On Pilgrimage - February 1957

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes her stay in prison after protesting air raid drills and notes it was comfortable. Decries the many women there because of drug charges. Mourns the sudden death of Paulina Sturm and writes appreciative obituary of her involvements with the Catholic Worker and work for justice. (DDLW #717).

When I think of the long sentences served by so many others in so many miscarriages of justice, when I think of the accumulation of prisons, outmoded and futile that dot the land of the free, I am not particularly interested in writing about my few days in jail last month. I am just glad that I served them, and am ready to serve again if there is another compulsory air raid drill next summer. It is a gesture perhaps, but a necessary one. Silence means consent, and we cannot consent to the militarization of our country without protest. Since we believe that the air raid drills are part of a calculated plan to inspire fear of the enemy instead of the love which Jesus Christ told us we should feel toward him we must protest these drills. It is an opportunity to show we mean what we write when we repeat over and over, that man is here on this earth, to love God and His brother. We love our country and have no wish to give up citizenship as Stanley Borowsky announced he wished to do. Peter Maurin felt himself to be not a Frenchman or an American, but first of all a Catholic, but just the same loved both the country of his birth and his adopted country where he had worked for forty years.

It was good to have the opportunity to "visit the prisoner," which is one of the works of mercy, even for so brief a visit, by being a prisoner one's self. One of the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld has had herself committed to a prison in France in order that she might live with her less fortunate sisters, and in her confinement live a life of work and prayer.

We have no complaint to make of the prison or of the attendants there. Our physical needs were supplied, blankets, sheets, towels, clothing. What if the clothing were a bit coarse, unbleached muslin and not cut to fit? What if the dress were a purple sack coming just below the knees! I would not say we were clothed with modesty, nor in Christian fashion, but we were clothed. Our food was coarse but adequate, a little too much rice and spaghetti of course. The cells were tiny and crowded but they were both warm and airy. One could open the window as wide as one liked or all of the five little panes. One pane of glass even was clear so that we could look out on Greenwich street, on the swirling snow, the slushy streets, the people rushing to and fro, the brightly lit stores, the flower shop, food stores, all in the heart of Greenwich Village.

We were given thorough physical examinations, even to x-rays and Wasserman tests. There was a recreation room on the roof, a beauty parlor, a craftshop and

in the few days we were there we were taught by a gentle tacher to make some brass enameled ashtrays. If there had been more time we could have worked in clay, leather, bound a book, dressed dolls.

The "ladies" as they called us, worked in the laundry, kitchen, sewing rooms, cleaning and so on. We were given mop and pail to clean the corridors. But there was never enough work for the 500 or so prisoners so there were many idle. I saw one girl display with pride a dress she has made for herself so there is a chance to learn a few useful things.

But the sadness of it all is that aside from talking day in and day out about freedom, and "how much time you got" and "when do you get out?" there are some there who are truly happy. Quite a few of the women who have lived with us at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality have spent short terms there for disorderly conduct and drinking, and I remember one Jean especially. She was staying with us on Staten Island and as we all sat around the table one night sewing and talking, (she was playing solitaire) she suddenly said, "I never was so happy as when I was in the clink." Born and bred on the Bowery, of a drunken father and mother, all her family scattered, she looked upon the jail as a place of comfort and security, a place where she could not get into much trouble, where there was warmth and companionship and movies on Saturday night and television every night until nine, and nobody expecting much of her, just taking her as she was. It is sad too that there is nothing much to come out to, not enough hospices, just the prospect of going back to the same old taverns to find your friends, to the same old work with its tensions and dirt and insecurity, and far more expected of you than you are able to give.

"I don't like to work," one little Puerto Rican said to me. She spent most of her time lying on her cot, singing melancholy songs.

"What kind of work were you doing?" "Laundry work and I'm here for being a pickpocket," and she covered her face with her hands in mock shame, and laughed at me.

Why are all jails so full, and why are the searches so rigid? And why are they all so young these girls that fill the four corridors on the six or seven floors of the House of Detention which are used as cell blocks. It is mostly drugs, and the girls themselves say the problem is hopeless. "We will get out, and then we will be here again."

I remembered an article I had read in the magazine section of the New York Times, on drug addiction, and the way it is handled in England and the way it is handled here. "Of course it is not a crime," one of the officers said to me. "But it is treated as a crime, and it certainly leads to more crime." The Times has also called the Women's Detention Prison a "black hole," because it is overcrowded, because girls are held there long before trial as well as after conviction. But physically speaking, it is not a black hole. The sad fact remains that it is more comfortable physically than many a slum tenement with its overcrowding, its vermin, its cold and dark and lack of hot water.

Our physical needs are cared for, but certainly not the spiritual. If you go in on Monday, you do not see a priest until the following Saturday, and if you ask for a rosary or prayer book, or Bible, you do not get it. And you wonder if there is any visitation, any preaching, any telling the stories of the lives of the saints, any glimpse for these prisoners of any other kind of life than the one they know of the flesh. Or is it only a half-hour Mass, one half-hour out of the one hundred and sixty eight hours of the week, thirty minutes out of the 10,080 minutes of the week?

We beg our readers to pray for prisoners, since we cannot perform the work of mercy of visiting them.

Paulina Sturm is dead and we all feel griefstricken here at the **Catholic Worker**. She was only 31 years old, she was a widow, a convert, the mother of a ten year old daughter, Joanna. When you are writing the obituary of an older person, who has lived his life, who has run his course, you can write with some joy in the faith that we have of everlasting life, that "life is changed, not taken away." But it is hard to feel that God wills so early a death. It is by His permissive will of course that all things happen, but doctors and scientists work hard to save that precious gift of life, so that it may run its usual three score and ten years. But there always remains the mystery of suffering and death.

We first heard from Paulina on the feast of St. Anthony a few years ago. It is an involved story, and I shall tell it and run the risk of being accused of seeing signs and wonders. I was in possession of a first class relic of St. Anthony of Padua, (without the papers authenticating it) which had been given to Caroline Gordon by Stark Young (two famous people in the literary world) and by her to me. I wore it around my neck in a reliquary of silver made by one of Ammon Hennacy's Hopi Indian friends. On that feast day I felt very discouraged with my writing and stopped to say a prayer to St. Anthony. I reminded him of the relic I wore, and begged his help to make up my mind about the piece of writing I was doing. When I returned from Mass there was a letter from Paulina Sturm in her beautiful script, much like Peter Maurin's in its careful lettering, and in addition to a large gift, she told me how much she liked my last book and urged me to go on writing.

Ammon sent her his book also and when she came to visit us that summer, he met her at the station, and with his usual overflowing friendliness, took her everywhere with him, introducing her to the street corners where he sold papers, to his radical Catholic and non-Catholic friends. Her little daughter had gone to a summer camp, so Paulina stayed with us for six weeks, and when we were arrested the first time, for our civil disobedience, and our bail was fixed at a thousand dollars each by Judge Kaplan, she paid my bail and also told Eileen Fantino to use the money she had given her for the summer camp for the children that year, to get bail bonds for the three in her group.

She was with us that day we were arrested, helping us first to give out leaflets, and then when the air raid signals began at two o'clock, she took shelter nearby

as the law required. She had a ten year old child to think of. And then too, the fact that she was Theodore Roosevelt's granddaughter, and the daughter of Alice Longworth, would make her very conspicuous if she were arrested.

There was always something child-like and shy about Paulina but she was valiant too, and though she could not speak up and shout **Catholic Worker** with Ammon when she went out with him, she willingly stood with him in the market place and held the paper up before her, while he did the shouting.

One time an ardent socialist at Union Square tried to engage her in debate, and she kept saying, "Go talk to Ammon." But he liked her broad, sweet face, with its widely spaced blue eyes, set in dark lashes, and kept trying to talk to her until Ammon came to the rescue.

She made a retreat with us that summer, at Maryfarm, the last one we had there, given by Fr. Casey of St. Anastasia's Church, Hutchinson, Minnesota. She slept in her station wagon out under the old apple tree by the side of the house right under the dormitory window. I could look down on her from my attic window. She spent most of her time reading, and the retreat was in silence of course.

She stayed with us on Chrystie street for some weeks, before she went to share an apartment with Carol Perry on a dingy East Side street near Tompkins Square.

She loved to go into the room filled with knickknacks that Hatty and Veronica have here at St. Joseph's house and where they serve coffee to all and sundry. Veronica takes care of all the linens and blankets and it is hard to keep her from doing the mending and pressing besides. Her side of the room is filled with potted plants around a little shrine. Hatty has an old curiousity shop and I'm always threatening to walk off with the tiny vases and animals which cover the dresser and the what-not. She does the curtains for every room in the house. So they are always there, and for a shy person like Paulina, it was nice to go up and sit with them and have coffee.

Veronica knew all about her, and was very thrilled to tell her about her (Paulina's) fourth birthday, celebrated in the House, in Washington, D.C., when Paulina's father was Speaker of the House. "I remember reading the story, about how the governess brought you to the visitors' gallery and when on hearing it was your birthday, the entire House rose to its feet and clapped for you, you jumped up too and clapped as hard as you could."

"Did I do that?" Paulina wondered. The papers had said so, Veronica assured her.

The papers were not so kind at the time of her death last Monday. There being a dirth of other news, the Mirror made a headline story and called it a mystery death and said an autopsy had been ordered. She had been found unconscious on the couch in her living room, on Sunday afternoon, by her little ten year old daughter, who had called the neighbors, who called an ambulance. She died not long after reaching the hospital, whether from a blood clot or a failure of the

heart, who knows? We had seen her a few weeks ago when she came to New York to attend the little play written by Kerran Dugan about "Aaron Heresy" and spent the evening with us. She had worked in the Georgetown Hospital every morning as a volunteer. She visited the Home for Incurables twice a week, and had been there a few days before her death. There was one unhappy old patient whom she had telephoned each day.

When I was returning from my trip to the South in October, I stopped in Washington to spend the night with her, and the next day we had gone to Llewellyn Scott's for lunch and spent the afternoon talking to him, and going over his three houses of hospitality which he runs under the blessing of Martin de Porres, the Negro lay brother of the Dominican Order. Paulina brought men's clothes to Llewellyn and gave me a duffel bag full of children's clothes to bring back on the bus.

We all loved her, and are deeply grieved by her death. Pete Asaro saw a good deal of her and Carol that summer and the three of them helped us move, using her station wagon, and an old one of ours. When ours broke down during the next winter, she gave Charlie McCormack hers and we will always think of her when we use it in the future. He went down to Washington to pick it up last year and visited her little Georgetown home where she and Joanna lived so happily. Ammon saw her again when he picketed the White House December first appealing for an amnesty for conscientious objectors who were in prison. And it was only three weeks ago she was here to visit us.

We were all there at the Requiem Mass, Peter, Charlie, Ammon and I, in the little Epiphany Church in Georgetown which could scarcely hold all the people who came. The altar rails were banked with white blossoms, cala lilies and chrysanthemums, and the coffin was draped with a blanket of fine ferns. I had to hang on to my missal and the Little Office of the Dead, keeping my mind on the beautiful words to keep from crying.

This winter Larry O'Donnell had died, and Dick Dwyer, benefactors too in their way, with their painting and carpentering our house of hospitality, and they were poor men who possessed nothing.

But the glorious requiem was the same for them all. "Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace."