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ROAD TO EMMAUS

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF FR. DAVID KIRK

BOYHOOD IN THE DEEP SOUTH

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS RUNS
THROUGH HARLEM

THE ARCHBISHOP IN ALABAMA



THE ROAD TO EMMAUS RUNS THROUGH HARLEM

Father David Kirk is waiting for us in the second floor living room of Emmaus House/Harlem at 160 West 120th Street, the New York City homeless community that he has inspired and sustained for over forty years. A large, soft-spoken man, with a southern accent still evident after decades in New York, his sandy hair and unlined face belie his 72 years, but Fr. David's declining health has recently led to dialysis, and he is frankly downcast over his diminishing energy. As he speaks, however, his enthusiasm mounts, and he retells story after story, alternating between vivid scenes of 20th-century America, his long journey to Orthodoxy, and his own zealous views on the reformation of church and society. Warm laughter, generous forgiveness, and Christian hope punctuate his conversation, and draw us back to a time when ideals were meant to be realized.

RTE: Father David, your notes, "Boyhood in the Deep South," are fascinating. What did it mean to have William Faulkner mentor you? You were already developing your own sense of racial and economic justice in the light of Christian charity. Did Faulkner add to that momentum, or did your correspondence just confirm what you already felt?

FR. DAVID: I'd been very alone with my thoughts on race and injustice until I read a work by Faulkner with a theme about racism. Faulkner was from Mississippi, a Nobel Prize winner, and for a southerner he was moderate, not a radical. My brother was attending the University of Mississippi and had seen Faulkner in person, so we talked about him and I thought, "Well,

Opposite: Emmaus Harlem marching for housing circa 1980s.

maybe I'll write him." When Faulkner became my mentor, I was very alone and secretive about it, because knowing him was a danger for me, even a little more than I realized. I was in Tuscaloosa then, studying at the University of Alabama. At that time the whole campus was racist – professors, students and chaplains. But there were already small things happening, like in South Carolina they were sitting-in to buy hamburgers – but I wasn't openly involved in any of this.

In my last year at the university, 1957-58, I was holding down two jobs that didn't pay enough. By that last semester I was starving. I had a professor, Dr. O.B. Emerson, who was a specialist on Faulkner, and who had also written Faulkner, but Faulkner hadn't answered; he often didn't answer letters. This professor knew about our correspondence and one day said, "I'm moving to Washington, but these are very valuable letters. You can get money for these. If you want to sell them, let me know."

I didn't understand their value, and that summer, I got to the point that I sent him the letters with a note saying, "You said you would give me what they are worth. I trust you." He sent me a \$10 check, and I was so hungry that I cashed it and bought \$10 worth of hamburgers that I spread over three days. I never got the letters back and he refused to talk to me once I'd cashed the check. I didn't have copies of the letters, but I've found them since in about ten different books because Faulkner released them to the press when people asked him for a statement about the race situation. They were printed all over the country.¹

RTE: You say that you weren't openly involved, but in your junior year, you and some friends barricaded the campus library to protect Autherine Lucy when she was threatened with mob violence during her attempt to integrate the University of Alabama.

FR. DAVID: The situation with Autherine Lucy wasn't something I sought out; it just happened. At the time, it seemed a natural thing to do. I only knew that I had to be terribly quiet about the whole thing. It was dangerous to be on campus that year because we were considered traitors to the white race, and I was taken out and beaten around. But the danger was over after that fall. Autherine went on to an all-black college, and I never tried to keep

¹ One letter from William Faulkner to David Kirk can be read online at: <http://www.fatherdavidkirk.org/images/photos/mentions/WilliamFaulknerLettertoDavidKirk.pdf>

in touch. I found out a few years ago that the University of Alabama marked the 50th anniversary of her trying to enter, casting Faulkner and myself as heroes. They put out a special issue of the campus magazine, including our correspondence. (I still don't have a copy.) It was ironic; I was ostracized at the time, but now they were applauding.²

As I said, in those years you had to be quiet because you were dealing with subversive issues. After my final year of college, I went back to Mobile and took a job teaching high school social studies. I'd always thought that I'd just be a teacher, but now everything had changed inside of me – religion, faith, ideas – and I didn't know what to do.

The Melkite Catholic Church and Father Joseph Raya

RTE: Were you already a Christian?

FR. DAVID: I'd been a Christian for three years when I graduated from college, and it was the situation of Autherine Lucy and people like her that led me to Orthodoxy and Eastern Catholicism.

I was 18 and in my first year of college at the very beginning of civil rights, pre-desegregation. I was involved in Alabama, and the people who were the most involved there – black folks mostly, some whites – were Christians. I'd never been to church in my life, except sitting on the steps of a little wood-frame black church in Mississippi, listening to the music, but friends began taking me around to Methodist and Baptist churches, both of which seemed like a one-man preaching with songs. I went to the Roman Catholic Church because the local Roman Catholic priest was the only white pastor around who didn't think that segregation was ordained by God, but to me it was somehow more mysterious than mystery. I couldn't make it out. Then someone told me that there was this funny church in Birmingham, about sixty miles away, "a Syrian church." So, I hitchhiked up there. It was a Melkite Catholic Church under the pope, but they followed the Orthodox faith and traditions. There was no Orthodox church around – the nearest was another sixty miles away – but this was my introduction to the Eastern Church

² Although there was a court order to secure her 1956 admittance, after entering the campus, Autherine Lucy was suspended and then expelled by the University of Alabama. She went on to complete her education at an African-American college and her expulsion was only overturned by the university in 1980. In 1992, she returned to take a Master's degree in Elementary Education at the university she'd been expelled from almost four decades before.

through Father Joseph Raya, a dynamic, open, extraordinary priest, who later became the Melkite Archbishop of Nazareth.³

RTE: Father Joseph Raya was a remarkable pastor, and Orthodox should know that he did wonderful English translations of akathists and services. His *Byzantine Daily Worship* was the first eastern Christian service book I ever owned.

FR. DAVID: He gave me Orthodoxy as an eastern Catholic, except (*smiling*) that little part about the pope which was also a bit of a problem for him, being from the Middle East. It was kind of slid under everything else I was taught. Fr. Joseph was very much a “stand-up-for-who-we-are” kind of man, even though we were under the local Roman Catholic bishop.

RTE: Was there friction? This was pre-Vatican II and the mass was still in Latin throughout most of the world.

³ Archbishop Joseph Raya (1916-2005): Born in Zahle, Lebanon, Fr. Raya was a prominent Melkite Greek Catholic archbishop, theologian, and author. He served as metropolitan of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and All Galilee from 1968 until 1974 and was particularly known for his commitment to reconciliation between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. He was also a leading advocate of celebrating the Divine Liturgy in vernacular languages.

After his ordination in 1941, he taught at the Patriarchal College in Cairo, but was expelled from Egypt in 1948 for defending the rights of women. Emigrating to the U.S. in 1949, he was appointed pastor of St. George Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Birmingham, Alabama. His championship of civil rights brought him into close friendship with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Father Raya marched at King's side and suffered several times at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, including one occasion when he was kidnapped and severely beaten by Klansmen. Defying the threat of excommunication issued by Roman Catholic Archbishop Thomas Toolen, Fr. Raya helped King and other civil rights workers organize protests throughout Alabama during the 1960's. Father Raya went on to found the first Eastern Catholic mission for African Americans, located in downtown Birmingham.

Father Raya was a member of the Melkite patriarchal delegation to the Second Vatican Council, and after completing his work, continued to translate Arabic and Syriac Melkite services and spiritual works into English. His work is the standard translation for all English-language Eastern Rite Catholic services.

In 1968, he was appointed archbishop of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and All Galilee, and led a peaceful demonstration of thousands of Arabs and Jews in Israel seeking justice for the villages of Kafr Bir'im and Iqrit, which had been forcibly depopulated in 1948 by Israeli forces and then destroyed. At the closing session of the Israeli parliament, he spoke out eloquently, alternating between French, Arabic, and English, that the Jewish representatives might understand that they were inflicting on the Arabs the very things that they lament so bitterly in their own history. Father Raya also commanded the Christian Arabs to purge their hearts of hatred for the Jews.

In August, 1972, he raised another Arab Christian demonstration to mourn “the death of justice in Israel,” saying, “No end justifies injustice – even if that end seems to be the good of the state or of a nation. If you base security on denial of justice, no amount of money can guarantee that security. Not even an army as strong as all of the legions of Rome will be able to insure it.” Although the Israeli government viewed him as a danger, when he resigned his archbishopric in 1974, Fr. Raya was begged by Prime Minister Golda Meir to reconsider. In his farewell address, he said, “I came to the Holy Land to give... but I was overwhelmed by what I received! I came to enrich and purify... but I was the one to be enriched and purified. I loved the family of the Lord. His family ...are both the Jews and the Arabs. I held the Muslims, the Druze, the Jew, the Christian, everyone, believer and unbeliever, in the same embrace.”

Harlem, near Emmaus House.

FR. DAVID: Father Joseph knew that, as Eastern Catholics, we had the right to have liturgy in the language of the people (they had been saying it in Arabic and Syriac), and so he started serving liturgy in English, but the local Roman Catholic bishop went to Rome and got the Vatican to issue a decree saying that Eastern Rite Catholics in America could not have liturgy in English. Father Joseph wrote Patriarch Maximos IV, the Melkite Patriarch of Antioch⁴ who was under the pope (but still our patriarch), who said, “Don’t stop serving.” Patriarch Maximos IV was probably the most Orthodox of the eastern Catholics. When Pope John XXIII became pope, Fr. Joseph went to speak to him about the decree. Pope John himself had worked in Istanbul and had a good understanding of the Orthodox. He tore up that decree. Fr. Joseph said the mass in English from then on. He did that kind of thing again and again.

RTE: So, in Eastern Catholicism you found an expression of Christianity that recognized the common human ties you valued, beyond race and ethnicity?

FR. DAVID: Right. Father Joseph was that. He was very supportive.

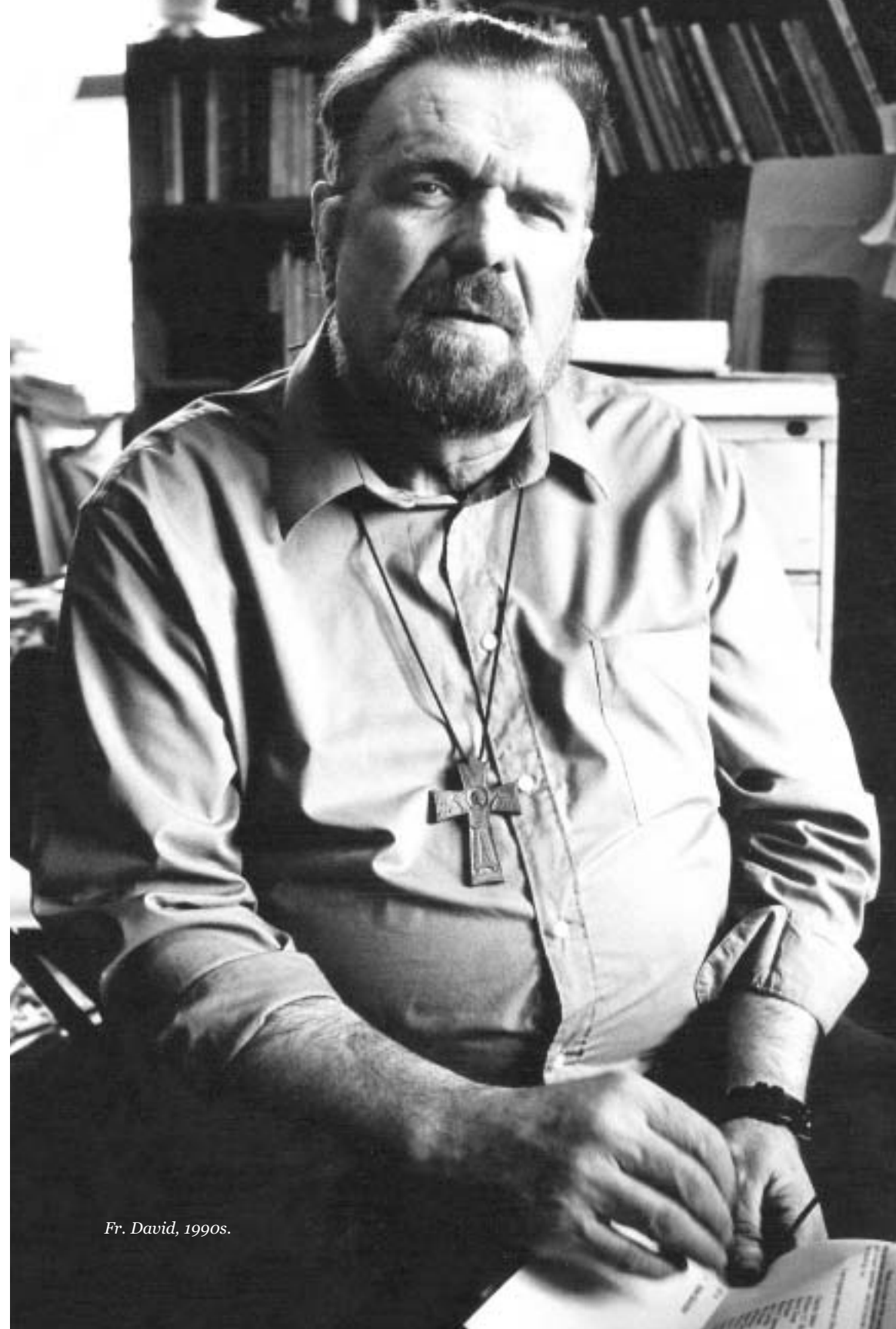
RTE: It’s remarkable to think today that a Syrian-Arab immigrant was one of the first white Christians to see beyond the racial barriers in the Deep South.

FR. DAVID: Father Raya was a very powerful man, a very joyful man, a very loving man. I remember him speaking once at a Congregational Church in Birmingham. They had been inviting guest speakers, and at the same time, they were looking for a pastor. After he spoke they ended up offering him the pastorate. (*Laughter*). It shows how he reached people – beyond being Catholic, beyond being Eastern, beyond being Lebanese, he got through. He tried to do little things to help, like starting a Montessori school with all black children. He also rented a storefront chapel, and that same year we began doing liturgies in the black neighborhood. It was a big year.

RTE: What did Fr. Joseph give you spiritually?

FR. DAVID: Fr. Joseph taught me Orthodox Christianity and a whole new way of looking at God, humanity, and the Church. It was different because

⁴ Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Maximos IV (Sayegh) (1878-1967). Enthroned as patriarch in 1947, he served until his death. He was succeeded by Patriarch Maximos V (Hakim) (1908-2001), who served as patriarch from 1967-2000.



Fr. David, 1990s.

of its emphasis, the traditional sources from which it draws nourishment, the image and likeness of God leading to the deification of the human person, the God of Love unfolding Himself into time, the really real, the ground of our being, living to our fullest potential which is God, Christ... the spirituality of the heart, the goodness of people. I can remember a hundred teachings because they shocked me, knowing what I had heard from “religion” in the Deep South. When I realized that I’d found my home, I was baptized and chrismated. It seemed like there was a chorus of a hundred angels and spiritual beings in that lonely chapel that day.

The Draft Board

Then I set about living my Christianity day by day. I had the Scriptures and a book of the Church Fathers from Fr. Joseph. I took each point, and as I grasped it, started trying to live it. Life suddenly started presenting me with situations to which I had to respond as a Christian.

One day, not long after my baptism, I got a letter from my draft board. We were in Korea. I was a patriotic American and had never thought about these issues, but somewhere I’d read: “Don’t kill, don’t even hold onto anger; if you live by the gun, you perish by the gun.” I presented myself to my draft board in the little town of Pritchard, Alabama. They’d never heard of an Eastern Church. In those days, no one got draft exemptions except Quakers. I simply told them: “I am an Eastern Christian, an Eastern Catholic, a part of the great Church of Antioch. My faith does not allow me to kill, nor to be a part of any organized effort to kill, dominate, or oppress.” They gave me no hint; I left knowing I would be arrested shortly. Instead, a letter came saying that I was exempted for religious reasons. I’m told I was the first non-Quaker not to go to jail, usually four to seven years.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott and a Young Black Preacher

RTE: So, after college, conversion, and your exemption, you were teaching in Mobile.

FR. DAVID: I’d taken a job teaching, but I got into trouble again because I tried to open the students up to new experiences by having some guest speakers. One was a black minister that I invited to talk to our school about the race situation, to give the students an understanding of how black peo-

ple felt. Another speaker was a Jewish rabbi. Being from the South at that time, I’d never met a Jewish person either, so I did that for myself, as well as for them. Later, I found out that a student had taped me. Her father was the head of the White Citizen’s Council, the new name for the Ku Klux Klan, and the tapes started a whole round of telephone calls and threats, frightening my mother. I almost got fired that year.

I was still teaching school when I heard about Dorothy Day. She’d been doing the Catholic Worker for twenty-five years by the time I got to her.⁵ She’d begun in 1933 and this was about 1957, after my baptism, when I wrote to her and said, “I’ve read the Gospel, but how do I do these works of mercy?” and she made suggestions: “Go visit the sick in nursing homes, you can do this, you can do that....” So I did. There was no organization I could join; it was just me trying to figure it all out. I started visiting nursing homes, fasting totally on Fridays and using that money to feed someone, and so on. I had to figure things out. Once I foolishly gave away most of my clothes, and then had to buy them back.

What I really wanted to do was some kind of interracial talk. As a white person, there was no way that you could get together with African-Americans and talk about what was going on because if you were seen together there would be real problems for them. I’d already heard about the Catholic Interracial Council in New York, and Fr. John LaFarge, a well-known Jesuit social activist, who had started this center where black and white Christians could come together and talk about these issues. I hoped to do the same, so I went to Archbishop Toolen, the Catholic archbishop of Mobile, and said, “I’d like to start a place where people can come together nonviolently and talk.” His response was, “We don’t need more nigger agitators here! Don’t come back here with such ideas.” In anguish and despair I wrote Dorothy. She wrote back on a postcard words that have guided my life ever since: “You don’t need permission to do good. The gospel gives you that freedom.”

It was then that I heard of a young black minister in Montgomery who wanted to start something similar. His name was Martin Luther King, Jr. I never got to the point of starting my group, but when the Montgomery bus boycott began, I hitchhiked down to see what was going on. I went to his

5 The Catholic Worker Movement: Founded by Dorothy Day (1897-1980) and Peter Maurin in 1933 in New York City. Today there are over 185 Catholic Worker communities whose members live in common and are committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, hospitality for the homeless, and who work against injustice, war, racism, and violence. The New York St. Joseph House, where Dorothy Day worked, is at 36 E. 1st St. (between 1st and 2nd Ave.).

home and the Kings told me about how Rosa Parks had just been arrested for not giving up her seat on the bus to a white man. They weren't directly involved yet, nor did they know the people of Montgomery since they'd just come from Atlanta, but they felt they should do something. So, they did what they knew was a very utopian thing. They mimeographed a poster saying, "One of our members has been arrested," calling all of the black churches – all churches really – to boycott the buses. Mrs. King said that they really didn't expect anything to happen. They were new and Martin wasn't known. They got up early in the morning and stood looking out of the window. Pretty soon the first bus came by, and it was empty. The second was also empty. By the time the fifth bus came by, it was only half full.

That night, people gathered at the church. A community leader stood up and said, "You know, we have a new member of our city and our church now, and he's going to be organizing this. I want you to meet Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King." So, he started on his own in Montgomery and people had to be introduced to him. Within a few weeks, though, he was known around the country. He was arrested and his house was fire-bombed for instigating the boycott.

Since I hadn't followed through on my own idea of the interracial center, what to do next? I saw myself settling into normal life. I was about to buy a car and other things that would put me in debt and tie me down for years. I got engaged. But it became clearer and clearer that "this is not what I'm meant to do, this is not what I want, this is quicksand." The Gospel stuck like a grape in my throat. So I wrote to Dorothy, told her what was happening, and asked if I could come. She wrote back saying, "Come, but buy a round trip ticket. I don't know if you'll like this or not." In three days I'd cancelled the job, cancelled the car, cancelled the engagement, packed a small suitcase, and caught a train to New York City with \$10 in my pocket. I only got a one-way ticket, though, because I didn't have enough money for the round-trip.

I arrived at Penn Station and walked across the street to St. Francis Church, intending to make my way to the Catholic Worker, but there in front of the church was Ammon Hennacy, selling papers, and he took me home.⁶ Ammon was the associate editor of *The Catholic Worker* paper.

⁶ Ammon Hennacy (1893-1970): American pacifist, Christian anarchist, social activist, vegetarian, and associate editor of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. Known for his strict integrity in living out his own principles of social justice, one writer says of him, "With his charm, courage, love and wisdom, he created friends out of enemies." Tireless in confronting injustice, Hennacy was known for his sharp wit and would say such things as: "At times those who do not want to have their inconsistencies pointed out, say in a super-sweet voice to me, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." I reply, "OK, judge me then."

That was typical of what happens in my life, in all of our lives. You have to take risks of faith, otherwise you don't learn anything.

Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker

RTE: What was it like working with Dorothy Day at the Catholic Worker?

FR. DAVID: I used to have two books on the history of Greenwich Village, and both of them have bits about Dorothy. One of them talks about, "the two lives of Dorothy Day," with the story of a man going to a party in Greenwich Village, where there is a tall, blond, Ingrid Bergman-type woman with a bottle of gin... and he says, "That was Dorothy Day." And this is true – the early Dorothy enjoyed that life as a young 19-, 20-year-old (not a communist, she was never quite a communist, although she was a member of IWW, International Workers of the World) who could drink any man under the table and had many lovers.

Probably her closest relationship was with the playwright Eugene O'Neill. When I was at the Catholic Worker, I saw an O'Neill play that was first staged in Sweden [*A Touch of the Poet*]. The central character was a woman who was always scrubbing floors and talking. One day Dorothy said quietly, "You know, Gene wrote that character about me." She had a great love for him, and also felt sorry, because his wife was in a mental hospital most of her life. So, as a young woman she had that secret love, and was getting into all of the socialist, leftist movements, into feminism and "free-love". At the same time, she was seeking something beyond all that. Ultimately, it was faith.

As everyone knows, she went into a depression after an abortion, and in 1926, when she became pregnant a second time by her new common-law husband, Forster Batterham, she knew that she would keep the child: this was her daughter Tamar. The baby was born when Dorothy and Forster were living together in a little shack on Staten Island. Dorothy decided, "I want Tamar to grow up in a better world, with a better vision and values." Her first idea was to baptize Tamar, and soon she realized that she was



Dorothy Day.

going that way herself. Forster was an avowed atheist, and when she told him that she was going to become Catholic and that she wanted to get married, he said, “I’ll never enter a church,” and he left – just walked away and left her. That was the beginning of the new life.⁷

She moved in with her brother in the village, on the lower East side. That’s when a tramp, really, Peter Maurin, came. He was a French Catholic philosopher, and after meeting Dorothy, he became her teacher. He taught her the Christian vision of social justice and the Body of Christ. He’d once been a Christian Brother, but had moved to Canada where he farmed until his partner died, and now in New York was teaching French and writing poetic outlines called “Easy Essays” – straightforward ideas about life that were very easy to get.

Dorothy’s family, of course, didn’t want Peter around. She’d say, “Look, I need this man. He’s teaching me and I know where I’m going now.” Peter would say, “We’ve got to do houses of hospitality, round-table discussions, we need to start a paper.” Dorothy would reply, “We don’t have money for a newspaper,” but he’d say, “You don’t need money in the Church, you just do it.”

Somehow they got a little money together to put out the first copy of the *Catholic Worker*. It was a penny a copy (it’s still a penny a copy) and in their first issue they restated something that most people still don’t know – that at the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea it was decreed that every bishop and parish must have a hospice for the poor. So, they put out the idea of parishes doing that, but no one did anything, so Dorothy said, “We have to show them how to do it. We must start it ourselves.”

Their House of Hospitality ended up as a movement, of course. It bloomed, and within a year they were distributing 700,000 copies of each issue of the *Catholic Worker*. Peter Maurin’s vision was to develop small

⁷ Fr. David: That, you would think, was the end of Forster, but sixty years later, a month after Dorothy’s death, the Catholic Archdiocese of New York asked that one of her memorial services be at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Afterwards, Tamar came up to me and said, “Fr. David, I want you to meet my father, Forster.” Now, I’d heard these stories about Forster never having been in church, and here I was, talking to him in the cathedral.

I think he was more aware of Dorothy and Tamar than Dorothy wrote about. Once when I was at the *Catholic Worker*, we were arrested for not participating in practices in case an atomic bomb was dropped over New York City. Working people were supposed to go into the subways, and schoolchildren would hide under their desks or cots. It was all absurd. The *Catholic Workers* went out to Greenwich Village park and were arrested. In jail before the trial, we were looking down through a window at people below holding signs saying, “Free Dorothy Day!” when Dorothy said, “See that little man?” He was kind of short and fat. “That’s Forster.” I thought then, “They’ve kept up their friendship over all these years.”



The Catholic Worker, St. Joseph House, NYC.



Fr. David, mid 1980s.

agricultural communities that would give people honest work and a place to heal, as well as city shelters for the homeless. They did both. Articles began appearing in the general press about Dorothy as the new Joan of Arc and even bishops were listening, or pretending to.

But Dorothy was totally honest to her truth, and while she was feeding and housing the poor, she also wanted to get to the causes of poverty, the cause of war, to help the trade unionists who were striking for better wages. The Catholic Church was generally not supporting trade unions, and that caused a real conflict. During the Spanish Civil War, Dorothy didn't make radical leftist statements, but kept repeating that we should help the poor. When you look back at her articles now, they were carefully done, but back then there was a lot of fever about it: "Dorothy Day – we called her a saint and now she's supporting the Communists." Boom! Down went the circulation to 40,000.

Over all these years, she continued living simply with the people at the Catholic Worker. We get stipends here at Emmaus House – \$25 a week – but no one got stipends there, including Dorothy. Catholic Workers lived very poorly, in solidarity with the poor. It's amazing that she was able to continue with this in New York where we have so many neurotic folks, and some who want to play Jesus. She stayed there and kept it going.

RTE: When Ammon Hennacy took you home, did you join the Catholic Worker community?

FR. DAVID: Yes, I was 22 at the time, and I stayed with Dorothy for two years. I was also getting my Master's at Columbia in Social Thought and I lived at the Catholic Worker, sharing a rented room with two other guys. The original Catholic Worker house had been taken over by New York City to build the subway, so Dorothy rented a lot of cheap little apartments and people went into those. In our little room there was a tiny kitchen, a bed, and a bathtub. She took me over to the bathtub and said, "Now put a blanket in this and you'll be as snug as a bug in a rug. You'll love it." She always had something positive to say. Some days when we had almost nothing to eat, she'd quietly say, "These are the best potatoes I've ever had." That really taught me something. She was just a wonderful friend but she could also be very stern, and there were clear lines you didn't pass.

RTE: In what way?

FR. DAVID: Well, it was the sixties and people had picked up some odd ideas about freedom. She'd just say, "We don't go this way." I remember once we were on the bus, traveling to Virginia for a demonstration, when a guy said, "When I get down there I'm gonna get me a little woman." Dorothy heard him and said, "That's disgusting. We should be fasting and praying." She was a spiritual woman, but also earthy. She could have a word or two, come out with a little language.

RTE: How old was she at this time?

FR. DAVID: I think she was about 58. I have to say that she looked older. In her pictures, she is always very tall and thin. They made a movie with this little short woman playing her, but it didn't fit. Dorothy was Ingrid Bergman, a giant woman with an enormous presence and these Katherine Hepburn cheekbones. I remember one time, a homeless poet came to our Friday night meeting, which was held in a bare room with one little light bulb hanging from a string. Dorothy was sitting there with the light hitting the angles of her face and the poet said, "Now look at her – she knows how she's lighted." (*laughter*) So, she did have her critics, too, but she took it with humor.

RTE: As a devout Catholic, how did she get on with the Roman Catholic hierarchs in New York? Cardinal Spellman, particularly, wouldn't have shared her politics.

FR. DAVID: No. She certainly criticized the hierarchy, but she was very careful with her criticism, recognizing that Cardinal Spellman was her bishop, although there were certain things that she had to oppose. People sometimes went after him ruthlessly, and once I remember her saying, "Pardon me, but you know, some birds shit in their own nest." That was her only comment. I liked that about her. She told the truth.

I remember once, after I had been ordained and started Emmaus, she called and a resident named Carolyn answered the phone. Dorothy said, "Who are you? Tell me about yourself." She listened for awhile and then laughed, "You're up there with all those priests. You've got to join women's liberation."

I have a lot of Dorothy stories. There are two pictures of Dorothy, the one of her looking up, almost with anger on her face, like she's speaking out about something, and the other of her looking down in deep prayer. I always had these two senses of her, speaking out and being in prayer. In the

chapel, she'd leave little things in the corner where she prayed. She had a notebook that I couldn't help but look at sometimes... all of the people she prayed for she had listed there, and every day she'd go over it. She loved the Eastern Church. I was Melkite, of course, and most Sundays we'd go together to St. Michael's Chapel where there was a Russian Catholic priest doing the full Melkite Orthodox liturgy.

RTE: She was familiar with the Slavonic liturgy?

FR. DAVID: Yes, she always had Bishop Raya's prayer book and her love of Russian writers went back to her girlhood. She was always talking about Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. She constantly quoted them and often spoke of the Russian soul. One of our best friends was Hélène Iswolsky, whose father was the last Imperial Russian ambassador to France. Hélène had become Roman Catholic while attending a French Catholic school. As an adult she became Eastern Catholic to get closer to her roots, and wrote a popular book called, *Christ in Russia*. She was very close to Dorothy, and when Russia began opening up in the seventies, Hélène finally felt that she could go back. She and Dorothy got a little car over there and Hélène drove her all over, to places Dorothy had always wanted to go – Novgorod and so on. They prayed all over Russia.

I once gave her an icon of the Mother of God that I got from a Russian Catholic monastery in Belgium. When Dorothy died in 1980 and I went into her room, I saw that she still had that icon, thirty years later.

Everything I have, I have her to thank for. She formed me. Those two years at the Catholic Worker I lived at Dorothy's feet, like Timothy to Paul. If she was peeling potatoes, I'd move over and start peeling potatoes, just to listen to her. If she was on the phone, I'd stand at her elbow. I didn't take notes, but I took mental notes. I already had a lot of the social and spiritual theory, but she made it real.

Beda College, Rome

RTE: And it was about this time that, as a Melkite Catholic, you felt a call to the priesthood?

FR. DAVID: Yes, and I wanted to stay in New York. New York was Dorothy, working for peace, civil rights, for the homeless, against the cold war... so

many things were happening here. I wanted to study for the priesthood here, but I couldn't find a seminary I felt I could get through. I was already formed, and far too independent – or opinionated.

I had certain truths that had been growing inside of me, but most of the seminaries, even the eastern Catholic seminaries in those days were for teenage boys, not for mature men. Then, I heard about a seminary in Rome, Beda College, founded in the late 19th century for converts from the Anglican clergy by Cardinal Newman, the Anglican bishop who converted to Catholicism. There weren't many rules there and you were treated as adults.

RTE: This had come out of the 19th-century Oxford Movement?

FR. DAVID: Yes, but when I wrote to Beda, they told me they had no room. They had a nine-year waiting list, and said they'd put me on. But I decided I couldn't wait so Ren Marro and I – Ren was a friend who was studying social work in Rome – left on a little boat. We docked at Le Havre, and caught a train to Rome sitting on our suitcases. I hadn't been accepted to Beda, so I “sat on the steps” until they decided to let me in. At 24, I felt ancient because in those days you started seminary much earlier. (Although, in fact, Beda's oldest student was a 74 year-old British general.) I had a wonderful biblical theology professor, and also took courses at the Russikon and the Greek College. I lived my liturgical life at the Russikon.

RTE: The Russikon is the Vatican college for Russian and Eastern Catholics?

FR. DAVID: Yes, and we had the Byzantine Liturgy in Slavonic. The Melkites were not large enough to have their own seminary in Rome, although they have them in the Middle East: Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan.

I was at Beda from 1959-1963. It was wonderful. We had two weeks off at Christmas and two weeks off at Easter. In those days you could catch a train from Rome to Vienna for \$10. You'd buy some bread and cheese, and you could always find a place to stay for free. I discovered lots of little Orthodox things going on in Vienna, or in Florence – really saintly people doing things.

In the summer I'd go to the Middle East and stay with the Melkite patriarch. I spent three summers, four months each, in the Middle East while I was at Beda College. In Jerusalem I stayed with the White Fathers who ran the Melkite seminary, and often went to the monastery at Mar Sabba.

Walking on foot around Palestine, I'd find wonderful shrines with signs like, “This is the place where the Good Shepherd was,” – ancient ruins, almost destroyed, with vegetation growing through the walls and an old Palestinian man looking after it.

One thing that I understood from being there was that the mind of eastern and African peoples is very different from that of the West. I think that part of the problem with our faith and civilization has been this westernization, the break with the eastern patriarchates followed by the Protestant espousal of exaggerated capitalism and the idea that any man can interpret the Bible and start his own church. I also have to say that although I see how the West went wrong spiritually, there was still a lot of great Christian witness there.

Over the centuries that Eastern Christians were being closed in upon by Islam (and later by Marxism), we Eastern Christians were able to hang on because we had married clergy and we had liturgy in the language of the people. There wasn't a lot of authoritarian church government; it was the people who sustained the Church. Even as a Catholic seminarian, it was very strange to me that these people, who had been Orthodox for so many centuries, had suddenly become Catholic two or three hundred years ago. Even then, I felt that their poverty and isolation had been taken advantage of.

In my part of the Melkite Church, for example, the French religious orders were ready to set up schools and do everything for the Orthodox émigrés, because about half of the Middle Eastern Orthodox bishops had come into communion with Rome in the 18th to 19th centuries, partly as a response to heavy-handedness from Constantinople. It was an agreement that said, “All you have to do is to pray for the pope at liturgy.” Who you prayed for in liturgy meant a lot back in Lebanon, because when they heard that litany, they knew what kind of a church it was. But in reality, it meant you were moving from being an autonomous interdependent church to being a colony. What they called the “Office for the Oriental Churches” was like the Colonial Office of the British Empire, and that was how we were treated. A bishop from the Office once said to me, “Let me remind you. This is an Office *for* the eastern church, not of the eastern church. We in the Roman Church determine these things.”

The Second Vatican Council happened during my years in Rome, and one day during the months that Fr. Joseph Raya was there as a Melkite delegate, we saw a procession of Roman bishops on their way to a special council session. He said, “I want to see what's happening in there today,” and left. The



Melkite Patriarch Maximos V with Fr David Kirk.

next day he returned, smiling, and said, “I got in. They’re never sure who we are, but I put on everything eastern I have, and they let me in.”

I met many interesting people in Rome during the Council. There was a Melkite priest from Palestine who built houses for the poor in Bethlehem. His chapel was in a cave, like the cave where Jesus was born. He and one of the Melkite bishops (who would later become patriarch) tried to introduce a session on “The Way of the Poor,” into Vatican II, encouraging bishops and priests to live a more humble lifestyle. There were suggestions like, “Instead of Cadillacs, a Volkswagen.” I don’t remember it all, but it was signed and circulated by all of the Third World bishops who were concerned about the example of priests and hierarchs.

RTE: Were the Melkites asked to accept the *flioque* and later Roman Catholic doctrines that the Orthodox don’t share?

FR. DAVID: No. We never had to follow those decrees; we only had to commemorate the pope in liturgy. Still, we didn’t have a bishop in this country for a long time. Eastern Catholics were under the local Roman Catholic bishop when they were outside the local territory of the eastern patriarchates. Only after forty years of asking for our own hierarchy, were we allowed to name three candidates, from whom the pope would choose one.

A Patriarchal Blessing

Anyway, during those summers in the Middle East, I kept feeding myself spiritually, and when I saw anything Orthodox, I knew it belonged to me. Although I was on the sidelines, for me Orthodoxy was the measuring stick, the teacher. I also found Orthodox examples inside the Melkite Church, and later I met most of the Orthodox patriarchs – the Patriarch of Antioch, the Patriarch of Jerusalem. We even visited Athenagoras, the Patriarch of Constantinople ... I say “we” because that first visit was myself and a Finnish-American named Karlo, whom I’d met on retreat in a Trappist monastery. He was in the army and when I told him about the tradition of non-violence and the Catholic Worker, he went back and served time in prison, rather than participate. His desire all the time was to become an Orthodox priest. He’d been stationed in Japan and had gotten to know the Orthodox bishop there.

Now with Patriarch Athenagoras, I felt an almost personal relationship.

On my fourth and last visit to him in 1963, I was on my way to Jerusalem to be ordained on the Feast of the Transfiguration. I connected that also with Hiroshima Day: Christ, the Light of the World, and Hiroshima, the destruction of the world. So, I arrived in Istanbul at the Phanar, and found that the patriarch was sick, but they said, “He wants to see you, anyway.” They got me a chair, and I sat by his bed, and he talked to me about what I wanted to do, what I wanted to be. Then he said, “You know, the best way for us to come together is for all of us Eastern Christians to gather together to serve others. You will get to know one another, and then you can start studying the faith together, searching out what the problems were a thousand years ago, and looking at them now.” He tried to sit up in his bed, and gave me a blessing for my ordination. I felt that he was somehow participating in it.

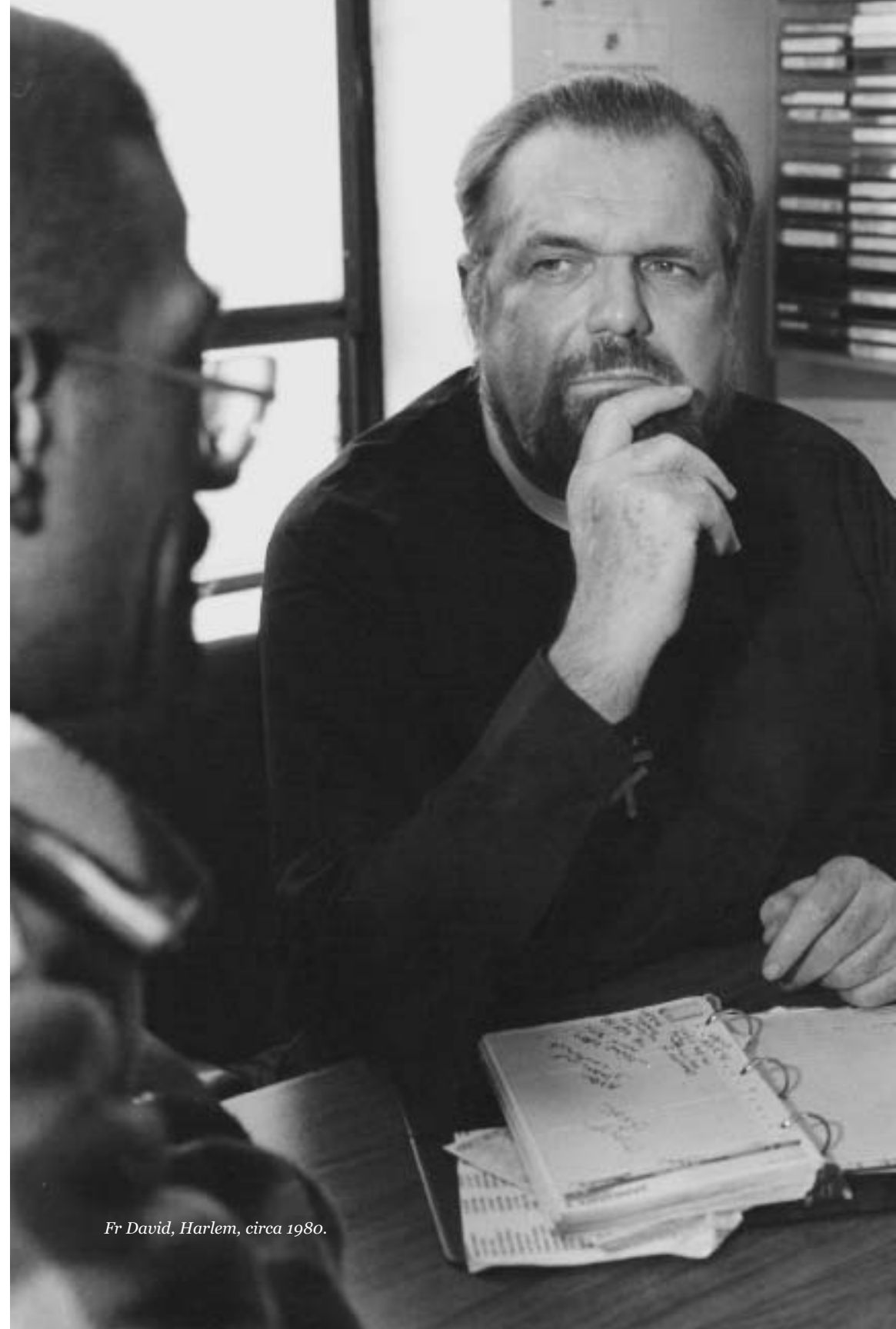
So, I was in Rome for three years. I could have stayed for four, but Patriarch Maximos said, “You know, I think it’s enough, you’ve had three years of study and summers in the Middle East,” so on Transfiguration in 1963 I was ordained in the Melkite Church of St. Anne, in Jerusalem. It’s an old crusader church, just below the Dome of the Rock mosque on the Temple Mount.

From the beginning, Patriarch Maximos had agreed that I would be working with people, but we didn’t know what form it would take. So, in the ordination formula where it says, “You are ordained for the Church of God,” ...he added the words, “...for the poor, and for the unity of Christians.” My first liturgy was in the Chapel of Christ Weeping Over the City, on the Mount of Olives, a proper place to begin a diakonia to the poor weeping over Harlem.

The patriarch sent me back to Birmingham, Alabama for my pastoral internship year with Fr. Joseph Raya, and two weeks later, Dr. King arrived for the Birmingham campaign. I said to Fr. Joseph, “I really want to be a part of this. Can I go?” and he replied, “Yes, you should be there.” This was the beginning of what they afterwards called, “The Birmingham Year.” Half of our parishioners were Lebanese-Syrian-Arab, and the other half were converts, but no one minded what I was doing. I wasn’t getting my picture in the paper.

The Birmingham Year

A campaign had already begun in Birmingham to desegregate stores and so on, but it wasn’t going well, so Dr. King came to spend a year. I just did



Fr David, Harlem, circa 1980.

whatever they asked me to do, often working with a little group of white people in Birmingham on desegregation. We talked with businesspeople and this and that. We also took part in the protests and were arrested. Some of us went on to the march in Selma. One thing I do remember is that a week before the four little girls were murdered by a bomb at the Baptist Church on 116th Street, I spoke there, which was kind of a shivery thing. It was a wonderful year, but a very difficult one. What other pastor in Alabama would have allowed a new priest to go and do that?

A House in Harlem

RTE: And the rest is history. What did you do after Birmingham?

FR. DAVID: When my pastoral year was over, I hooked up with two other young Melkite priest friends, Fr. Lyle Young and Fr. Albert Gorayeb, and we came up with a proposal for the new Melkite Bishop, Justin. He joyfully agreed, “This must be a part of the work of our church diakonia,” and gave



*Newly Ordained
Fr. David Kirk,
mid 1960s.*

us his blessing to found Emmaus and buy a house for the poor. He was the first Melkite bishop in the U.S., and, sadly, he was really afraid of the Roman bishops. He was like the colored boy and they were the plantation owners. There was a lot of fear in those days.

For a while we were living in the car, until we figured out how we could do this. I wanted to start on the Lower East Side, because there were poor people there and this was the place where all of our Orthodox and Eastern Christian forefathers had first come.

I had the theory, but it was Dorothy who made it real for me again. One day she said, “You know, Peter Maurin tried to start a place in Harlem, but he didn’t succeed because he didn’t know how to organize. You could do that. There’s a lot of need in Harlem. Why don’t you think about it?” So, I did. Of course, with my background in the South and my relationship with the movement of black humanity, it was a natural thing. Now it was my turn to make it real.

RTE: You already had the idea of Emmaus House?

FR. DAVID: What we decided was, “We aren’t going in with an agenda, we want to hear from people what they need. Let’s just get a house if we can, and see what happens.”

RTE: And you had no money.

FR. DAVID: No money, but I’d met a Protestant minister who was doing wonderful things in East Harlem, and after telling him my dream, of what I’d like to do, he said, “You know, I want to invest in your dream,” and he wrote out a check for \$500.

At that time Dorothy had a Christian friend, Ruth, who was in real estate. She found a house on 16th Street in Harlem, an area called Little Italy. In the early sixties, there were still some Italian families there, trying to get out. It was a house about the size of this one, a brownstone walk-up, and it was for sale for \$10,000. Dorothy and I also had a mutual friend, Janet, who had come into a large inheritance. Around this time Janet flew Dorothy to Rome for some kind of appeal to the pope about peace, and Dorothy must have said something to her, because when she returned, Janet gave us \$10,000 for the house.

RTE: Wonderful.

FR. DAVID: That’s how we began, and from then on, it was up to us. The house was dilapidated. We didn’t have a stove or refrigerator, so I got a crock pot that came with a book of recipes, and that’s what I cooked on for the first six months. After awhile we got a stove, and then a priest said, “I hear you need a refrigerator,” and so it went. We grew and – I don’t know how else to say it – we were surrounded by a circle of love. People kept coming and helping and wanting to share. This was 1965. We grew, we grew, we grew. Maybe we shouldn’t have grown so fast, but it was hard to say “No” to needs that came up. You felt that somehow it could be done.

RTE: Were you already taking people into the house?

FR. DAVID: Within our limitations. It was like a Catholic Worker House of Hospitality, but we didn’t try to cram people in the way the Catholic Worker does, although in the wintertime we put down mattresses on the floor for more beds.

Taped Again and This Time Fired

We still didn't have any funding, so I taught at night to make money to run Emmaus – one year at St. John's University, another at Union Theological, another at Fordham, then at the College of New Rochelle. The first year I taught at a private New York girl's high school, the Convent of the Sacred Heart.⁸ The sisters teaching there were called the Madams of the Sacred Heart, and their order was dedicated to teaching the upper class and very rich. One of their students at the time was the young Caroline Kennedy, who was in the 11th grade, though not in my class.

I got the job when Sister Joan, the headmistress, called me to say that she'd read something I'd written. She felt the students needed to hear what



Emmaus residents and volunteers circa late 1970.

I had to say, and she wanted to do a social issues class. I agreed, and I put it all out there about war and peace, about race, about poverty. Once again, someone taped me. This time the girl took it to her father, who wasn't KKK, but was the head of the parent's association, and he played my tape at the parents-teachers meeting, saying that I was a communist who had infiltrated the Church. So, they voted to fire me. I'd just started the

course, and the student had only had time to make three recordings (that was enough) when they let me go, but I was paid for the whole year, and I thought, "Well that's good. I've got a little extra money."

Years later, when homelessness became a big issue, Paul Moore of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John one day called a meeting of people he knew who dealt with the homeless. Suddenly a woman dressed in nice lay clothing came up to me and asked, "Do you remember me?" It was Sister Joan. I didn't recognize her because she wasn't in her habit, but we reminisced about our days at the school. She had gone into homeless work herself. She'd started something called "Homes for the Homeless" where she had a benefactor who bought motels to house homeless families. She'd been moved by all of that to do more than teach.

⁸ In 2008, at 125 years old, the Convent of the Sacred Heart is the oldest private girl's school in Manhattan. In 1990 the school received a Blue Ribbon Award for Academic Excellence from the U.S. Dept. of Education. In 2006, it was voted the number one private girl's school in New York City, and in 2007, it led the nation in advanced placement courses, and is called a "model for schools worldwide."

Black Panthers in Harlem

RTE: The Catholics of the sixties were in the forefront of social activism, but this was also the time when black militants arose. Not many whites would have been able or welcome to work in Harlem. How did you manage?

FR. DAVID: Actually, when the Black Panthers came to Harlem, everyone was afraid of them, even the black pastors. The Panthers were trying to find churches that would work with them, and I saw them as having a program in which nine out of ten points were really good, so we met with them. Everyone at Emmaus was frightened, though, and after the meeting voted "No," that they were too dangerous to work with. At that time, Black Panthers were being shot down in the street, but I still felt we should try, so, I went around and talked to the Emmaus people one by one, and we voted again, and they said "Yes." Out of that collaboration, we ran a breakfast program for the children of Harlem – a huge breakfast, and any child could come.

Emmaus started more or less in the Catholic Worker way, which was to give hospitality, to house the homeless and feed people, though without our own newspaper to present alternatives to poverty and despair. But after awhile I saw that this wasn't working. The homeless that I'd known from the Catholic Worker were very different from those in Harlem, and you can't just transfer programs from place to place.

RTE: How were they different?

FR. DAVID: At the Worker, there were many elderly men and women who didn't fit into any other kind of shelter. New York only had one main shelter, called the MUNI, a huge dormitory kind of thing. The Catholic Worker would get these old men and women who were really living on the street and couldn't stay at the MUNI: they'd either live at the Worker or they'd just come there to eat. Some of them couldn't or wouldn't live anywhere because they were so alienated. You also had people who were very mentally broken.

Dorothy never focused on statistics or descriptions of the people the Worker was reaching, so we don't have those details, but in Harlem the homeless were younger. Ours were 21 to 45 on average, with 95% drug addiction, and we understood that it wasn't enough just to give them a bed and some food. I decided that we had to turn the tables – they had to be involved in the process, not just receive.

Emmaus Community Finds Its Way

The idea of the Emmaus community was that it was run by the residents themselves, it was about taking ownership. If you stayed, you had to go to some kind of therapy. If you were an addict, you started with Narcotics Anonymous meetings – you had to go for ninety days, every day. You had to stay clean, work on a new life, get into a discipline, and you also had to go to some kind of education at night. Some people learned to read and write, others were doing their GED, and the rest went to college. Many graduated.

RTE: How did they manage tuition?

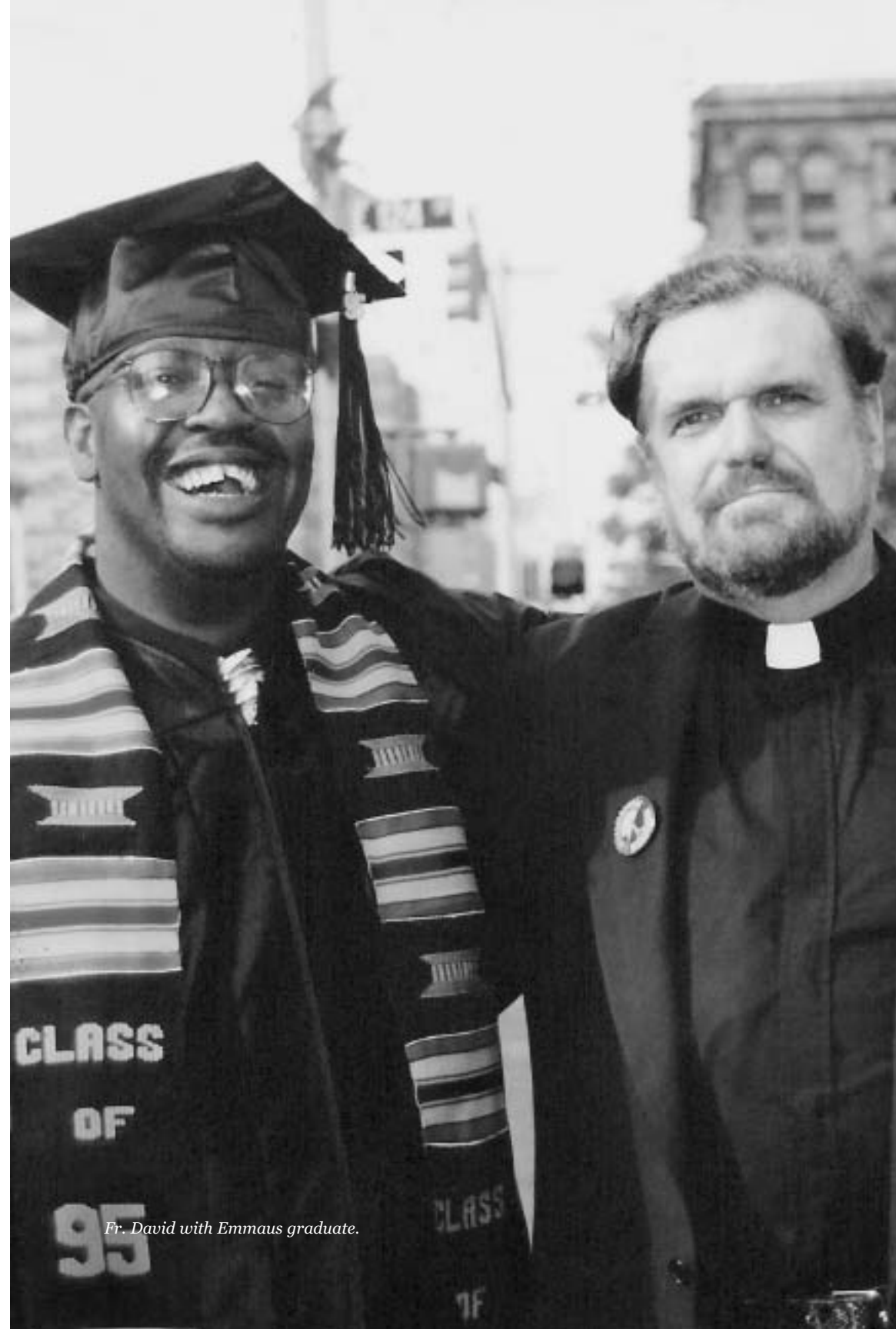
FR. DAVID: Emmaus House paid for it, even the four-year college courses. People sometimes stayed with us for years. Everyone also had to work a few hours a day at Emmaus. We had a wood workshop that built cabinets for hospitals, a second-hand store, and a moving company.

Another principle was the spiritual search. I don't know how far people really got with the spiritual search – often they would just go back to their own spiritual roots and build on them. On the weekend, between Friday and Monday, which covered Islamic, Jewish and Christian holy days, everyone had to go to what we called, “a place of hope.” If they weren't believers, then I had a list of humanist places: ethical culture centers, places of values. I wanted them to learn to depend on God and to find communities of hope outside, so that when they left Emmaus they would have other things to hang onto.

RTE: Did you have anyone becoming eastern Christian after living at Emmaus?

FR. DAVID: I think I had six Melkite converts – seven, if I can claim the Orthodox convert. Otherwise, people were mostly going back to what they had done earlier, what their families had done. I encouraged everyone to look beyond the adolescent stage of religion to a more adult search. This could also tie in with their therapy. For example, the therapy of the young woman who became Orthodox while she was here was to talk to her spiritual father. That was fifteen years ago. She later became a nun at a Russian monastery in Jerusalem.

We also had the “principle of culture” that Peter Maurin taught: give people a sense of who they are, give them a sense of their heritage. Peter died



Fr. David with Emmaus graduate.



Emmaus Jericho construction training.

in 1949, but he had an expression that he'd taken from the Benedictine Rule: "Cult, Culture, and Cultivation." For instance, we might have an African dance troupe show us rhythms and music from Ghana, and then talk about how that matched up with what had developed in this country. Culture is something that I'm still very concerned about. What is American culture? Is it just an eclectic collection of world cultures?

And what will be the effect of what is happening in Europe today? Islamic culture is coming in and I'm not sure that the French, for example, know how to keep their own culture alive. This is a real problem because I want to see all of these cultures survive. There is a book out called, "While Europe Slept." European nations brought all of these Islamic people in to wash the dishes, who have now become established and more prosperous, but they also brought in cultural notions that many Europeans don't understand and aren't ready for. All of the 9/11 people had gone to study in Germany, the Netherlands, and so forth, from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, and felt alienated by the western response to them. Whether this feeling was valid or not, we can't say, but there was something there. People need to try to keep their own culture secure, but respect other cultures as well. At Emmaus, we brought in anything we could to broaden their lives.

RTE: And if people were successful in following the Emmaus House principles, then you gave them more responsibility?

FR. DAVID: We had a circle. The general system of organization in America is a pyramid, with the managers at the top and the peons below. Ours was a circle with a core group in the center. That core group needed to be people of faith, people who had come from the experience of being homeless to exercising a certain amount of leadership. This was a learning process that went on all the time. For most of our years, we had 500 or more people coming for a full meal every day. This core group managed all the business of those meals. In fact, our last kitchen manager had first come in to get a meal himself. He liked what he saw, and stayed. He started as a kitchen worker and became manager.

We even had a cooking school, managed by a well-known chef in New York City. This chef was part of a circle of inspired professional volunteers around that core of residents. This was another way of participating. People could see that Emmaus worked and they liked being a part of it. But we always said, "If you've come for shelter or 'to help out,' you're wasting your

time. But if you've come for a new life and your liberation in God is bound up with us, then let's work together."

Another circle around the core was that of the few professionals we had to hire. These were mostly administrative people because by this time we had a few major projects: two guesthouses for hospitality; a full-meal community kitchen; a second-hand store, "Ragpickers of Emmaus"; and later a series of vans, "The Traveling Kitchen," (best chicken soup in town!), that delivered food to the homeless who lived in cardboard boxes under bridges and deep in the caverns of the subway. We also advocated for housing and set up legal aid for the homeless – the Urban Justice Center, with nineteen lawyers. There was Emmaus/Jericho, that taught Harlem residents construction skills at our brownstone on 120th Street, a community of live-in AIDS sufferers called Emmaus Inns – sixty apartments housing people at different sites with their own medical staff, and the Stand Up Women's Project that rescued women from crack houses. Through it all, we were always active in peace and justice work, particularly during Vietnam and against nuclear arms.⁹

But these are things we worked out over a forty-year period. We made a lot of mistakes at first. The biggest obstacle in a community of broken people are the judgments. Amazing judgments. So you've got to cut down on that, get rid of the scales, before you can see what's going on. Also, accounting and bookkeeping is one area where you have to hire people, and you've got to be very careful of who you hire. There are people running around, looking for naïve folks like us who need help with administration. They tried to rob us many times, and sometimes they succeeded.

When we received large sums of money, we used it to buy houses and facilities to keep growing, but we didn't want people to see us as a sugar daddy. To be at Emmaus, you had to learn how to live on \$25 a week, how to raise money without being obnoxious, all of those things. I've never really had to go out and ask for money – I'd hate that – but I do a letter every Christmas about Emmaus House. People come throughout the year to see it, and every foundation that ever visited the house gave us a grant.

⁹ Ed. Note: The long-term staff directing Emmaus not only serve as administrators, as seen in this 1998 letter from Fr. David: "Phillip, living in the last stage of AIDS, knocked on my door. He came in and suddenly he had to vomit. I took him to the bathroom and held him while he vomited, and I realized he just wanted to be held... Phillip had lived on the street since he was five; abused, exploited, and now dying.... I took care of him personally, washing him, dressing him, and telling him of the great adventure with God up ahead. He slept at the foot of my bed on a little mattress. 'I'm afraid I'll die alone,' he said. (He did die, and we buried him like a king.)" Father David was later to say, "This kind of experience helps us to run from our own arrogance, egoism, and greed."

RTE: You've also had support from actors, musicians and public figures.

FR. DAVID: Yes. Odetta has often spoken about us and gave proceeds from a benefit concert, as did Bette Midler. We also had actors Martin Sheen and Mario Van Peebles, as well as Betty Shabazz (Malcolm X's widow), and Bob Dylan, who has visited, and helped us financially many times. There were many others, not so known. Our friends were our support.

Only once did we try working with the government. In 1994, right after his election as mayor, Guiliani met with us on homeless issues and shocked me with a proposal. "We like your approach," he said. "We want to totally fund Emmaus now and to build twelve Emmaus Houses, little by little, around New York City. You won't need to change anything, whatsoever. Stay as you are." Frankly, I was tired after decades of finding money to run Emmaus. I'd told the Board and the community that I wanted to stop my involvement in fund-



Ragpickers of Emmaus.

raising, but I always ended up doing it anyway, so we made a contract with the City. But soon the Department of Human Services was demanding changes that would have changed the essence of Emmaus, so after three months we canceled our agreement.

We depend on God, not on Caesar. Dorothy used to say, "The less you take from Caesar, the less you must render unto Caesar."

The Bread is Rising

RTE: For our readers – as we're doing this interview, we're also sitting here going through the old Emmaus files. Father David, I see that you had a newsletter called *The Bread is Rising* – a great title. Was that a Catholic Worker-type paper?

FR. DAVID: Yes, it was my idea, but it was very sixties' kind of stuff. Some of it was interesting, but some of it I wouldn't publish now. We were drawing from our vision of what a human person, a human society, should be. It was a social view that came out of early Christian writings and many other sources as well.

Someone once said, “Truth is truth, no matter whose mouth it comes out of.” Whatever truth I found, I just brought it back to Christianity.

RTE: Was *The Bread is Rising* a daily or a weekly?

FR. DAVID: No, it was what we call “an occasional.” (*laughter*) That is, whenever we had the money. Getting it out depended on a couple of people who were good artists and whatever, so we just brought it out when we could.

RTE: (*Holding a copy of the newsletter with a picture of an elderly Mae West.*) Look at this inscription: “This woman never reads *The Bread is Rising*. Look at what happened to her.”

FR. DAVID: (*laughter*) I’d forgotten about that. We always had a little humor to keep it from getting too serious. And here are some copies of a personal newsletter I did for years called, “*On the Road to Emmaus*,” about different things that happened at the house.

Quotations of Chairman Jesus

RTE: (*Looking at a small red-covered book, published by Templegate and compiled by David Kirk, “Quotations from Chairman Jesus.”*) I remember this.

FR. DAVID: Yes, the foundation of that was the *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, which was all the rage to read at that time. Dan Berrigan¹⁰ was at the house one night, looking over some loose quotes I’d taken from the New Testament set under themes like, “Sharing your goods,” “Loving your neighbor,” “On conformity to society.” He said, “This is like quotations from Chairman Jesus.” At the time we had a \$500 bill that we needed to pay, and he said, “Look, why don’t you put this together and send it to a publisher. You might get some quick money that way.” That’s how it started.

So we did, and we immediately got a telegram from Templegate accepting. Templegate was owned by Hugh Garvey, the father of Fr. John Garvey, now an Orthodox priest in New York. John was a young Catholic layman

¹⁰ Fr. Daniel Berrigan (1921 -): American Jesuit, Catholic priest, and social activist from the sixties until now, Fr. Berrigan is the author of over 50 books of prose and poetry, and is currently poet-in-residence at Fordham University. His brother, Philip Berrigan (1923-2002), after serving as a 2nd lieutenant at the Battle of the Bulge, was so affected by the violence of war and the racism of boot camp in the South that he joined the Josephite Order as a priest, ministering to African-Americans. Both brothers served prison terms for their protests against war and nuclear arms.

then and he edited *Quotations*, and guided me through its publication.¹¹

There were different versions of this book around the world, and one was in Zimbabwe. The Catholic bishops of Zimbabwe had asked for permission to print it, and we said, “No charge.” We didn’t take any royalties. I won’t show it to you, but it’s called, *Quotations from Comrade Jesus*. Now, maybe in South Africa that’s a term that’s used in place of “Brother,” but I’m glad that I didn’t see it earlier. It’s not the thing at all, and we weren’t communists. I tell this to people who are a little suspicious of people like me wandering into untouched territory like this. I never could read Karl Marx. He’s terrible reading if you’ve ever tried – very technical stuff. The only version that I ever found readable was a sixties’ cartoon version.

This copy of *Quotations* that we put out has the original Dan Berrigan forward. There was another edition that was supposed to come out later. I wrote a new introduction for it, saying that I was Orthodox and presenting the Orthodox position, but the company that was doing it went bankrupt. What I’d love to do now if I was well, would be something with quotes from the scripture, Church Fathers, saints, and martyrs. Like a little handbook. If I get better, I might throw this out to Fr. John Garvey – an Orthodox handbook for Orthodox young people.

RTE: Young people are still doing things like this. There was a great ‘zine some years ago called *Death to the World* – the 90’s Orthodox answer to your *Quotations*. The things you were doing must have seemed radical in the sixties.

Get David Kirk Out of New York

RTE: As a Melkite priest, you were under the Roman Catholic archdiocese of New York. How did the chancery respond to you? They must have noticed what you were doing.

¹¹ From OCA priest, Fr. John Garvey: “I met [Fr. David Kirk] when... he approached Templegate, my father’s publishing company, with the idea of a book to be called *Quotations from Chairman Jesus*. The title will tell you that this was in the late sixties, when Mao’s little red book was all the rage with campus radicals. I was the book’s editor, and Fr. David came to Springfield, Illinois for a few days and we got the book out in fairly short order. It was a selection from scripture, the Fathers, and other sources, with an emphasis on the radical nature of Christian belief. Daniel Berrigan did the introduction, and *In Communion* readers may be interested to know that the dedication was to Jim Forest, then in prison for anti-war activities.” (Reprinted with permission from www.fatherdavidkirk.org)

[Ed. Note: Fr. David and John Garvey remained lifelong friends, and Fr. John Garvey is now a member of the Emmaus Board of Directors.]



Emmaus House Kitchen, May, 2007.

FR. DAVID: Yes. Coming back to America, I'd seen the other side of the Melkite Church. In the Middle East, there was an attempt to try to be Orthodox within the Roman communion, but I always say that a mouse doesn't survive well with an elephant, and it was as if we were being ruled by a colonial power. The Melkites had a parish on Wall Street in the sixties, and for whatever reason, many business people, shopkeepers, anyone seeking out a mass during their lunch hour in downtown Manhattan, began going there. The church served the "Greek-Catholic" mass, which was a little strange to most Americans, but they came anyhow. But when Cardinal Spellman saw the money going into that church, and all of the Wall Street lunch-time Roman Catholics going there, he wrote a letter to the pastor saying, "We no longer need you." He gave him a month, so the priest just packed his bags and left. The Melkite patriarch protested to Spellman and to Rome, saying something like, "You have 99 sheep and I only have one, and you've taken my one sheep."

When I returned to New York after my ordination with a blessing from my Melkite bishop to start Emmaus House, I was called in by Cardinal Spellman, who asked me what I thought I was doing. When I told him I wanted to work with the poor, he said, "Work among the poor belongs to the Roman rite. We'll do the work for the poor. That's not for you, you serve your ethnic groups." I said, "So, that means that at the Last Judgment we won't be judged by whether we fed the hungry or housed the homeless... is that what you're saying?" I was told to close Emmaus House, and that was the end of the discussion. Well, I didn't do it, and so for several years, from the chancery point of view, we were *persona non grata*. Of course, the Catholic clergy and laity in New York were very supportive.

RTE: Did Cardinal Spellman discipline you?

FR. DAVID: Not then, but later he called my bishop in Boston, who I happened to be visiting at the time, and I heard the whole conversation. He said, "Get David Kirk out of New York City." The bishop asked, "Why?" and Spellman said because of my position on war and my hospitality to priests leaving the Church. In those days, a priest who wanted to leave was given \$10 and had to slip out the back door. I had these men calling me from the bus station with no place to go. They were in disgrace and couldn't even go home, so quite a few times I put them up for a couple of weeks. I wasn't the only one though, and I wasn't in bad company – Fathers Philip and Daniel

Berrigan had just been kicked out of New York as well.

After Spellman's call, the Melkite bishop sent me to a parish in Rochester. I said, "I'll go, but Emmaus will continue." I sat in Rochester for a month, thinking, "I shouldn't give in to this," and finally, I called the bishop and said, "This isn't right, this is being bullied. You blessed me to do this." He asked, "What can I do?" I said, "Well, what I can do is to tell the truth, to write and speak about what happened, but I'd rather you just sent me back quietly and let me continue the work." So, he let me go back.

RTE: What would Dorothy have done in your place?

FR. DAVID: Well, you know, I thought about that at the time. She would have said, "Even if I'm silent, the Catholic Worker can go on." And at that moment, I also said, "Emmaus can go on," and I tried to be obedient. But then I thought, "A lot of people are looking to me to set another example than what they've seen – the Melkite priests kow-towing from this low-class position and feeling that when they go to an archdiocese clergy meeting, they don't belong." I never had any of that baggage. As far as I was concerned, I'd discovered a whole different expression of faith, not something that would make me play a role, but that would make me stand up proud. Dorothy understood this, even though she had her own way of dealing with things.

Cardinal John O'Connor

But right at that time – this was 1968 – Cardinal Spellman died. Cardinal Cooke succeeded him, and later on things changed completely in 1984 when John O'Connor became archbishop of New York, and later cardinal. The first thing he did on arriving in New York was to visit Emmaus!

RTE: Wonderful. What did he say?

FR. DAVID: When we heard that he'd been appointed, I also learned that he'd been a rear admiral in the Navy and had spent most of his life in the military. I thought, "Oh no, this isn't going to work," but he had another heart. The same day he visited Emmaus, a book on Cardinal Spellman came out, called *The American Pope*, and every priest in New York was carrying a copy. It had that chapter on me and the Berrigans, and I thought, "Oh Lord, he's definitely going to cancel the meeting when he sees this." But he didn't.



Emmaus Food Pantry.

He walked around Emmaus House, and when he saw a picture of Dorothy, who had died four years earlier, he said, “You know, I heard her speak at seminary, and now there’s talk that I should recommend her for the first stages of sainthood. What do you think?” I said, “I don’t know.” She used to say, “When they call me a saint, that’s a way of dismissing what I have to say. It’s just some pious old lady talking.” I told him a couple of stories about her, and he laughed. Later, it was as if Cardinal O’Connor adopted me. We did a lot of organizing together for the poor people of Harlem. I would go talk to him, and then a few days later in *The Times*, read that he had put the things we talked about into a sermon. Although he was a career military man, he was outspoken in criticizing America’s involvement in unjust wars, nuclear weapon stockpiling, and rising military spending.

One time he was almost arrested with us. There was a toxic chemical waste dump next door to a place in Harlem where people with AIDS and the elderly were being fed. We started protesting to close it down, and at first we got a little notice by getting arrested every day. Then Charles Rangel, our black Catholic congressman, joined us. I didn’t speak with the cardinal about the situation, but someone did, and he called Mayor Giuliani and said, “If you don’t close the dump, I’ll be out there tomorrow with Fr. Kirk and the group, and I will also be arrested.” So the mayor closed the dump.

Devolving Community

RTE: What reflections do you have now on the sixties’ changes in the American Catholic Church?

FR. DAVID: In those first years we had a Byzantine Emmaus, and then suddenly the Roman Catholic Church blew up and everybody was involved with all these unanswered questions: Could a priest marry? “Did you have the right to do this or that?” I thought it was wonderful at the time and believed that the Roman Catholic Church was getting back to discussing the Orthodox traditions it had once had. But as I see it now, what happened was more like sailors on leave. There were monks leaving their monasteries in droves, as in Martin Luther’s day. And the sisters! There were what, over a million Catholic sisters in this country? I don’t know how, but the tradition just disappeared in ten years. How could that have happened spiritually? It wasn’t an advancement.

RTE: I imagine that much of the community life was traded for social work, not realizing that social work needs tradition to inspire it.

FR. DAVID: And you can’t do it. You just become another social worker. Once, I met a sister of St. Joseph who told me that she was leaving her order. I asked why and she said, “There’s no reason for me to take vows and make this kind of commitment, when I go out every day and make my living working for the government as a social administrator. I get \$60,000 a year. I live in an apartment with two other nuns. We have a little room for a chapel. I come in at night exhausted. I stick my head in the chapel and bow and go to my room. We have no community life because we are all out doing. Together we are making close to \$200,000, we have a three-car garage... What is the difference now between being a lay-woman involved in the world and a sister? What is a nun?”

Ironically, in the midst of all these alternative communities forming, it was community that was being laid aside in the Catholic Church. Community is crucial, as is spiritual life and prayer, but much got dropped. Everything was shortened to “quick and easy,” like in a recipe book. It went wrong. In Vatican II, I think the Holy Spirit was calling us to return to earlier traditions of conciliarity, and I hoped for a change of direction, but it didn’t happen. When people began their own “search for myself,” many got lost. Coming back from the seminary, we got swept up in the sixties, and our work for the poor got lost. In the sixties, there was always a debate. Now we do work.

Abbé Pierre and Emmaus International

RTE: Were you influenced by Abbé Pierre’s Emmaus House network in Europe?¹²

FR. DAVID: We had a kinship. I knew Abbé Pierre and we joined Emmaus International, but our connection was informal. I remember that one of our

¹² Abbé Pierre (Groues) (1912-2007) and Emmaus House International: A movement of 310 member groups in 36 countries, whose communities take in “the marginalized and those wounded by life.” Their projects include housing and feeding the poor, health care, literacy, and the environment. Founded in 1949 by Abbé Pierre, a French Catholic priest who had worked with the Resistance during World War II and later served as a member of the French parliament from 1947-1951. Until his death on January 22, 2007, at 94 years old, Abbé Pierre remained an organizer and advocate for the homeless and displaced. Each year for decades he was consistently named the most respected personality in France, until he removed his name from the polls. Emmaus International can be reached at www.emmaus-international.org.

rich Melkite parishioners once went to the bishop and said, “I think Fr. David and Abbé Pierre are communists,” so he called me in. The bishop had known Abbé Pierre for many years – he was well-respected in Europe and the Middle East – and he said, “Well, I know that Abbé Pierre isn’t a communist, but what about you?” I said, “I live according to the Gospel of Jesus, not the Gospel of Karl Marx.”

RTE: Was your name for Emmaus House inspired by Abbé Pierre’s work?

FR. DAVID: No, as a matter of fact, Dorothy didn’t want me to use the name Emmaus, but I won’t tell you why. I thought, though, that it was a resurrection name. It was also a name about being on the road – we’re all searchers, we haven’t arrived at any plateau, we just keep going, and then, when we are together and share, we meet the Lord. It’s everything. It’s a perfect name.

RTE: We think so too.

FR. DAVID: I liked Abbé Pierre, but his Emmaus communities were different than ours. We were interested in empowering people, and our people took part in all decision-making, even down to hiring a bookkeeper. The community rule that we still go by was written and refined over the years by the residents themselves. For instance, I didn’t agree with the idea of a compulsory urine test to make sure that no one was doing drugs, but they said, “We want this because we’ve all been on drugs and we want to protect ourselves.” So, Emmaus came out of the poor. It was a community of the poor and with the poor. Mostly you have organizations *for* the poor, not *with* the poor, not in solidarity, not *of* the poor in the sense of them having power.

We say, “Look within,” but we also say, “Look without. You also have to care for others.” So, the Emmaus community of the poor fed the hungry, over 500 full dinners every day. They managed it, they ran all of the social services. You had these talented people who’d been knocked out by drugs, and when they got here it was like people waking up and having an opportunity. Nobody ever wanted to leave Emmaus.

That was a problem sometimes. One man tried to commit suicide, or pretended to, in order to stay. His street name was Casanova, and we said to him, “You know, you’ve been here three years now, and you really need to be on your own. You’re ready.” I went up to my room one day, and there was a letter: “Dear Fr. David, Thank you for giving me a new life. I’m so grate-

ful, but I won’t be able to continue it. I have to leave. Goodbye.” I ran down to his room, and he’d pushed all of his furniture up against the door. Through a crack, I could see a little blood. I called the police and they came and broke the door down. They came out a few minutes later and said, “He’s fine. He knows how to cut. He just cut a tiny vein.” We let him stay a little longer. But you know, I was out walking a few months ago, and here came Casanova in a white suit, with a white hat, and a lady at his side. He said, “You’ve got to see me, Father, I own three buildings.” I thought, “He always was a wheeler-dealer.”

Exercises in Hope

RTE: How many people did you have living in the house at any one time?

FR. DAVID: Once we bought the hotel at 124th and Lexington, we had fifty-four bedrooms and sixty members. We’d almost finished renovating it when it was set on fire by local people who were mad that it was now off-limits to drug and sex traffickers. Not everyone in Harlem appreciated us. We had to start all over again. We also had a community guest-house for overnight stays. We took in twenty women and twenty men overnight, with no requirements. The community ran the overnight program.

We did other things too. We tried to change legislation, we protested, we went to jail. We had people come in at the beginning to organize us, to teach us how to speak to power, and we had meetings with Mayor Giuliani. At one point we found out that there were 60,000 apartments being warehoused, held back from rental, because if they rented then, by law they would have to be low-cost, but if the owners waited a length of time, the rents could go up. Owners could do this under city laws that were protective of the rich and many of these apartments were owned by wealthy individuals or corporations.

So, we decided to protest, and every day for weeks, we formed a ring around City Hall, holding hands, so that everyone from the Mayor and his whole council to the cleaning ladies had to walk through our line to enter the building. Every day they were reminded. We were arrested a number of times. Once, during that campaign, they were carrying me to the paddy wagon, when a very nice young woman came up to interview me. I told her what it was about and I asked her, “What’s your name?” She said, “Paula Robeson.” I said, “You don’t mean...” and she said, “Yes, Paul Robeson was

my grandfather.¹³ He would be very proud of me today.” It was special.

We got 6,000 apartments open from that campaign. That was good. It wasn't 60,000, but it was something.

Our Emmaus people also joined a march by the poor on Washington, D.C., for a hearing on national housing. It was a cold, rainy season, and the walk took a week and a half from New York. When I saw the people who had volunteered, I thought, “They'll never make it.” There was an ex-drug dealer named Sidney Sims, who'd had both of his legs broken. I was sure he wouldn't make it, but he did.

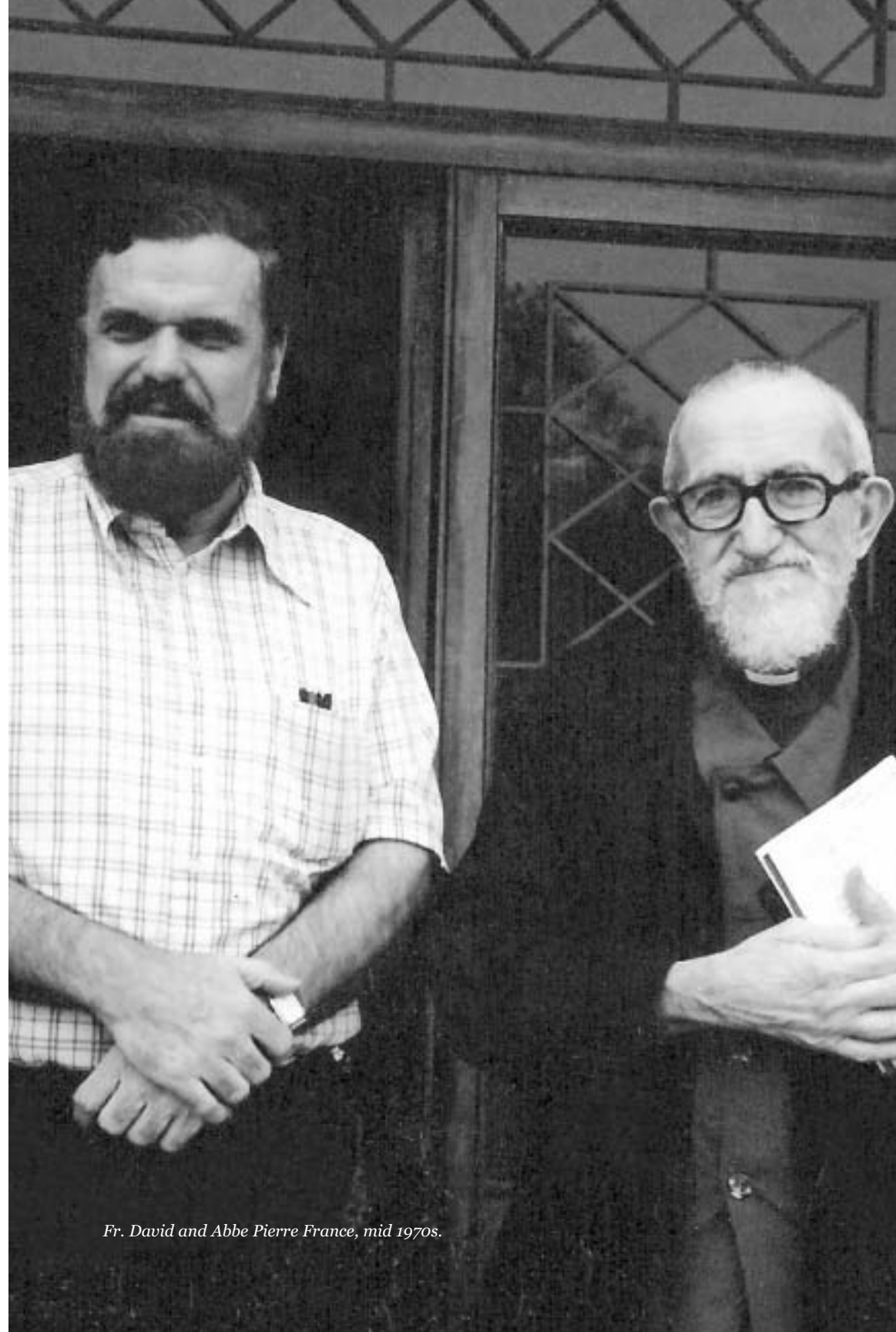
Our group became the leaders. Some of the other homeless people were drinking, doing drugs, and from town to town they were a bad exhibit. But our group had an A.A. meeting every night on the road, and we were very proud of them. I caught a train and met them in Washington. When they arrived, they were so proud! At first when you saw them marching, you'd think, “What's all this about?” but when they explained that it was about all of us, about having a better life and so on, it made sense to people.

We also ran an annual nuclear weapons research seminar, and sat in to protest nuclear arms. Emmaus wasn't a social service institution, we were about the whole person. When we won something, or even just participated in it, it gave people hope. I called them “exercises in hope,” whether you reached your goal or not.

RTE: Yesterday, I saw an old New York Times photo of you and Fr. Daniel Berrigan chained to the gate of a nuclear missile installation.

FR. DAVID: Yes, we were together many times with anti-war work. Dorothy was also there, and many others. And you know, all of the work that I've done, all the work that people have done from Emmaus, is for me, a part of Orthodoxy. Although my formal reception into Orthodoxy only took place two years ago, it was Orthodox work.

¹³ Paul Robeson (1898-1976) Columbia-trained lawyer, civil rights activist, actor, athlete, fluent in twelve languages, and conversant in twenty, Paul Robeson was best known internationally for his singing and acting, and as a spokesman for African-Americans and disadvantaged peoples world-wide. A puzzling weakness was his uncritical support of Stalin's Soviet Union, in which he confused Soviet ideals with the reality of Stalin's Russia. Although popular in Europe, Robeson was blacklisted in the U.S. for decades and it was only in the 1970's that his movies and music began to circulate again.



Fr. David and Abbe Pierre France, mid 1970s.

Fifty Years

Every step of my life has meant going up against a huge obstacle for which there is no normal solution, whether it was segregation in Alabama, getting to New York, into the seminary in Rome, or standing up to Cardinal Spellman in starting Emmaus. What I always wanted was a core of deeply religious and committed people: committed to the poor, committed to God, committed to community life. Individuals came, but that solid core never materialized, so a lot depended on me... and a lot of things that I wanted to do, I couldn't do.

To fulfill something like this, you need to have a firmly Orthodox Christian group, with a total life commitment, that believes these things can be done without money. You have to totally put your life into God's hands. Saint Isaac of Nineveh, who has a very clear view of how to live with the poor, says that to really be of help, your own lifestyle can't be too distant from theirs. It has to be in solidarity with them. I never found many of these kinds of people among the Eastern Catholics or the Orthodox. People came and went. Until recently, the Melkite Church was mostly made up of immigrants struggling to make a living and pursue the "American Dream." The second generation is still trying to fit in and these people don't necessarily appreciate their spiritual heritage. They simply can't translate it. Although, saying this, I have to add that there is one Byzantine-Melkite priest in Boston, Fr. [Emmanuel] Charles McCarthy, a married priest with a great number of children, who has been involved in the peace movement for decades and was nominated for the Nobel prize.¹⁴

The Orthodox and eastern Catholics are just coming out of the position of the Roman Church in the late 20's and early 30's, when it was still an immigrant church. The Catholic Worker opened up the Roman Catholic Church to what was going on in this country: the formation of labor unions, how the



Emmaus House Chapel.



Emmaus House, New York.

¹⁴ Fr. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy is a priest of the Eastern Rite (Byzantine-Melkite) of the Catholic Church. Formerly a lawyer and a university educator, Fr. McCarthy is the founder and the original director of the Program for the Study and Practice of Nonviolent Conflict Resolution at the University of Notre Dame. He is also co-founder, along with Dorothy Day and others, of Pax Christi-USA and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his life's work on behalf of peace.

Catholic Church could respond to the Depression, to poverty, to war, to the homeless. It was a great awakening, but the eastern churches are still awaiting that. Except in a few cases, they haven't become involved with local community need. For example, the Russians who started the Tolstoy Foundation did a lot of service work for poor Russian émigrés, but there wasn't a reaching out beyond themselves.

But I feel that now in Orthodoxy, there are people who are ready for something like this to happen. It's about getting beyond jurisdictions and being able to be an Orthodox Christian witness among the poor, against war, against greed; people like ourselves who have gone through the sixties, through materialism, and want something else.

Dorothy Day called her life story *A Long Loneliness*, and it's been a long loneliness for me as well – fifty years of plugging away and expecting something to happen. But it wasn't all loneliness; some people did come.

Orthodoxy as the Root

RTE: Along with living with the poor and sharing responsibility, how does Emmaus differ from other Christian service organizations?

FR. DAVID: Orthodoxy is the root of Emmaus. We are different, totally different from other things I know about because our roots are different. By seventeen I was a socialist; by that I mean a democratic socialist, a Christian socialist. The values from those early years will always guide my social and political thinking: the whole people have a voice, the whole people must be served, the whole people share life, and we must be totally dependent upon God.

From our first years, we were an eastern Byzantine Catholic center for the poor, along the lines of the Catholic Worker, but with eastern Christianity as our spiritual base. Although the volunteers we drew were mostly Roman Catholic and Protestant, this was the way we worshipped, and if you became a volunteer at Emmaus, you had to do a whole class on our eastern Christian understanding of God, the Church, and the world. Most all of the volunteers did that. Of course there are different ways of living the Gospel, but running off to do an Emmaus House should be like running off to join a monastery, following that radical theme of the Gospel.

I've had friendships over the years with various Orthodox. Father Joachim Parr came to me as an Orthodox priest (he was also formerly a Catholic

priest), who wanted to work with the homeless himself, and asked my advice on how to go about it. He was back and forth, and finally came to me and said, "You know, this is too hard, I can't do it by myself. Can I help you?" We had a guesthouse with space for twenty men and for twenty women, who could stay overnight, no demands, breakfast in the morning. At first Fr. Joachim looked after the guesthouse, but then he began to see, in the way we also had, that this wasn't enough. He needed to be there. At first he said, "Can I sleep over?" and then he just moved in and stayed for ten years.

Trying to live as a monastic at Emmaus was a little difficult, but he always dressed as an Orthodox monk. He fit in perfectly – people dressed all kinds of ways, including transgender.... People loved him and he loved people. His hope was to eventually start a monastery here in the city, so after ten years he began a monastery dedicated to St. Mary of Egypt, with the idea of having a space for hospitality, which he called Mercy House. To his amazement, so many people wanted to join the monastery that he had to turn the hospitality floor into rooms for monks. In these days, when no one starts monasteries, he's got seven monks. It's crowded and more people are waiting to join.

The End of a Journey

RTE: When did you start looking further "east," towards canonical Orthodoxy?

FR. DAVID: Even when I was in Rome we had an Orthodox study group. There were about six of us eastern Catholics doing theology there, and in the end everyone became Orthodox, either right afterwards or a few years later, except me. Out of that group came two Orthodox bishops, a couple of priests, an Orthodox seminary theology professor.... Our little group did well. I was the last.

I felt that I'd found Jesus Christ in the Melkite Church and that I should be faithful to that. I held to that until I saw that it wasn't possible to follow an Orthodox life while being woven into the structure of the Roman Catholic Church. It was then that I started planning how to move Emmaus into Orthodoxy. But my life is not just my life; many people are involved and I had to think of everyone. I didn't want my actions to cause despair to the eastern Catholics I'd been a part of for years. They needed to understand that this was the fulfillment of my journey, not a shift off the road.

I started planning the move to Orthodoxy ten years ago, talking to people on our large and varied board. They didn't all understand. Then I got sick. The kidney disease began and it had serious effects. I'd been through health problems before and even close to death, but I'd always rallied, and people thought, "He's been through this kind of thing before, he always overcomes."

For six years I said to myself, "I'll get a little better and then make the change to Orthodoxy. I'll give the bigger projects independence so they can go ahead. We've developed them and they're ready to be set loose. It's Emmaus House itself that is strongly tied to Orthodoxy, and as soon as I'm able to work ..., " but it didn't happen. I kept getting worse until I was totally disabled. One night in early 2004, I called Archbishop Nathaniel,¹⁵ who had been part of our Orthodox group in Rome. Through all these years he had never pushed me, just let me know he was there, so I called and said, "This isn't getting better. In fact, it's pretty bad, and I have to become Orthodox now. Like tonight." He had a priest come out and receive me right then in our church here at Emmaus House. I recited the Creed, was chrismated, and received the Eucharist. Later, I was accepted as a priest by the Orthodox Church in America.

RTE: How did that change things for you and with Emmaus?

FR. DAVID: I have to say that it was amazing interiorly. It's been a terrible hour-to-hour struggle with misery, pain, and weakness, but I've had a wonderful peacefulness and contentment, although I no longer have the strength to celebrate the liturgy, which was always my daily bread. I'm too weak to serve now, but the monks from Mercy House come every Sunday to take me to St. Nicholas Cathedral for liturgy and Holy Communion. They also served a liturgy here at Emmaus House right after Pascha. Much love has been shown to me by Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters.

The Future of Emmaus

RTE: Where are you at now with Emmaus House?

FR. DAVID: With my failing health, I'll never be able to return to being the full-time director of Emmaus. To be, in effect, bed-ridden – what a paralysis that

¹⁵ Archbishop Nathaniel Popp (OCA) (1940-): Archbishop of Detroit and the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America.

is! The community here takes good care of me, and you always think, "It will work out somehow." Well, it didn't work out. In fact, a lot of people think I'm dead. I recently sent a letter of recommendation for an Emmaus resident to a social service office in Harlem, and they said, "Father David! Is he still alive?"

We've downsized over the years as my kidney failure got worse, let all of the Emmaus projects go independent, until now we have this one house with less than a dozen residents. The problem is that Harlem is becoming gentrified. Realtors and outsiders are buying up property, and I think we should sell this house as a foundation for the future elsewhere. We need to move where the poor are moving, to get a smaller house for a core group of residents, including myself: a business center, some hospitality, a temporary place for people.... We can find a larger place for more outreach later.

RTE: So you are hoping for an unmarried priest or a monk who could lead Emmaus with the same vision that you have had?

FR. DAVID: Or if they are married, to understand it as a vocation. To have a strong sense, first of all, of Orthodox mission, and within that context, to be involved with the poor as we are now. Doing, rather than just speaking. Let it be seen that this is the Orthodox way of following the Gospel. At one point, I even offered Emmaus to the Bruderhof.¹⁶ A family came to try it out, but it was too difficult an environment for a family with young children, although they still live in Harlem as a Christian witness.

I've had Orthodox priests and lay people who already work professionally with the poor call me about Emmaus, but almost all of them are married and there's a real problem of moving to a simpler life-style when children need to be educated. Or, if they don't have children, they're heavily invested in their own area, and just can't leave. All I'm trying to do is to hold the resources together and hope that if I can stay alive another two years, someone will come along and want to do this.

I used to worry about things. I don't anymore. The only thing I worry about now is to try to find ways to strengthen myself. I'd really like to get all

¹⁶ Bruderhof: A Christian community founded by Eberhard Arnold in 1920, whose members live together, holding their material possessions in common. They share a rural livelihood, uphold the sanctity of marriage and family, practice nonviolence as a way of life, and take their Christian practice from both the early Church and Anabaptist (Mennonite, Amish, and Hutterite) teachings. There are Bruderhof communities in America, Great Britain, Germany, and Australia. In some periods they have been closely connected to Hutterites, although they are the only Anabaptist-influenced group to live in common. The Bruderhof has recently changed its name to Church Communities International.

of this into a book. It's been a very rich adventure and I can't imagine anybody having more fun than I've had. I'm disabled now, but we still have this vast experience of alternatives to western social work, of different ways of doing things. As I've said before, personally and communally, our approach to the poor is not simply for the poor, but of the poor and with the poor.

The only task I have left is to teach. To teach by word and to teach by writing, and then I'm finished. I can go home. I've completed my journey in a sense, and yet it's beginning again – a whole new beginning. †

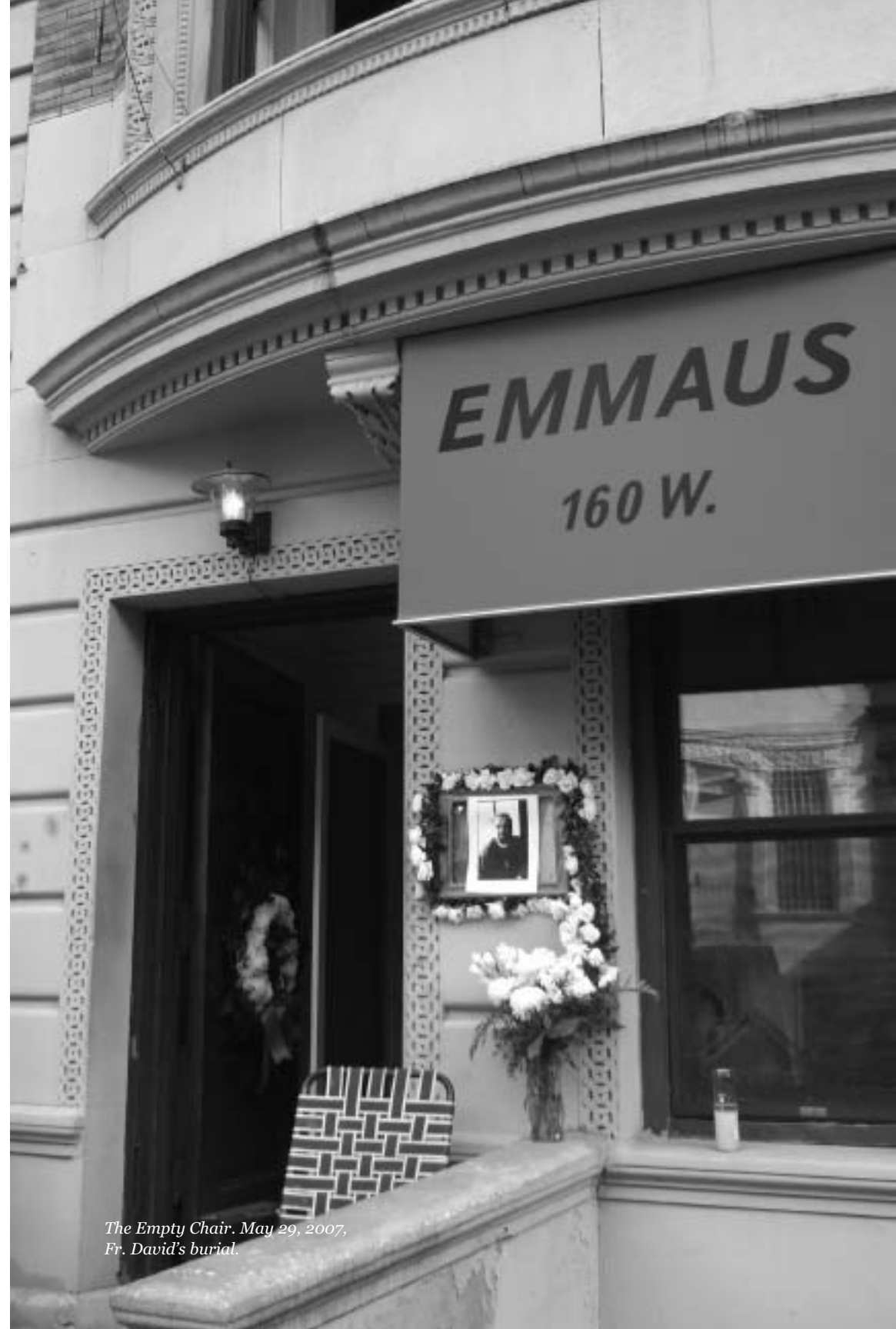
Fr. David Kirk quite unexpectedly reposed in his sleep a few hours after our interview, on the morning of Wednesday, May 23, 2007. He was 72 years old, and had served God and the poor for half a century. May his memory be eternal!

Fr. David's well-fought battle with the illness that kept him from work and eventually led to his death was bolstered by his sense of God's Providence, expressed in this thank-you letter to an Emmaus supporter:

This is a very reflective time in my life which makes me be thankful for all things, beautiful or sad, all that I have seen, heard, received. Thankful for all the welcoming roads that have led me to deep truths and truthful people. Thankful, as I have to do so much sitting with my illnesses, for the winter wind that caresses my face and for the trees that nod to me at my window. Maybe God lets us be a little disabled so that we may see more deeply so much that we once walked by. Which means to thank the Lord for always being there, and you personally for being there for us.

Fr. David's funeral was held on May 29 at St. Nicholas Cathedral (Moscow Patriarchate), served by his friend and former Emmaus co-worker, Fr. Joachim Parr, and assisted by Fr. John Garvey. Father David was buried at Resurrection Cemetery in Staten Island, in a plot he bought almost thirty years ago, close to the grave of Dorothy Day. Father David's funeral was attended by his nephew and archivist Kirk Barrell, Fr. Pat McNulty and Fr. Pat Mahoney, long-time Melkite friends of Madonna House, and past and present residents of Emmaus House and from Harlem at large. Also attending were New York social workers, Melkite acquaintances of many years, fellow wayfarers from the Catholic Worker and Bruderhof communities, the Orthodox monks of Mercy House, and many newer Orthodox friends.

The Emmaus House board of directors now includes both Orthodox and various New York professionals, many of whom knew Fr. David for decades. These include Professor Albert



*The Empty Chair. May 29, 2007,
Fr. David's burial.*

and Julia Raboteau, as co-chairs; Fr. John Garvey (who visits Emmaus House weekly to serve vespers); Ren Marro, one of Fr. David's oldest friends; Kirk Barrell, Fr. David's nephew and archivist; Luis Centeno, Emmaus House manager; and Darryll Wood, Emmaus staff member. The Board is now searching for a successor to Fr. David and sources of income to keep Emmaus House running. If you are interested in helping to carry on Fr. David's work, please write to Professor Albert and Julia Raboteau at: raboteau@princeton.edu.

Donations (check or money order) may be sent to:
Emmaus House/Harlem, PO Box 1177, New York, NY, 10035.
Website: www.emmaushouse-harlem.org

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“Live pure, Speak true, Right wrong, follow the King...”

Gleanings from Fr. David Kirk

I don't mean to imply that the priest is the leader of political revolution. But he is more than the minister of the sacraments; he should be a “minister of restlessness”...a man who worries mankind.

– Letter to Fr. Louis (Thomas) Merton, 1962

“Everything is possible and nothing is impossible, so long as we have faith and love the Lord with our whole self. Look out, Satan, we've found the lost formula for movin' mountains again.”

– Letter to John Garvey, 1972

“Emmaus is simple Christianity, where giving a cup of cold water on a hot summer's day is like a sacrament.”

– Thank you letter to sponsor, 2004

“I'm a little afraid sometimes of the people who have a relationship with the unseen God, but don't seek the God hidden in human relationships.”

– Emmaus House Morning Reflection

“I'm not here to run a hotel or a nest of vipers; I'm here because I want to love and you're here because you want to love.”

– Emmaus House Morning Reflection

“I was talking to a friend who's a drug counselor and he said, ‘When they rip the sinks off the walls, it's time to close.’ I said, ‘They did that four days ago.’”

– The Story of Emmaus in Harlem

“In the midst of much suffering we have been hard pressed, struck down again and again, but we have never been crushed, as St. Paul says. Somehow, I have an unquenchable faith, enough hope when so many feel hopeless, enough bread to feed all who come, enough Eucharist to sustain us.”

– Forty Years and Counting



Emmaus House staff, residents, board members. March, 2008.