

Friars Respond to Occupy Movement in USA



Intense and committed, they've been likened to anti-war protesters of the 1960s. But huddled around fires in tent-city encampments, they look more like the jobless, itinerant masses of the '30s.

In reality, Occupy Wall Street is a mix of idealistic youth, veterans, the homeless and middle-class victims of down-sizing. In two months this grass-roots movement has caught fire and blown westward from New York City, the place where it began as a campaign against greed. On Tuesday, under orders from New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, riot police dismantled the original tent city at Zuccotti Park and arrested 100 protesters. That night in Cincinnati, the Rev. Jesse Jackson stoked a defiant Occupy Cincinnati crowd gathered in Piatt Park, where they had recently been evicted. Fueled by a well-organized social media campaign, the movement has made its way around the world. And in cities where the Occupy message is loudest, Franciscan friars are listening.

"These people are doing something worthwhile, quietly and faithfully," David Moczulski says of the youthful residents of Occupy Pittsburgh, a camp of about 100 tents at Mellon Green, a park owned by the financial firm BNY Mellon. "They're very respectful and non-violent, walking around with signs, chanting, trying to engage people in conversation" about the growing gap between rich and poor. "It's basically [about] the big bank bailout. Nobody's been held accountable for the misdeeds of the last few years." In a statement on its website, Occupy Pittsburgh spells it out: "We write so that all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know we are your allies."

Describing himself as "an aging hippie," David says, "It's a great thing for me to see young people involved in this. I've thought about participating" in the Pittsburgh camp, made up primarily of underemployed college graduates and veterans. "It would be good if we did that as a Church." So far the closest thing to that is a document on global finance issued Oct. 24 by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. "Catholic social teaching and the Occupy Wall Street movement agree that the economy should be at the service of the human person and that strong action must be taken to reduce the growing gap between rich and poor," Vatican officials told the National Catholic Reporter.

In Detroit, the poor joined forces with Occupy protesters just two blocks from St. Aloysius Parish.

“Some of the Occupiers here have let homeless people share their tents” at the campsite at Grand Circus Park, says Al Mascia. While the parish has not endorsed a political agenda, “They are presently within our parish boundaries and so, according to Pastor Tod Laverty, deserving of our pastoral care. Our parish nurse, for example, was there helping to assist with health and wellness issues and giving out flu shots. Their food commissary was shut down due to health reasons so the Canticle Café carts and volunteers provided some food and hot beverages” last week during a cold snap.

While Occupy Detroit’s days in the park are numbered – protesters plan to move indoors next week – Al says “their presence seems to have made downtown a more peaceful place. They seem to be in my estimation people of good will.” And he is inspired by the witness of “young people who are willing to step up to the plate and challenge what they consider to be injustice” – the way their parents did in the 1960s.

(The Occupy movement is about more than economic disparity. To read a list of Occupy Pittsburgh’s grievances, visit <http://www.occupypittsburgh.org/content/who-we-are>.)

We Have to Work Together

BY RICHARD GOODIN, OFM

Colin King and I headed downtown one sunny morning a few weeks back to check out the Occupy Chicago scene. We took the bus down, walked a few blocks and found a small morning crowd, 10 to 20 people. The presence of two brown-habited men drew nearly all the attention as we approached. Quickly we were met with a few smiles and hellos and within a minute a hyper man with sign in hand approached us and asked us if we were friars from St. Peter's. We cleared up the details and we made fast friends with him based on his appreciation of the friars in the Loop. We asked him many questions and he answered with jokes, stories and gestures that were somewhere between rant, rave and comical.

The group that morning included some local Catholics who had wondered down the street from a weekly morning prayer service for immigrants. Others standing around were beating huge drums and holding signs for passers-by and cars to see. At the foot of the Bank of America building, across from the Federal Reserve of Chicago and adjacent to the Chicago Board of Trade, this motley crew stared down the giants, maybe best understood as the opponents of the Occupy movement.

The faces of the movement had in their number both the well-groomed and the hardened disposition of street dwellers. A man Colin and I spent time talking to was there for the first time and within minutes he left only to return with trays of hot, fresh coffee. As the group caffeinated, a throng of young, college-aged women and men came down the street, dressed for interviews, that is to say they looked really, really “classy”, and they flooded into the opposition fortresses. While these people were passing by the Occupy fort-let, smiles were exchanged and a gracious and unexplainable peacefulness filled the air. I felt deeply at that moment that despite such different reasons for being on the Chicago streets that morning, no one hated the other.

About the same time Colin and I were being video interviewed by some college students who were collecting footage and audio for a documentary. They wanted every side of the story. They asked why we were there. I said, "There is an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and that is a problem. I came here to experience how this movement is or is not responding to that problem." As I was being videotaped, the sharply dressed young people were passing. Something hit me like a ton of bricks then and there. As I, in my shabby cross-like garment of a leper, watched the next generation of Wall Street business people pass by in their finery, I realized despite our differences we have to work together to rectify the concerns that brought this Occupy movement to the streets. If we stand on our street corner yelling and they go to work day after day, we are both going to get tired, and someone will win and someone will lose. Standing in that juxtaposition I yearned deeply for a common ground in which people's needs can be heard, pondered and met. I left with one thought: Neither side is "right". But as the Occupy folks occupy and the bankers go to and from work, my hope is that they begin to find common ground.

People Before Profits

BY COLIN KING, OFM

I do hope that through this movement our nation will have a discussion about income inequality. Before entering postulancy, I was a public school teacher in a wealthy suburb of Cincinnati. This is an area where Homearama was building multimillion-dollar homes and even created a waterway more than a mile long for residents of the exclusive community to enjoy. However, I also had students who were on free/reduced priced breakfast and lunch. Students who lived in a two-bedroom apartment with their parents, siblings and grandparents. Students who could not afford to attend summer camp or summer school because they had to earn money to support the family. The disparity was shocking to me. One year I was allowed to attend a workshop about socioeconomic diversity. The information presented was based on the work done by Dr. Ruby Payne and her "bridges out of poverty" strategies. The presenter shared much of the same information that is being given now about the income inequality that really became noticeable around 1979.

One of the Order's JPIC documents we read in Postulancy talked about putting people before profits (much like the Occupy movement is saying now). Mark Cuban, the owner of the Dallas Mavericks NBA team, had an interesting post on his blog a few weeks ago. He said, "CEOs all say, 'We are acting in the best interests of shareholders.'... Shareholders, whether they own shares directly or through mutual funds or pensions, do not live in a corporate vacuum. Their lives are impacted by far more than the share price of a stock. Every layoff in the name of more earnings per share puts a stress on the economy, on the federal, state and local governments, which is in turn paid for through taxes or assumption of government debt by [wait for it] the same shareholders CEOs say they want to benefit."

I do not think this situation is as simple as "Goodies vs. Baddies", but a painful question does need to be asked: Who is my neighbor, whether that be in a small suburban city or across and outside of boardroom tables, and what obligation do I have to care for my neighbor?

