technology, and production towards meeting people's primary needs, including food.

So, this is communism, right? Or do you mean socialism?



Distributism only has a few things in common with communism and socialism. Generally speaking, socialism is an economic system in which the production and distribution of goods are controlled by the government rather than by private companies. Socialism is not a fixed doctrine and program, but people typically say “socialism” when they mean big government programs (Dorothy Day called it “Holy Mother State”). Communism is the economic and social system envisioned by Karl Marx in which private property is replaced by commonly-owned property – a classless, stateless, and egalitarian society. Socialism was to be the step between capitalism and communism, using a strong, central government to plan and control the economy until rule by the masses is achieved. The Soviet-ruled countries were technically socialist, and did not reach the Marxist goal of communism.

As you can see, there are more differences than similarities between distributism, socialism, and communism. Their critiques of capitalism’s failures are similar, and people often turn to one of these alternatives when seeking remedies to the problems of poverty, and war. As opposed to centralized or commonly held ownership, distributism promotes mass ownership—family-owned businesses, associations of mutual aid, and decentralization in every realm possible. Distributism also recognizes the inevitability of class, but limits the huge gap between these classes.

How will our society look if it becomes distributist, rather than capitalist?

Our society will look like a network of regional communities that are each mainly self-sufficient. We will work in the home, in the neighborhood, in our town, not a 45-minute car commute away. This is what is sustainable for our planet, for our relationships, and for our happiness. We might live in one house for most of our adult lives, adding space as necessary. Our diets will be geared more towards local, seasonal goods. National or

even multi-national structures that we depend on for computers, health insurance, and food will be replaced by worker-owned groups that are based locally and regionally. You’re probably seeing the pattern here: distributism’s primary goal is to augment the common good (by de-monopolizing large corporations, giving workers real participation in their craft, and fostering relationships within the act of consuming things). Describing a distributist economy, Dorothy Day said, “We favor the establishment of a Distributist economy wherein those who have a vocation to the land will work on the farms surrounding the village, and those who have other vocations will work in the village itself.”

It’s time to expose the myth that capitalism works for anyone with a strong enough will to succeed; too many of us are without health insurance, locked up in jail, struggling to pay our mortgages, and living in massive debt. These changes might seem scary, but so is the current reality we live in.

What is the role of government with a distributist economy?

A distributist economy can work with many types of government, but probably the most synergistic is a democratic government. The Catholic Worker promotes a society where we live in smaller, decentralized communities that are self-governing. We seek

to infuse personalism into all of society’s structures – both the economy (how we organize our resources) and government (how we make decisions and organize ourselves as a community). Personalism is a philosophy which regards the freedom and dignity of each person as the basis, focus and goal of all metaphysics and morals, which guides us away from individualism toward the good of the other.<sup>2</sup> Our long-range hope is to build small, decentralized, self-organized communities that have just relationships with each other and the land.

I know that capitalism has some problems, and that many people suffer across the world, but our family tries to live within our means, and we’re happy. Why does our system have to change so fundamentally?



Jones family urban farm by Alby Headrick

“Capitalism depends, at its core, upon a rampant consumerism that often borders on outright hedonism, while the production of real wealth - our shoes, heaters, books, and coffee tables - is relegated to those in foreign lands, who are thus prevented from producing wealth for their own.”<sup>3</sup> Capitalism is destroying our values, our happiness, and our planet. U.S. citizens need to honestly examine the consequences of our upgrading, our diets, our cutting edge-technology and our acquisitions: our first-world lifestyle, no matter how simply we try to live, is directly based on the exploitation of others. The computer on which I’m typing this article, the coffee table in front of me, and super-market salad I ate for lunch were all produced thousands of miles away, in labor conditions that favor profit-making over decent working conditions and fair wages. From health care to the prison system to immigration policy, a great majority of social justice issues are rooted in the inherent tendency of capitalism to favor profit-making over meeting needs. It is time to change.

You’re ignoring the human nature towards greed and power – it’s inherent in us and evident throughout history. How does distributism address this?

Human history is filled with examples of both terrible greed and grace-filled generosity. We—and the television shows, school textbooks, movies and other media we consume—often overly focus on the outrageous, egregious and outlandish behavior of people in power. As personalists, though, we choose to believe that all humans are created in the image of God with a great capacity for love.

The consumerism and greed of Americans is not inherent, but bred by our capitalist economy that depends on us to buy things we don’t need. Even in the most progressive of circles, there is pressure to marvel at the new Iphone, laptop or application that will enable us to do our work “faster and better.” Our base human needs for community, conversation, purpose in our work, and family time are ironically usurped by this fixation. We can communicate in amazing new ways—by text, fax, email, instant messaging, and social networking—but we are more isolated than ever. Our daily human needs continue to go unmet, so we focus on the next upgrade, computer system, or other new product on amazon.com—materialism fills the void for us.

Distributism is not a magic pill that will automatically alleviate this tendency that has been instilled in us. Rather, it provides an alternative model: profit-making is limited, we are part owners of our work, and businesses seek to produce things that actually improve life. Even in our Catholic Worker community, which is filled with firm believers of personalism, voluntary poverty, and distributism, we struggle with the pull of consumerism. By surrounding ourselves with people who challenge and support us, we strive to move forward in growth and love.

What is the role of women, the poor, and the disabled in a distributist economy?

When reading about distributism, it is hard to ignore the blatant sexism in many author’s writings. This is an unfortunate limitation, and not something we support or promote. We think of Catholic Worker distributism as more inclusive, where all forms of work (doing the dishes, childcare, working at the local furniture-making business, cooking dinner) are valued equitably, and divided according to preference rather than gender. We also believe that distributism—which embodies many principles developed in Catholic documents—is an economic system that should include both Catholic and non-Catholic people and communities.

Distributism was conceived as a way to decrease the gap between rich and poor, its whole basis resting in the idea that our economic system should promote a baseline of dignity for every person. Human society will always have people who work at different levels, with different abilities, whether we are using capitalism or distributism. Distributism values each individual’s talents and interests; people are not a cog in the wheel of a multinational corporation, nor are they limited professionally to our current cookie-cutter mold that plugs inner city black women into housekeeping and suburban white men into professional life. The distributist economy’s primary goal is the common good—to ensure that people who can work are able to meet the needs of their family, while acknowledging that not everyone in society will be a producer.

Here we see two contrasting goals: capitalism encourages the production of frivolous or useless products, using advertising to convince people to consume these products. Increasing the profit margin for businesses is the primary goal. Distributism, on the other hand, shifts our production to meeting our primary needs, which includes care for the young, the elderly, those with disabilities, etc.

What can we do now?

“Do anything, however small, that will prevent the completion of the work of capitalist combination. Save one shop out of a hundred shops. Keep open one door out of a hundred doors, for so long as one door is open, we are not in prison.” – G. K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity*

Consider further action! Check out our “further reading” section, visit your local co-op, consider buying everything locally this year, and eat one seasonally-inspired meal a week. Help us clarify our thoughts in our January RoundTable discussion on distributism. (Please see the back page for details.)

For the last word, we turn to Dorothy Day: “What is to be done? First of all, we can admit that our so-called American way of life has meant great inequalities, and that there does indeed exist a great mass of poor and

unemployed people who are in need... We need to study ways to change the social order...[to create a balance where we] will be closer to the land, where there is a possibility of ownership and responsibility, work for young and old, and that security which ownership would bring. We need to study the idea of credit unions and cooperatives, and small groups to work out the idea of family communities, and village communities, and decentralized living. We need to study as far as we are able, the entire distributist program... [and] to approach the problem

directly..." We need to transform our economy from one that values profit to one that values relationships—our future depends on it. ✚

1. Distributism and the Modern Economy- Donald P. Goodman
2. Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker
3. Distributism and Modern Economics- Donald P. Goodman



# Distributism in Action

## St. Louis Home School Network

by Carolyn Griffeth

One of the core principals of distributism is that the goods needed for human prosperity are distributed as evenly as possible, which ensures both human flourishing and freedom. Education is undoubtedly a human good, yet in many contexts quality education can be hard to access much less take ownership of.

Nearly thirty years ago, a group of St. Louis families seeking to educate their children according to their own values and children's best interests forged the St. Louis Homeschool Network (SLHN.) The SLHN, which today includes about one hundred families, serves as a support group for homeschoolers from very diverse religious, political, and economic backgrounds. The group is run entirely by volunteers and provides support to families through social activities and meetings which discuss homeschool related topics or include resource sharing.

The largest project of the SLHN is a collective learning co-op. Every semester, each family within the co-op offers one or more classes to the rest of the group. All the classes are then compiled into a catalogue and each family chooses which classes each of their children would like to participate in. Each child rates their choices in order of preference so that they will get a spot in those classes most important to them. There is a lottery component if more kids sign up for a class than there is space. Classes offered, include topics such as physics, carpentry, yoga, field trips, book clubs, theater, and American history. There are also classes listed only for parents such as meditation or Indian cooking. The SLHN is a remarkable example of individuals seeking to distribute educational opportunity amongst all types of people and the personal freedom gained by working in collaboration. As a homeschool parent I am deeply thankful for the support of this amazing group. ✚

**Carolyn Griffeth** has been raising our communal awareness of the wonder of children in our lives.



# Spiritual Roots of Distributism

by James Meinert

In a world newly concerned with “these tough economic times,” many mixed messages are given to us about the causes of the recent economic shifts and ways that they will be avoided next time. Conversations are held over coffee about sub-prime-mortgages and from the pulpit we hear mention of things “too-big-to-fail.”

Not surprisingly, my uncle recently commented on the Church’s unfailing support of capitalism. While John Paul II can be quoted as saying, “It would appear on the level of individual nations and of international relations the free market is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs,”<sup>1</sup> it is important not to confuse a free market with capitalism. A free market is often understood as buying and selling without government intervention, but capitalism enjoys much government intervention to the benefit of the capitalists and their investors. What the Pope was more concerned about was meeting the needs of the people. He even follows this quote by dwelling on the fact that many human needs are not met by any markets, free or otherwise. That same Pope often condemned the evils of capitalism—“the frantic search for material possessions... the thirst for power and control over others and over things... the illusion of easy success”<sup>2</sup>—and invited people to a mature spiritual life and a way of living that does not enslave us.

In this insight lies the basic problem the Catholic Church holds with capitalism and socialism—they both treat the human person as no more valuable than her/his economic utility and both reduce or ignore entirely spiritual and communal needs. And though the Church does not proclaim another specific economic system, reading the Church Doctors, the Encyclicals and the Gospels, certain values that the Church proclaims for how we humans should organize our economic and communal activity can easily be seen. These Catholic values have been shaped into an economic theory that is called distributism. Though most American Catholics would probably identify themselves as capitalists, capitalism encourages greed and rugged individualism while producing drastic inequality and injustices that the Church is fiercely opposed to, while distributism persuades us to live out our Catholic values.

If we start with Jesus of Nazareth, (sometimes considered the spiritual root of the Catholic Church) it becomes easy to see that he did not desire the personal

accumulation of wealth at a cost to the community. He himself was a carpenter—dignified manual labor—and a preacher, and in his parables he often spoke against the accumulation of wealth. There was the man who saved up all his grain, invested in more grain bins, and then died the next day. There was the rich young man asked to give up all of his possessions in order to follow the way of Jesus. There was praise for the poor widow that gave her last two coins. Instead of focusing on our own upward mobility, Jesus encouraged a way of forming communities and placing our trust in God (like the lilies of the field) and our trust in neighbors, rather than in our own accumulated wealth.

Then a few hundred years later, within a blossoming Catholic Church, two saints and now Doctors of the Church<sup>3</sup>, St. Basil and St. Anselm wrote often about individual opulence in the face of communal suffering. St. Basil is quoted as saying, “When someone strips a man of his clothes we call him a thief. And one who might clothe the naked and does not—should he not be given the same name? The bread in your board belongs to the hungry: the cloak in your wardrobe belongs to the naked, the shoes you let rot belong to the barefoot; the money in your vaults belongs to the destitute.” I would also add, the empty room in your house belongs to the homeless. St. Ambrose, a contemporary of St. Basil, says in regards to almsgiving, “You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich.” The beliefs that property is to be held by the individual but used for the community, and that anything kept to oneself that could serve the common good is theft, are moral cornerstones upon which distributism is built.

Yet the Church has not stopped at parables and insightful phrases, but has fleshed out its views on how to organize society for the good of human persons over the last 150 years. An article by John C. Médaille on four of the principal values helping us understand how to organize our economic activity illustrates this point.<sup>4</sup>

The Church believes in human labor over capital in the same way that it believes that a person is more important than an object. Both Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI point to the obvious fact that all wealth comes originally from the labor of human hands before it builds the

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**James Meinert** has brought joy to our community through guitar playing at Mass, in the band, Firekite, and through his personality—7's are so fun!



capital of the elite. We may not see this as much today because many of us are very separated from the labor that produces the goods we have, but we can ask ourselves, "Why are the computer industry executives and power industry executives so wealthy while the Chileans that labor long days extracting copper—necessary for electricity and computers—still so very poor?"

A second principle is just wage, or as the Church puts it, a wage that meets the ordinary needs of a family with only one working parent. Again we can think of many examples, but if a woman works 40 hours a week at the BP gas station, she'll be paid fewer than 15,000 dollars a year, which, with a non-working partner and just one child puts her well below the poverty line. The BP executives made between 1.5 million and 3 million dollars this past year. Are the owners paying a just wage? Still, the Church doesn't stop at simply advocating a just wage based on living standards, but expects a wage to be enough so that a worker can eventually own the tools and have the capital to be an owner herself.

The third, and maybe most radical principle, is a just distribution of property. John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens* calls for a shift from individual owners to worker-ownership of what is produced. Rather than a gradual change in social equality due to better wages the Pope asks for a change in the way businesses are owned, and a profit sharing among all people working to produce a good—not just profit for the management.

A final principle of the Church that leads away from capitalism and towards distributism is subsidiarity, or the belief that the smallest, most local competent agent should be the one that is charged with a task—and for our times, I would add that the local one is the one that should be supported and encouraged by the community. If our neighbor can make bread from the flour she buys from the man who grinds wheat which he buys from the woman who grows it in the next town over, then that should be supported instead of Wonder bread which keeps their prices lower, but does so, probably due to unjust wages, and centralization of wealth and power. Subsidiarity as a value guards against the centralization of power and wealth which leads to those injustices.

These guiding principles of the Catholic Church—labor over capital, a just wage, just distribution of property and subsidiarity—lead one away from being able to submit to the logic of capitalism and also away from the logic of socialism. For this reason, passionate spiritual people that truly care about reshaping our world by re-



shaping our communities and the larger economics look to other models that meet our values. One that meets the values of the Church and was shaped to do just that is distributism.

One may still ask though, why does the Church involve herself in discussions on economics when we have a field of study and very intelligent men and women that should better point the way? I think a quote from the encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* best explains the Church's reasoning: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

By stepping out of our comfortable lives, where the wealth of the world has been concentrated, and seeing the places where the wealth of the people has been, in the words of St. Anselm, stolen—North St. Louis, Brazil, the Ivory Coast, Vietnam, etc.—we can better see what the Catholic Church has seen as

the result of global capitalism—grief and anxiety.

We must shift our way of organizing our societies and economies so that they serve to bring communities and peoples of the world closer rather than separating us. All followers of Jesus are called to love and to relate to the poor and afflicted and capitalism has only divided the people of God more. We have extremely wealthy people, who may be philanthropic, but their charity only divides the people more into those who give and those who receive; we are called to labor together. We are called to reshape our society on the principles of Christ so that we live and work together, so that we have time for each other, and so that we share in each others' joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties. ✚

1. Centesimus Annus, 34
2. Homily, March 1, 1998
3. Doctors of the Church are saints thus recognized due to the orthodoxy (right teaching) of their theology.
4. Distributivism and Catholic Social Teaching, Médaille, John C. 2006, <http://www.medaille.com/disutiv-ismandcst.pdf>

# Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Distributism...

by Teka Childress

While sitting around discussing this issue we thought it would be helpful to deal with some questions that people might have about Distributism, that is if they ever thought about it. We therefore posed the following questions to several people who have written or taught on the subject.

About the authors—

**John Medaille**, author of numerous works on distributism, including *The Vocation of Business: Social Justice in the Marketplace* and an upcoming book, to be published by ISI Books, *Towards a Truly Free Market: A Distributist Perspective on the Role of Government, Taxes, Health Care, Deficits, and More*. He is the father of five and an adjunct Instructor of Theology at the University of Dallas.

**Charles (Chuck) K. Wilber**, Emeritus Professor of Economics at Notre Dame, has published numerous articles on economics and ethics and recently taught a class on Distributism at Notre Dame. He has an impressive curriculum vita, and especially impressive to Catholic Workers is his years of involvement with the Catholic Worker movement.

**Kevin A. Carson**, author of *Studies in Mutualist Political Economy* is a health care worker, organic gardener and a blog writer on mutualism, "a school of thought that calls for decentralizing economic and political power through building cooperatives and community financing systems." [www.mutualist.blogspot.com](http://www.mutualist.blogspot.com)

**Thomas Storck** has published several books, *The Catholic Milieu*, *Christendom Press*, *Foundations of a Catholic Political Order*, (1998) and *Christendom and the West*, (2000) both by Four Faces Press. He served as contributing editor for *Caelum et Terra* from '91-'96 and the *New Oxford Review* from '96-'06 and is currently on the editorial board for the *Chesterton Review*. He has taught history and philosophy.

**Question #1: Distributism is sometimes called a "third way" between capitalism and socialism. Could you explain this?**

**Chuck:** If you reject state socialism on the one hand and reject private property (as it is used in capitalism), on the other, there have been a variety of middle-way options, distributism is one of them. Guilds of the Middle Ages, while not opposed to private property, emphasized local production for use and also emphasized the importance of working communally. Modern guilds in which people come together to pool labor to produce goods are similar. Distributists have a rather dim view of the wage system. They believe that the cooperative system works better, where all share in the profits and the losses.

**Thomas:** The notion of a "third way" arose because most people, at least in the U.S., tend to think that we're stuck with either capitalism or some sort of socialism. So alternatives are sometimes advertised as a "third" system. But this is not true. There are more than three ways, there are probably six or eight basic ways we could organize an economy. And also the word "between" is problematic. I would not say distributism is "between" capitalism and socialism, rather it's one of the several alternatives to capitalism or socialism.

**Question #2: Must everyone be a farmer in a distributist economy?**

**John:** Distributism is much more than agrarianism, and agrarianism is not so much about everybody going "back to the farm" as it is about restoring the proper relationship between Town and Country.

**Thomas:** None of the mainstream distributist writers or theorists ever suggested that everyone had to become a farmer. That is a mistake that some people make. It's not even necessary for every single person to own his own workshop or retail shop. Some employment for wages will still exist. It's a question of what is the predominant type of economic activity, the capitalist system of employer/employee, or the distributist model of single owners.

Teka Childress can be seen speeding around town on her moped in her neon jacket.

**Question #3: How do people obtain all the necessities of life in a distributist society if they do not produce them themselves? What is the method of exchange of goods? Is money used?**

**Chuck:** I don't think there is a single answer to that. Clearly, even in medieval times, there was long-distance trade. I don't think [in distributism] there is a problem with exchange of goods. Local production is encouraged. [Let's say,] I am a farmer—there are a variety of ways to trade. One way is through a labor bazaar. I work so many hours for which I get marks or chips or money. The problem [with the use of money] is when money becomes valued by speculation in stocks and bonds markets...

[An example of the labor bazaar] was "Forever Learning," an education program. In it, a retired pharmacist gave a class, a retired electrician gave one. People exchanged labor. In distributism, the detailed specifics are not well worked out. [But,] let's start small and see where it goes.

**Thomas:** This question reflects a too fundamentalist idea of distributism. As noted earlier, it does not mean that everyone has to be a primary producer or that nothing can be bought or sold.

Hilaire Belloc spoke of shops in a distributist society. Best to think of it as a society of small farmers, small workshops for production, small stores, without denying that there may be a need for some large entities, as I noted before. And money would certainly be present. You'll find, I think, that distributists might disagree about the form money would take, i.e., some would want a gold or other commodity standard, others would want the government itself to issue money in response to the economy's need for a means of exchange (my preference), perhaps a few would support fractional reserve money created by the private banking system, which is what we have now.

**Question #4: How do distributists live in the midst of a capitalist society? Do they participate in some way?**

**Chuck:** Well, first of all, we do live in a capitalist system. [It is] difficult to drop out. The best one can do is to reduce one's participation. Try to join a food co-op, try to buy locally, try to avoid Wal-Mart, [avoid buying] the cheapest, try to patronize the independent stores. Try to organize neighbors in cooperative ventures: lawn maintenance, food co-ops; buy everything used and also recycle. It can be more eco-friendly. Here we have a good recycling system. All I can think of is these little things to do.

Some will opt out. Some who have the skills and ability might try to distance themselves by becoming farmers or craftspeople, but most of us are doomed to do the best we can, trying to patronize small stores and farmers' markets, and avoid especially the

worst features of capitalism... I do not believe a society of self-sufficient households is viable in this world. We need to figure out how to produce for use using cooperative means.

**Kevin:** It doesn't seem to me that distributism requires the destruction of all forms of economic activity that can't be organized on a distributive basis. Simply eliminating the subsidies to centralism and allowing concentration to break up where smaller scale is more efficient will result in a radical shift toward localism; but some things like microchip foundries will probably require large scale [projects] for some time to come.

**Question #5: How do we get from a capitalist economy to a distributist system?**

**Thomas:** That is a difficult question. Various distributists would have different ideas. My own is that until we reach a critical mass of public opinion, the most we can probably do is encourage local economies, farmers' markets, etc., and promote the idea of distributism, and see where we go. Eventually, if distributism after the mind of Belloc and Chesterton is instituted, we would need laws limiting the amassing of property, probably via taxation. But we are very far from that today... Although government support of large corporations certainly makes capitalism worse, the free market is not the solution, even if all firms were small.


**Kevin:** I tend to take a pretty triumphal view of things, because centralism and large-scale [projects] for the most part depend heavily on state subsidies and protection for inherently inefficient ways of doing things—and given Peak Oil, the fiscal crisis, the crisis of over-accumulation and under-consumption, etc., the state is reaching the limits of its resources for propping up the system.

*Editor's Note:* For a longer discussion on this question look for: John Medaille's book due to be published this Spring, by ISI Books, *Toward a Truly Free Market: A...* See chapter, XIX, *Building the Ownership Society*.

**Question #6: Is it likely distributism will ever be adopted widely? Since it relies less on coercion to participate and focuses on building a local economy will it ever be the dominant or prevalent economy? Does it need to be? How does it come to be?**







Schools would teach subjects important to the community. Also likely that teachers may live in or close to the school

People are closely tied to their professions. Living in the same community & building relationships allows for fairer charges for services rendered.

Higher education would exist but it would be based on needs & desires of the community & taught by its members so everyone is a student & everyone is a teacher.

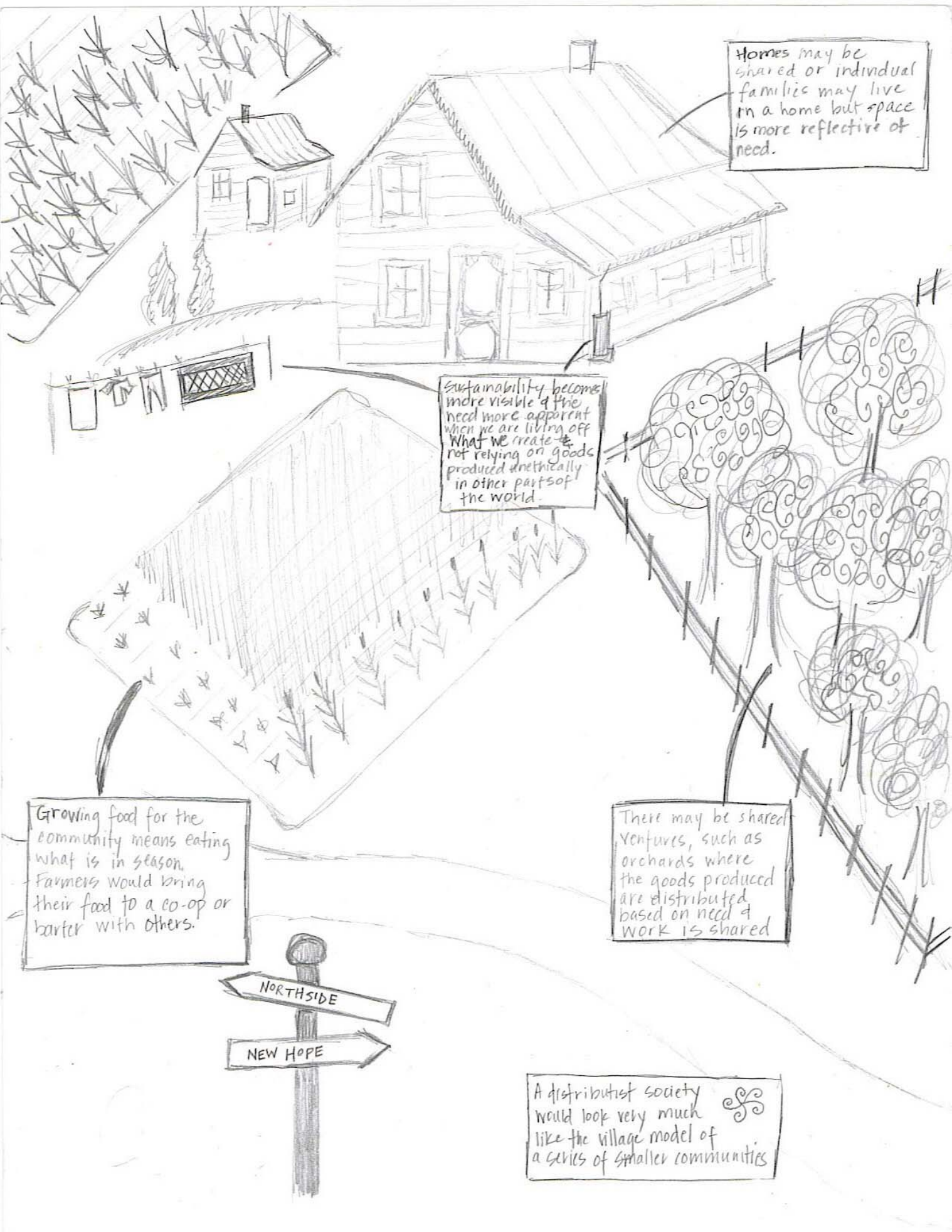
Shared meeting space might have multiple uses, community decision making, guild meetings, community gatherings, and might be owned in community trust

Relying locally for needs makes it much easier to see contributions made by others. For example a doctor very aware of the worker who upkeep the roads.

Stores would be more like food co-ops or shared worker industry where every worker owns & contributes to the business. Profit distributed among multiple owners. Some stores may even be owned by every member of the community.

Roads would exist for trade & other towns. The need for constant car travel would decrease since living & working & shopping locally would greatly reduce the need.





Homes may be shared or individual families may live in a home but space is more reflective of need.

Sustainability becomes more visible & the need more apparent when we are living off what we create & not relying on goods produced ethically in other parts of the world.

Growing food for the community means eating what is in season. Farmers would bring their food to a co-op or barter with others.

There may be shared ventures, such as orchards where the goods produced are distributed based on need & work is shared



A distributist society would look very much like the village model of a series of smaller communities

**Chuck:** If the economy crashed a new one may be designed. Not likely to happen soon. Let's just start building it right here where we are. Do it here wherever possible. All kinds of food co-ops are growing up around the country. At Miraculous Metals we've organized homeless people who collect scrap metal into a group with a pickup, which allows them to get larger stuff—such as a church's left-over refrigerator. Part of the money is given to the workers and part to the drop-in center.

Do I think this [type of economy] will be the dominant one in my time? Right now we are going the opposite direction—globalism—We have homogenized apples. We had 2000 varieties and now 90% of all apples consumed are just eleven varieties. I think if we are going to get counter trends to that we can't focus too much on results. Start building the local production and time will tell.

**John:** Yes, it will be adopted widely, because distributism is simply the natural state of property. As capitalism and globalism collapse from twin economic and environmental crises, people will of necessity reconnect with the land and the local community. They will re-learn how to make useful things and exchange them with their neighbors. Capitalism was created by the "primitive accumulation" brought about by the seizure of the monastery and guild lands, and the enclosure of the commons. Its origins are in state violence.

**Thomas:** I'm not sure if this is the right question to ask: In this world we have to try to work for what is good as much as we can without worrying about our success. But in fact there is much we can do to help a distributist economy arise in small ways, e.g., patronizing farmers' markets, shopping at small local stores, etc. G. K. Chesterton has an entire chapter in his *Outline of Sanity*, called "A Misunderstanding about Method," in which he speaks of various small-scale ways to work toward distributism. It may not be likely that we will have a completely distributist economy, but we can make our economy more distributist than it is. It's not an either/or question.

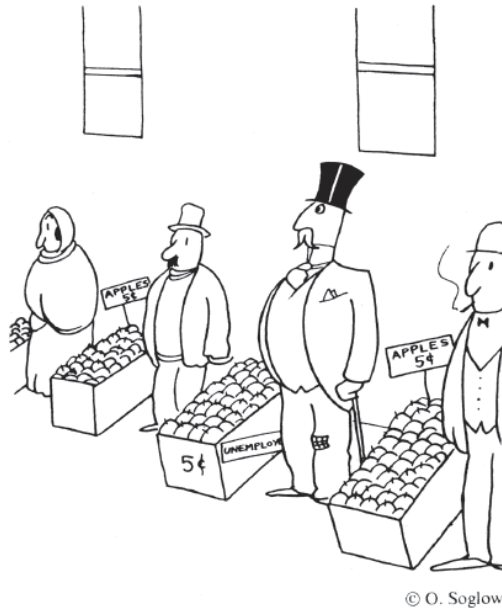
#### **Question #7: What is a guild and how does it work in a distributist society?**

**Chuck:** In a guild system, an industry is organized and sets standards for its products and workers' wages. It is a system of cooperatives, not exactly like a union, but like the industry and union combined. A certain kind of cloth has to meet certain standards. It is a cooperative system [of regulation].

**Thomas:** A guild is a democratically-controlled or-

ganization of all the producers in a particular industry or line of work. The ideal would be for all its members to be owners of their own small workshops, businesses or farms. But it is possible for a guild to exist even where the employer/employee system remains, if both employers and employees seek to put the common good as a whole, and the good of their particular industry, ahead of their own demands.

Guilds would handle most of the economic and industry regulation currently done by the government, e.g., product quality standards, safety standards, working hours, and probably prices and wages, as well as training programs for apprentices or new employees. A guild would also be concerned with assuring an adequate supply of whatever raw materials the industry needs, and so on. The emphasis would be on cooperation among individual micro-firms and on cooperation with other industries, all for the good of society as a whole, including of course, the legitimate economic needs of the guild members.



#### **Question #8: Can goods or services that are helpful if not necessary for life be produced in a distributist society, i.e., a railroad, (infrastructure...) or technologies, or do these depend on a concentration of wealth to be developed?**

**Chuck:** I don't see why not. A distributist society is not a subsistence society. Self-reliance is not the sole characteristic of distributism. Production for use will still require some division of labor. It is one in which community is paramount in all phases of life including the economic. Thus the production of railroad services, etc. should be done by a workforce that works cooperatively, neither privately owned nor state-run. The exact forms of control can vary, depending on the situation, the common good being the key. This might mean balancing the welfare of workers and the community at large.

**John:** Theoretical answers are easy, but one should only believe what one sees on the ground and working. The Mondragon Cooperative Corporation of Spain has over 80,000 worker-owners and does about \$24 billion/year in sales. In the cooperative economy of Emilia-Romagna, 40% of the GDP is from cooperatives and the average income is twice the Italian average. These enterprises do everything from the simple to the complex, right up to building factories to order. There is no particular reason why the concentration of wealth is necessary for a venture of any given size.

**Thomas:** Hilaire Belloc gave the theoretical answer already in his 1936 book, *The Restoration of Property*. Whenever technology or capital accumulation requires

that a large entity produce or administer a certain thing or process, we have the option of having a worker-owned cooperative in charge. Distributism does not require that each and every productive process be done by a micro-business, only that an economy of micro-businesses be the norm for an economy.

**Question #9: Does a distributist economy benefit the poor more or less than a capitalist one?**

**Chuck:** Food co-ops could help the poor. To the extent that a food co-op, like one near the university—is heavily used by the poor, it helps. Working locally one can incorporate the poor. Can more people be helped by distributism than capitalism? This question requires empirical evidence to answer. In the long run people will benefit materially and spiritually from small-scale production. Yes, capitalism may produce jobs—[but they] may come at a high price—some getting ahead, some left way behind. For every worker who has got a job there are two or three others that are barely surviving; traditional ways destroyed everywhere.

**Thomas:** Poverty is a complex issue and has different causes in different places and times. Distributism would largely eliminate poverty caused by the economic system, e.g., wages that are too low, lay-offs, factories picking up and moving to cheaper locations. Distributism would also offer a powerful model and example for individuals to work both for their own and their families' needs and for the good of society.

**Question #10: Won't the cost of things go up (when they are less frequently massed produced) leaving people unable to get needed goods?**

**Chuck:** This is an empirical question without a theoretical answer. Hopefully the scale of production will be smaller but batch processing is possible to produce a large quantity. It doesn't necessarily require assembly lines. Also many things we consume are required because of the way we live. For example, because of the auto we built suburbs and because we live dispersed we need autos. Higher density urban living and scattered site rural living would reduce the need to consume individual means of transportation.

**John:** The price in certain cases MUST go up, but not the cost. Distributism mass-produces things, where that is appropriate. But do not confuse price and cost. The modern corporation is NOT economically efficient; it is politically efficient. That is, it is able to obtain for itself large subsidies and privileges and to externalize many of its costs. Actual cost = price + subsidies + externalized costs. Distributist enterprises lose the ability to obtain large privileges from the state, and hence cannot obtain subsidies or externalize their costs.

**Kevin:** I would dispute that mass production really is more efficient. Mass production is based on capital-intensive industry using the largest and most specialized

forms of machinery (enormously expensive machinery), and then running it at full capacity 24/7 to minimize unit costs.

The problem is, this "efficiency" at the level of the individual step of production leads to enormous inefficiencies for the process as a whole. Because each machine, to be run economically, must be run at full capacity, it churns out components without regard to whether the next machine on the line needs it or not, or to whether there's an order for it. So a factory becomes piled up with work-in-process inventory between the machines, and the warehouse becomes piled up with finished goods inventory awaiting orders. Because of the large in-process inventories, there is no way of telling whether a part has a defect at the time of production, and correcting the machine immediately, so there is an enormous scrap rate.

Because of large market areas, shipping costs are much, much higher; so you've got not only all the transportation resources being used, but also enormous amounts of additional inventory in those "warehouses on wheels." And because production facilities must be run 24/7, production is divorced from consumption—which means the costs of high-pressure marketing, brand-name differentiation, and planned obsolescence to scrap the stuff fast enough to keep the wheels turning.

The mountains of scrap goods that go into landfills, after a brief detour through our living rooms, mean probably double or more the industrial capacity that would be required to satisfy our needs if products had modular design for easy repair.

Far more efficient, in most cases, is production with small-scale, general purpose machinery, producing for local markets on a lean basis as orders come in, and switching frequently between different product runs. This results in facilities scaled to the local market, with machinery scaled to the flow of incoming orders, short distribution chains, and almost zero inventory. A good example is the kind of networked manufacturing that exists in the Emilia-Romagna district of Italy.

**Thomas:** Very often our cheap goods are produced because of low wages. It's like making use of slaves—slave labor may be cheaper and thus slave-produced goods would be cheap, but this is unjust. The purpose of an economy is to allow everyone, producer and consumer (and most of us are both), to live in a decent and reasonable manner.

As to the question of mass production, the cost of some things might rise, but so would the quality. Many of the products of mass production are shoddy and need to be replaced frequently. The products of a distributist society would tend to be better and last much longer, because they are more carefully made and because they are produced with a real care about product quality, not just about how much the producer can sell and how much money he can make.





# Distributism in Action

## The Mondragón Corporation

by James Meinert



The Mondragón Corporation in the Basque region of Spain is often hailed by people searching for alternatives to either capitalism or socialism as a great success. They point to the worker ownership, the democracy within the cooperatives (worker/owners vote on directors and managers), the historical valuing of labor over profit, and the benefits received by the local communities.

The founder of the Mondragón cooperatives, Father Jose Maria Arizmendi, was a Catholic priest heavily influenced by the distributist doctrines and the Catholic back to the land movement of the early 20th century. He was sent to teach in the Basque region and along with technical skills, he taught the students some of the Church's social beliefs for organizing themselves. Some of the students began making kerosene stoves and eventually formed what today would be recognized as a credit union. Supporting each other and using profits to

re-invest into further cooperative ventures the Mondragón groups began to grow.

Keeping to many of the values originally learned from Arizmendi, Mondragón has grown to include today 256 individual companies and bodies, and over 92,000 employees. Even without large bonuses for owners, with required community investment, and some profit sharing, Mondragón has still managed to stay competitive within the larger capitalist world.

Though Mondragón is not strictly a distributist organization, they do embrace many limits that set them apart from other corporations: shares are not sold to investors, but workers must contribute to the company capital and are thus worker/owners; certain percentages of all profits must go into social services, health insurance, and social security for the workers; limits are imposed upon wage differences within Mondragón. Historically the wage differences were set at 3:1, meaning the highest paid person could not make more than three times the lowest paid person though today in some companies, they are set at 6:1. Also, the companies are often cooperative within their structure.

During difficult economic periods those that work and own a cooperative have often chosen to reduce their own wages rather than have any of their co-worker/owners removed from the organization. This solidarity within has often only strengthened the cooperative in the long run.

However, it doesn't appear as if Mondragón is moving towards a more distributist society, but rather has embraced many capitalist aspects. Only half of the companies now part of Mondragón are cooperatives and only one third of the workers are members of the cooperatives. Mondragón has a CEO and while choosing solidarity within, its groups still strive for a competitive edge over other companies. Labor is still divided in order to maximize efficiency and profit, and workers are ultimately renting the capital to produce goods but are not moving towards owning their own means of production.

While Mondragón is a good example of a corporation taking steps towards a distributist logic, it shows how difficult it is to be sustainable and just when trying to function within a global economy that is almost entirely capitalist.



**James Meinert** recently picked up Mary Densmore's bicycle, rang the bell, and managed to carry it up the three flights of Karen House's stairs before the bell stopped sounding.



# Love is an Exchange of Gifts

by Megan Heeney

## Wealth- Producing Maniacs

When the bank account  
became the Standard of Values,  
People ceased to produce for use,  
And began to produce for profits.  
They become wealth-producing maniacs,  
They produced too much wealth.  
When people found out that they  
had produced too much wealth  
They went on an orgy of wealth destruction  
And destroyed ten million lives besides.  
and fifteen years after a world-wide  
orgy of wealth and life destruction  
millions of people find themselves  
victims of a world-wide depression  
Brought about by a world gone mad  
On mass Production and Mass- distribution

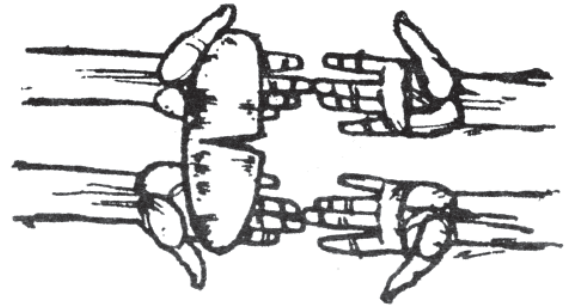
- Peter Maurin

We live in a world gone mad on mass-production and mass-distribution. It has brought about destruction and depression in massive volume. At the Catholic Worker we advocate for distributism, not because we want it but because our society desperately needs it. We need this model, which is rooted in personalism, to save our human dignity because the capitalist economic system we currently have is destroying all but the rich.

Every day women come to Karen House who are struggling to get their own place after losing homes, jobs, family members, and/or security. When we perpetuate a society that gives resources to only the few, we can't be surprised that there are so many without homes and resources to provide for their families' basic needs. This is unacceptable, to have so many struggling for survival while many of us have everything we need and want readily available to us. I believe a new economic model, which in fact isn't new but very old, must be part of the solution.

G. K. Chesterton in *The Outline of Sanity* said of distributism, "They say it is Utopian; and they are right.

They say it is idealistic; and they are right. They say it is quixotic; and they are right. It deserves every name that will indicate how completely they have driven justice out of the world; every name that will measure how remote from them and their sort is the standard of honourable living; every name that will emphasize and repeat the fact that property and liberty are sundered from them and theirs, by an abyss between heaven and hell."



## How do we know Distributism would be good for our personhood?

Catholic Worker Houses attempt to be models of personalism in the midst of a society whose economic system and philosophy pushes individualism. We do not see the economics of distributism in action frequently in our current society (although some of these distributist communities, guilds, co-ops and businesses are highlighted throughout this Roundtable issue.) The places where we witness intentional personalism present us with an idea of what an economic model, based in the ideals of personalism, would mean for persons and their quality of life.

At the heart of distributism is social justice through widespread distribution of property. The guests and community at Karen House do not receive their own private property at Karen House, but we do share responsibility for the house and for one another. Each guest has their own space for their family and holds responsibility in terms of daily chores and meal clean ups; we each feel ownership of the house. We practice personalism in the ways we try to meet each person where they are at. We

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**Megan Heeney** has been seen taking house on roller blades increasing her efficiency in answering doors and phones this fall.

try to let guests and community members tell us what they need, and not prescribe what we think they should need or want. When we live with one another for a time we recognize the gifts in each other, while our own gifts are illuminated. Practicing personalism every day allows us to better appreciate how each unique person is a manifestation of God amongst us. When people see that in me, I can start to see that in myself. As I begin



Photo by Mev Puleo from *Faces of Poverty, Faces of Christ*  
by John Kavanaugh

to see myself as a manifestation of the divine, I can acknowledge my profound ability to love the people around me. We each have the ability to create, but often we are so busy trying to keep a competitive pace that we don't acknowledge that which is already within us.

Throughout my time at Karen House I have come to find out that the human person is creative beyond my imagination. Some of the women who have stayed at Karen House have been told they couldn't create, because of abilities or how many children they had or their educational background. Many times women have felt like they were worthless because no one would hire them. How can they provide for themselves and their families if they don't have a job? Capitalism benefits those who are highly able, whose bodies and minds work in the way 'owners' want. Those who don't fit the mold are thrown to the curb side.

At Karen House we are all broken, but together we are able to create such beautiful things. We don't create

capital but we do create wealth, which is defined as the useful things required to meet our needs and to enhance our lives, or the transformation of raw resources into useful products. We create wealth by making delicious meals out of donations of food from Trader Joe's or other stores. This food is near expiration or spoilage but we serve so much food each day that using it before it goes bad only requires creativity. We make art for the walls out of scraps and donations. We build new things out of the old (even though sometimes it may take awhile, but what is the rush?). We can bring laughter out of silence and joy out of sadness. We are highly gifted!

When we, human persons, are given ways to create in our work, we thrive. Dorothy Day quoted Ignatius of Loyola in *The Long Loneliness* saying "Love is an exchange of gifts." I agree with Ignatius' and Dorothy's insights; I think God's love radiates when we are able to use our gifts for the good of one another.

A woman named Tammy lived with us at Karen House for seven months last year. Tammy is one of the most gifted individuals I have had the pleasure of knowing. She isn't gifted in the classroom, she doesn't know how to read or write very well. Tammy has had a hard time keeping a job and an even harder time in the current job market of finding a job. Tammy brought life to Karen House! She brought dancing, laughter and excitement. She created support systems amongst the women and opened herself up to guests and community alike. Tammy created safe spaces for people, she let us cry or laugh without fear of judgment.

The personalism of Karen House was a space where Tammy could flourish and enjoy life, having her gifts recognized and appreciated by so many. Currently Tammy and her four, beautiful, gifted, smiley children live in Transitional Housing. They are still doing well and finding ways to bring out the joy in life, even if they are struggling. Those of us who lived with them at Karen House miss their daily presence dearly.

The capitalist model we live in currently does not suit Tammy's skills. It doesn't value her life experience. It judges her lack of a high-school diploma. This system does not advocate time for joy and right relationships. It advocates 40-60 hour work weeks. It does not appreciate her raising four children on her own and doing a darn good job. It appreciates how much capital she creates to support those children. Tammy's life is full of wealth, even if it is not rich in money. Distributism as a model would allow Tammy resources and property where she could create freely and give others what they need. In a distributist model, Tammy could be part of a worker-owned co-op, or do something she's interested in with a small family-owned business. These are in contrast to the capitalist model in which she has her options more often limited to businesses like Wal-mart or McDonalds. She would be able to use her God-given gifts in her work, as opposed to having to conform her gifts to what will provide her with money in the capitalist system. This model would illuminate that fact that "love is an exchange of gifts!"

In a society like ours where the worker and the owner don't co-exist in the same person, we don't see that love in ourselves or in the people around us. People spend their whole days creating products for someone in a far off place to wear or eat. The fruit of the work is not seen by those who farm it, it is enjoyed somewhere else. When I eat that fruit I don't always remember the person, the manifestation of God, in another place who labored for my enjoyment, just to have some capital to send her children to school or put food on his table. Capitalism has us living in disconnected ways. Peter Maurin wrote, "Labor is not a commodity to be bought and sold. Labor is a means of self-expression, the worker's gift to the common good."

In practice, personalism leaves us feeling interconnected, necessary to the common good. We see this feeling of interconnectedness at Karen House daily. Distributism ensures that we know each other, that we walk down the street to get the needed resources, that we create what is necessary and that we waste less resources. I believe that we all desire connectivity. We want to be close to one another, it is scary to do this because it means we may have to give up some of the things that bring us comfort.

### **Distributism Dismantling Privilege**

In an interview for Shambala Sun Magazine. bell hooks, prominent author on race, class and gender issues said, "When we drop fear, we can draw nearer to people, we can draw nearer to the earth, we can draw nearer to all the heavenly creatures that surround us."

When we drop fear of insecurity we can begin to grow closer with all those around us. As a society we often cling to fear, because we are told there is so much to be afraid of. In reality our fear is what we should be afraid of. As we move beyond fear into loving relationships we begin to leave behind our privileges, to embrace one another.

Capitalism puts us in a situation where we are compelled to hoard our resources to ensure our own survival. We perpetuate prejudices and systems that are unjust, to assure that we receive the benefits of this broken system. We receive access to resources, whether that is land,

health coverage, education or capital, while others receive no access to resources. Those who don't receive certain resources or respect in this system are usually those who are considered different based on the color of their skin, their class, their gender, their sexual orientation, or their abilities. A system that benefits some and not all or even most, is not something we should be trying to sustain.

In a distributist society we may have similar problems; distributism will not immediately put an end to our discrimination. What we do know is that places where distributist principles are practiced have happier, healthier people that rely on and need each other. Scholars have shown that prejudice is based often times on fear and lack of knowledge. When we are able to meet one another in our day to day living, the stereotypes which feed prejudice can be eliminated. Distributism would force us into one another's lives. I have to know my neighbors, because we rely on each other, not the grocery store for survival. When we know each other we readily desire understanding, and with understanding we may become more loving.

Another reason negative -isms (classism, racism, sexism, ageism, etc.) are perpetuated is that those in power benefit from the perpetuation of these prejudices. A white, upper class male is able to acquire more capital than a black, lower class female. Why would the privileged be enticed to overcome prejudice, when it might take away their capital or resources? These are privileges that we have grown accustomed to enjoying. Distributism would liberate us in many ways. We could perhaps forgo our privileges if we knew we would be provided for. If we are fulfilled by our daily work, we can better enjoy others finding fulfillment in their daily work. Each person's gifts could be recognized as valuable pieces of the whole.

Distributism would allow more people access to resources, bringing fulfillment to those who are thrown to the curb in the current model. Distributism also has the potential to allow us to dismantle our own privileges. Hopefully there would not be privileged groups; we would just be privileged to know each other more fully.



# Distributism in Action

## Asset Building Efforts

by Christy Finsel

In reference to distributism, Dorothy Day wrote about how the means of production and wealth should be dispersed among populations. In many ways, asset-building efforts, facilitated by social and economic development specialists and others, have a similar goal of leveling the asset playing field. Here in the U.S. this playing field has been made unequal by red-lining, slavery, and broken treaties with Native communities who were promised land. Many asset buildings programs aim to help individuals and communities with lower or moderate incomes to more quickly own land and homes as well as to get access to loans and to develop small businesses and human capital.

Assets can be thought of as what is of value to you. For the past four years, I have been working with American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities who are looking at how their worldviews and values affect the development of their asset building programs. Some of these communities are thinking of assets as being natural resources (such as land), spirituality, education, health, youth, sovereignty, housing, food security, family, culture, and money to survive. Communities around the world, and here in St. Louis, such as the Karen House community, also can think about assets in a similar way, depending on their values, worldviews, and how they frame, or understand, assets. Asset building is about utilizing strategies to build a variety of assets. Social and economic development programs, i.e., asset building, can be handy tools to help people get what they need to survive and thrive, especially when they are experiencing economic disadvantage. One such tool is the Individual Development Account (IDA). These are matched savings accounts. They are used to help people purchase assets such as a home, money for education, small business development, etc.

Beyond IDAs, some other asset-building strategies being used by Native and non-Native communities are: **Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC)** at free tax preparation sites known as VITA sites (EITC could be used to pay down debt, for a down payment on a house, as rent to stabilize a family, etc.); **Loans through Community Development Financial Institutions** (for those who may have a harder time getting loans through mainstream banking institutions-repayment on these loans is high); **Land trusts** (as a way to hold land in common for housing, agriculture, parks, recreation areas, conservation, etc.); and **Youth banks** (which can be used to teach youth about ways to manage their money and/or as a means of getting loans out to youth for entrepreneurship opportunities).

As Native communities think about assets beyond economic assets, they often build assets in holistic and interconnected ways which promote cultural values. For example, a Native Hawaiian community may be working with their youth, teaching them Native Hawaiian language, chants, and incorporating beliefs about land and culture into financial education (or asset education) classes, mentoring the youth about how to farm organically, selling produce to a local farmer's market, offering an Individual Development Account (IDA), and figuring out ways to manage a land trust to promote food security and sustainable housing for Native Hawaiians in their area. All of these efforts are seen as integrated asset building tools as they are happening simultaneously and are interconnected.

When examining the points of connection between distributism and asset-building initiatives, I suggest that Karen House, and its extended community, has been engaged in asset building efforts, whether formally thought of this way or not. They have engaged in asset building in the following ways:

- By providing shelter to women and children and others; connecting guests to educational classes, job training programs, health services, etc.;
- By farming at New Roots Urban Farm (next door to Karen House) where food security and local production of land has been a priority;
- By teaching youth in the Downtown Teens program skills such as tuck-pointing and other employment skills; and
- By helping families stabilize after leaving Karen House, through efforts such as the Dorothy Day co-housing community

Thus, from these examples, we see that Karen House, along with its immediate and sister communities, like Native communities, is using a variety of asset-building strategies as a way of helping people get the means they need to survive. These efforts dovetail with the ideas of distributism, which Dorothy Day promoted.

**Christy Finsel** and Melissa Brickey (former Karen House community members) are co-coordinating an IDA program at De La Salle for eighth graders. This is their 7th year.





# From Teka Childress House

by Robert McGee

When my family and I first met the Karen House Catholic Worker community about four years ago, we were transitioning into Karen House, a women's shelter. There we met Annjie, Jenny, and a bunch of others who would eventually play huge roles in our lives. After almost a year of living at Karen House, we moved into Gateway Christian Service Center. Living at that shelter did not work out well. Eventually we were kicked out because of a rumor that was dispersed around the shelter. Fortunately, Annjie and Jenny were there to catch our fall. Since that moment, we have been living at Teka Childress (TC) House.

TC House means a lot to my family and me. It has helped us during a rough period in our lives. My family and I have been scarred emotionally from all of the shelter-hopping and pressure my mom has endured. Jenny, Annjie and TC House have shown great hospitality over the years. They gave us a home and only asked little in return. We have had our bumps and ditches in the road, but we prospered through it, and we are really grateful.

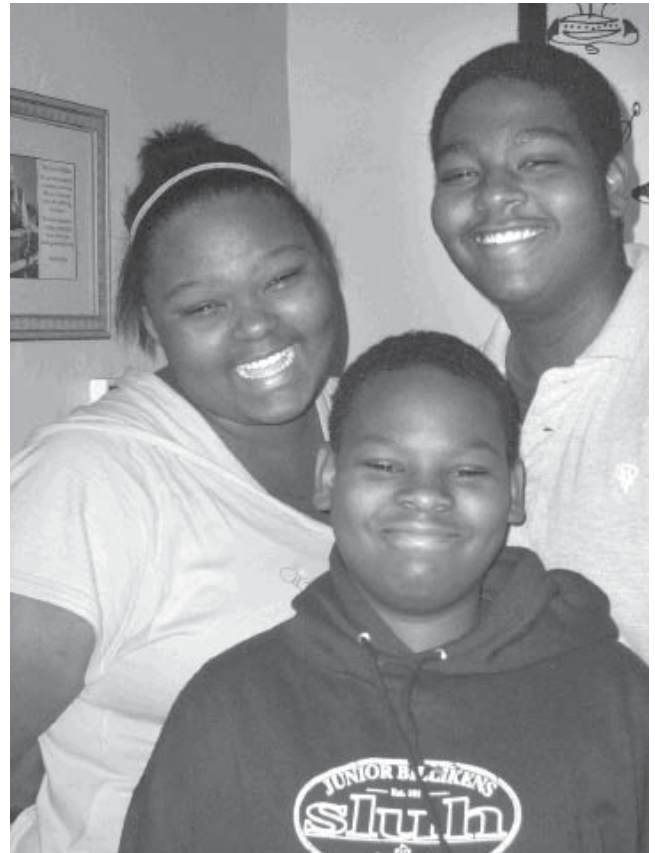
Living at TC House for the past two and a half years, I have grown in maturity, intellect, and spiritually. When my family and I first moved into TC House, I had a really low maturity level. I took a South Park movie of Annjie and Jenny's that I was not supposed to watch. I left the house and on my way out, Annjie and Jenny were returning home. I called my cousin to tell him to return the movie, not knowing that the answering machine was recording our conversation. I was caught red-handed and I disliked Annjie and Jenny for being so hard on me. That event has allowed my maturity level to rise.

However, I have also improved intellectually. Because my family moved into TC House, I was introduced to De La Salle Middle School. Attending that school was one of the best decisions of my life. They taught me things like the Pythagorean Theorem and polynomials, things I had never heard of before. With their help, I was able to score a 91/100 total on the ITBS standardized test, and I got accepted to the best high school in St. Louis. I am really thankful for that.

Not being a spiritual person, I have developed a more spiritual path towards God, and towards becoming a man for others. I volunteer at Karen House and help cook there occasionally. Other times, I may take out the trash, or answer doors if I'm there. I also help out at De La Salle. There, I aid students with math work, or help out with cooking lunch. Now, I stop and have reflective moments with myself. Prayer falls on me as I think about my life. I thank God for Jenny, Annjie, and TC House.

Currently, I am a freshman at St. Louis University High School. I take Chinese, and I have a GPA of 3.11. My sister, Macean, is a seventh grader at De La Salle. She is on Student Council, and is doing very well there. Laurence, my little brother, is a fifth grader at Confluence Academy. He loves math and playing basketball. My mom is a great chef, both for us, and at the Marriott Hotel downtown. Jenny volunteers at Karen House, and continues to get my siblings and me to try her butternut squash fries. Annjie is a Nurse Practitioner at Grace Hill, and always tells us stories about her most interesting patient of the day.

We have enjoyed each other's company over the past two and a half years. Besides the fact we annoy each other, we have become close. We are family. I thank God for people like Jenny and Annjie, and all that they have done for my family and me. I look forward to the time ahead that we will be spending together at the TC House.



**Robert McGee** is currently exploring all the extra-curriculars he can at SLU High, including rugby, the Chinese Club, the Aces club, and the Gaming club.



# From Karen House

by Tim Pekarek

Gone. Summer and Fall and almost the entire year—a year when the country was deep into a recession, many quarters even in a depression of sorts.

Our country is still endlessly at war (multiplication is needed to settle on how many.) This fall my nephew Zach left for Afghanistan, and thus my family joined the thousands of other families, friends, and loved ones experiencing the nervous stasis of waiting... for all of them to come home.

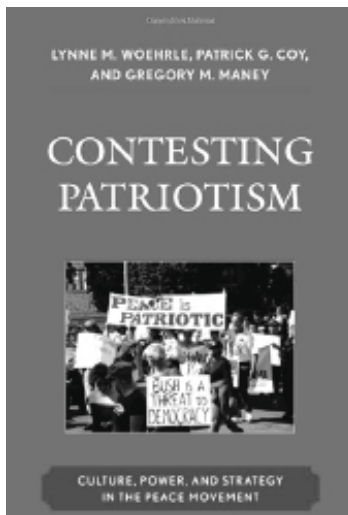
I have to say that it feels like Karen House has passed through a rough year and come through in good shape. As far as vital signs can be read; our community has continued to grow, up to an even dozen! No space here to go down the list of names and peg a talent or recent achievement onto each. I guess, if possible, you faithful reader will have to stop by Karen House and mix with us a bit and delve deeper into the life of Karen House.

On a personal note, earlier this fall I realized that it has been twenty-five years, and half of my life since I first came to the Catholic Worker in St. Louis. I can still recall that afternoon in October '84 when Carol, Nodric, and Jeffrey picked me up at the bus station, and my entry to Cass House which was alive, and close by Karen House at the time.

Along the back wall that surrounds Karen House's yard there is a row of oak and pine trees, these were planted by Katrina Campbell and me. This was probably nearly twenty years ago and the trees we planted were little sticks, the size of straws. Every day as I walk to and from Karen House I see these trees and always consider my own roots. In these moments I know grace.



**Tim Pekarek** continues to inspire us by riding his bike to work each day across town.



Former Karen House community member, Pat Coy, has written a new book!

*Contesting Patriotism: Culture, Power, and Strategy in the Peace Movement*  
by Patrick Coy, Lynne Woehrle and Gregory Maney  
(Rowman & Littlefield, 2008)

This is an insightful analysis of both the obstacles and growth made by the U.S. peace movement in the U.S. Check it out!



# Catholic Worker Thought & Action

## *Personalism*

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by Carolyn Griffeth

*"One does not free a man by detaching him from the bonds that paralyze him; one frees a man by attaching him to his destiny." -Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950)*

Years ago, when Kabat house was forming as a hospitality community for immigrants, a Catholic religious order encouraged me to apply for a grant from them, and so, with the hope of replacing some dangerous windows, I did. As it turned out the grant committee did award Kabat house the grant, but their treasurer refused to write us the check since Kabat house was not a nonprofit. I wasn't a bit surprised. I knew from the start that they expected nonprofit status, and I even considered "borrowing" a 501c3 number from a friendly nonprofit. But the idea of needing nonprofit status, which requires an enormous amount of paperwork and regulation, to simply share our home with struggling immigrants, fundamentally clashed with my understanding of the greatness of the human person. So I resisted, sensing that something more dangerous than our crashing windows was at stake in this decision.

This perspective on the greatness of the human person, which I had garnished from years within the Catholic Worker, is called personalism. Personalism was a favorite philosophical starting point for Peter Maurin, who gleaned the term from the contemporary French philosopher, Emmanuel Mounier and his essay *The Personalist Manifesto*. Being about as interested in philosophy as I am life on Mars, I hadn't actually read the Personalist Manifesto until preparing for this essay. Nonetheless, as I read it the thing that struck me most was how efficaciously the personalist perspective had been handed down to me by the structures and practices of the Catholic Worker movement.

When I first moved to the Worker, the practice that affected me most profoundly was living with people of all different races, abilities, and backgrounds, and becoming fast-friends. This experience points towards the foundational belief of personalism: we are each created in the image of God; thus we are holy Beings who deserve and desire to be recognized as such. Another thing I remember from my early days in the CW was how a long-time community member asked me all about myself, my hopes and dreams, and treated me like "God's gift" to the community. This too illustrated a basic tenant of personalism, that each of us is not only holy and good, but also profoundly gifted, and therefore all human relationships should inspire, encourage, and free individuals toward their full-giftedness, which Mounier called one's destiny. At the Worker, I was surrounded by individuals who embodied personal

freedom. They spent their days enjoying themselves and doing good works, be it learning the banjo or visiting homeless friends in a mental hospital. Through them I saw that the path towards happiness is that of taking personal responsibility beginning with ourselves, another tenant of personalism. Their lives told me that I too can live out my dreams and create a better world: my own sense of destiny was awakened.

Beyond the interpersonal dimension of community life, the very structures of the Catholic Worker model speak of human greatness. For one thing, community life gives witness to the ability of humans to resist social conformity and live intelligently. For example, in community we are able to meet many of our material needs simply by sharing, and many of our social needs by sharing the work of daily life, which is also a lot of fun. Voluntary giving of resources, labor, and caring are other basic structures of Catholic Worker communities. The circle of giving includes not only Catholic Workers, but also volunteers, homeless guests, and donors, who since the Catholic Worker is not a non-profit can't receive a tax write-off. Not being a non-profit is one of the most profoundly affecting aspects of the Catholic Worker model. Essentially this says anyone can do this; in fact it is perfectly natural to what it is to be human to want to draw close to one another, to serve others, and to change the world. Not a speck of paperwork is required to engage in direct action. This empowering perspective, that many Catholic Workers call anarchism, has its roots in personalism.

My response when I was told that we didn't get the grant was, "that's fine we can do this ourselves," and about an hour's worth of anecdotes about how well Jesus did without governmental sanction. And so without a letterhead, or a team of lawyers, Kabat house began providing hospitality to a handful of homeless individuals, footing the bills amongst our six community members. By each giving whatever we could, we realized that our community's needs would be provided for, even needs like sending a guest to visit his family in Cuba, or paying the INS a bundle for a new green card. Although we didn't get the broken windows replaced for a couple of years, I think we have gained much from the challenge of taking a more personal responsibility for funding our dreams. Today Kabat house is surrounded by an extended community of friends synergizing in creative ways to make new dreams happen. I trust that Kabat house has done its part to pass on the personalist perspective: the audacity to believe that through personal relationships we can make great things happen.



**Carolyn Griffeth** just returned from teaching the "nine spiritual paths" at the Catholic Worker School's Enneagram gathering, which she says was amazing. She is excited to see the new directions Catholic Worker spirituality is developing.

# The Round Table

Karen Catholic Worker House

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*The Round Table* is the quarterly journal of Catholic Worker life and thought in St. Louis. Subscriptions are free. Please write to *The Round Table*, 1840 Hogan, St. Louis, MO. 63106. Donations are gladly accepted to help us continue our work with the poor. People working on this issue include: Joe Angert, Jenny Truax, Teka Childress, Megan Heeney, Timmy Cosentino, Colleen Kelly, James Meinert, Kris Dennis, Katie Cushwa, Katherine Wallig, Pallavi Nishith, Carolyn Griffeth, Virginia Druhe, and Ellen Rehg. Letters to the editor are encouraged; we'll print as many as space permits.

## Karen House Needs

Utility assistance, blankets, winter gear, Fair Trade coffee, salad dressing, cereal, diapers, cleaning and hygiene supplies

## Karen House has switched to Pure Power!

AmerenUE purchases renewable energy credits (RECs) equal to Pure Power participation level. The purchase of RECs supports wind and other renewable resources right here in the Midwest. We are excited that our electricity will now come from 100% renewable resources, and encourage everyone to join us! [AmerenUE.com/purepower](http://AmerenUE.com/purepower)

## Kabat House Needs

Volunteers interested in teaching English. Call 314.621.7099 for more details.

## Roundtable Discussion on Distributism

Join us on Friday, January 22nd at 7:00 pm at Karen House to discuss the topic of this Round Table Issue.

## Further Reading on Distributism

- \* [distributist.blogspot.com](http://distributist.blogspot.com): Great site with in-depth writings on Distributism
- \* *Vocation of Business: Social Justice in the Marketplace* - John C. Medaille
- \* [schumachersociety.org](http://schumachersociety.org): Promotes the building of strong local economies
- \* [justpeace.org](http://justpeace.org): Contains a wide variety of info on Catholic Social Teaching and related issues

## Distributism and the Catholic Worker

- \* From the Mark and Louise Zwick at the Houston Catholic Worker: [cjd.org/paper/roots/rdistrib.html](http://cjd.org/paper/roots/rdistrib.html) and *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origins*
- \* [Catholicworker.org](http://Catholicworker.org) – searchable archive of Dorothy Day's writings
- \* The Karen House Spring 2008 Round Table: "Electing a Just Society? ...On Elections, Responsibility, and Resistance" [karenhousecw.org/Elections.htm](http://karenhousecw.org/Elections.htm)

Check [www.KarenHouseCW.org](http://www.KarenHouseCW.org) for updates on Karen House, information on the Catholic Worker, an archive of past Round Tables, and more!