

On Pilgrimage - February 1949

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Summary: Discusses Truman's attempt to nationalize steel and argues that it should be permitted as a transition to smaller group ownership, or if private ownership is efficient. Mentions the lack of support for distributism, particularly among Catholics who support government intervention. (DDLW #162).

Stottler's Crossroads, W. Va., January 11.

A good day to rest, cloudy and mild. This month I had two speaking engagements, one in Hagerstown and the other in Cumberland, Md., and so have a visit with my daughter and her family in between. I got here yesterday afternoon at four, Father Ballard driving me from Hagerstown, about thirty-two miles away. Our next door neighbor down here works at Fairchild's, the airplane factory there, where eight thousand are employed. He works nights and tries to farm days. He had counted on his grown son farming while he brought in a cash income, but the boy joined the army and is now in Japan. There are two young sons in school, and since they are closing all the smaller schools around here, they have to go by school bus twelve miles to the Berkeley Springs school.

My meeting was in Hagerstown where I was introduced by Paul Wagner, a CIO organizer (the auto workers include the airplane plants). Last year he had done a job of organizing the Victor products plant in Berkeley Springs (population 1,100) but said that as yet they had no contract. They would probably have to go before the arbitration board. We had dinner together, a good meal cooked by his bride of a few months; and Dan Cassey, also CIO auto worker accountant from Detroit and a friend of the late Paul St. Marie, was there.

I had commented in my book "On Pilgrimage" on the grave difficulties attendant on organizing in such a district as this, and I did not know that I'd be meeting the organizer.

Nationalization

We talked of President Truman's suggestion to build Federal Steel plants, a first step to nationalize the industry, everyone foretells. The CIO men thought

such a step in the right direction but according to the Popes and Eric Gill respectively, such steps are only taken when (1) the industry is too great for private management or (2) should be only a step towards turning over the means of production to much smaller groups representing the workers themselves. The latter certainly must be educated towards it, and must think in terms of the responsibility which goes with ownership.

First of all they must be taught to *want* it and as far as I can see, the drift of the clerical advisers of the workers is all in the other direction. Ownership of tools or factories is not all a necessary development of the life of man; the proletarian state is perfectly compatible with sanctity, the belt, the assembly line, must be accepted, “it is here to stay,” “you can’t turn the clock back.”

Even “my friend who ate sweet meats with me,” as the Palmist said, those of the Catholic Rural Life Conference, in a public statement at their last conference in December have come out against us of the *Catholic Worker* movement in the recent Commonweal controversy in endorsing our present industrial system and advocating a “moderate decentralization.” All they want, what they will settle for, is a share of the profits, instead of a share in the ownership, and the decentralization of the physical business of factories and production, and not a decentralization of control by widespread ownership. As far as I can see the Catholic is far behind the pagan even in fighting trusts or corporations. What distinguishes most social planners is their desire to keep the Status Quo.

Their best dig around us here is a dig at our poverty, part of which is holy in that we voluntarily accept what we cannot help. We use it as a means of sharing what we have with others, and is something we will accept as inevitable if we want to get on the land, or out into the village atmosphere, away from the “occasions of sin” which both the Holy Father and Fr. Vincent McNabb have termed our gigantic cities. God knows nobody is helping the family towards these aims. There are no trust funds on which they can draw, no credit unions to advance money to young couples to buy on the land, little help from brother Catholics (although the letter from Farmer Hinks of the Eastern Shore of Maryland is an exception). Certainly what hurts most of all, there is no **teaching** in that direction, so that those who are caught in the economic machine are positively discouraged from hoping to lead their children to another way of life.

In their anxiety not to appear “crackpot,” or “fuzzy idealist” or “romantic agrarian” they bend over backward to boost what is at best a short range program and lose sight completely of the long range view of another social order. They not only disregard the lessons of history—why else did the Russian revolution come about except in desire of the people for land and work and responsibility, a sense of their dignity as workers? They are secularists in thinking that by bettering conditions on the belt, man the remainder of his time can be a whole man. As though one can “sin a little” or be just “a little bit pregnant,” as one controversialist said.

To have any vision of “ownership by the workers of the means of production,”

a distributist economy, personal responsibility, a regional economy, is to them “visionary.” They delight in pointing to the failure of the “vision” of the leaders of the Socialist Soviet Republics and they fail the people by expecting nothing more from them than the irresponsibility they now show as a result of the evil system under which they have so long lived.

The Dangerous State

In fact, our critics in their exaltation of the state, in their acceptance of the state, are guilty of the Marxism they condemn, as they little by little let the State encroach on one field after another. For instance if they endorse socialized medicine now (as the editor of *America* has done) they may find themselves in the situation of Cardinal Mindzcenty tomorrow, because they will be forced sooner or later to protest the encroachment of the State, the little by little encroaching State which the Bishops of the United States warned against in their most recent statement.

Yes, the workers must be brought to *want* communal ownership so far have they strayed from the “responsible man.” Now they want the security of government ownership. They want the government rather than the corporations to take over, so that they can all become civil or federal employees. Many a time in talking to young people at schools, I have noticed that their idea of security is to work towards a *city job*.

Of course when I speak along these lines there are always members of the audience who feel that I have gone “too far.” One Protestant minister who reported my talk for the Hagerstown paper said that he agreed with all I had to say about the works of mercy (our care for the victims of our social order) but that he violently disagreed with everything else. The general reaction is that these are new ideas, so far have people gone in their acceptance of the responsibility of the state, the attitude of “let George do it.”

This afternoon Tamar, Becky and Susie and I took a walk down through Peter Yost’s property (146 acres for \$2,100). The farm house is an old hand-hewn log house, two story, four rooms downstairs and two large rooms upstairs.

One immense room upstairs with windows on three sides was formerly three small rooms and a passage with stairs. It is renting for five dollars a month, and a family are moving in next week, by the name of Curran. There are so many Catholic names down here, and so few Catholics! Only in such a diocese as that of St. Louis have I heard of priests going to the land with their people. We certainly try to be realistic and the terrible dilemma of the choice between city streets and the countryside without church or school is a tragedy of our day.

It was fun going over the old house with its two tiny stairways, its pump on the back porch, the log barn and granary and other outbuildings.

“A better house than mine,” Mr. Weber, our neighbor to the east, was saying just a few weeks ago at a pig killing at Mrs. Fearnow’s. And then Christmas eve his old house burned down, and everything was lost, including \$2,500 in cash which the older people were saving in the house, remembering the crash of 1929 when so many small banks failed throughout the country.

The Weber farm is a beautiful place up over a hill through pine woods on the Hennessy property. We picked herbs on the way, sumac berries which our neighbor told us were good to swab the throat with (making a tea of the berries), and ground ivy and the tips of pine trees which the neighbors hereabouts use instead of hot lemonade in case of a cold. I picked a box of mosses and pine for Johannah, who with Tommy and Mary Hughes all have whooping cough at 115 Mott Street. (Later in the month when Helen Adler took the terrarium to show to our neighbor florist around the corner, he arranged it for her, and told her of the hundreds of varieties of mosses he collected himself).

Neighbors

Fortunately the outbuildings of the Weber farm still stand, and one truck driver son borrowed a trailer in which mother and father and daughter are now living, with the rest of the family farmed out to neighbors. Everybody has already sent furnishings for the new house, which all are helping to build. They were pouring cement the day we were over there, and a local portable mill had moved in and was sawing logs for them, and they are going to have to build with green lumber just for the sake of shelter. The new place will be 25 by 25, and Mrs. Weber was lamenting on how small her kitchen was going to be. She was used to one so vast that it took two stoves to heat it. Mrs. Weber’s life sounds like Ingunn’s in *The Master of Hestiyken*, that epic of Sigrid Undset. She has had five miscarriages, three still-born children and then seven healthy children! Two of those boys are now working on the telephone lines throughout the country, and another is driving cars out of Detroit. Two are working on the new house with three of the neighbors. Mrs. Fearnow said Mrs. Weber used to be a sickly woman, but now at fifty-four is beginning to get her health back! She’s always had heart trouble, too. I must say that she looks younger at fifty-four than I do at fifty-one! Oh, the difference between city people and county people.

It is raining now, and there is a soft fall that I hope will clear up by morning so we can have another good walk. We hung out a line full of clothes today and the extra rinsing will do them good. And now I am having a cup of catnip tea, a country sedative and cureall for colds and fatigue.

Later in January

One could write much more about delightful walks, and life on the land, but space is limited. At Cumberland I spoke to a parish group before returning to New York.

Here a Celanese factory is the largest industry, though there are many other factories and it is a railroad town, too. The factory used to employ 12,000 and now has only 8,000 due to increased use of machinery. Someone else put the figures at 15,000, but even quoting the more conservative estimate makes the situation shocking enough. What are we going to do about the increase of unemployed, who have been kept employed these last ten years only because of war and reparation for war, or preparation for more war! Is it not about time we begin some radical thinking of what a peace time economy would be like, and how to give men work at satisfactory and honorable pursuits? Who wants to go back to the cake and circuses of the depression, the gifts of Holy Mother the State?