

Notes By The Way - October 1943

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Summary: Exuberant description of a month spent at a Grail folk school where work, crafts, prayer, meditation, liturgies, lectures, and fasting intermingled. Includes her notes of presentations on the Mass, liturgical singing, and the psalms. (DDLW #396).

For the past several years I have been reading aloud to all who would listen from the sayings and life of the Fathers of the Desert. Undoubtedly this has influenced me far more than those who heard me. Undoubtedly it had a great deal to do with my deciding to go away for a year to practice the use of the weapons of the spirit. Like some of the early Fathers (I don't know whether the Sisters or Mothers of the desert did such things) I begin my year by visiting other Fathers of the Desert, and the desert this month of September has been a green and lush one, the prairies around Wheeling, Illinois, where the Ladies of the Grail were giving their final course of the summer, The Harvest. I did this not only for my own sake, to start the year off right, but for the sake of Tamar, who took the course.

It has been a month of joyfulness and plenty. It has been a month of much meditation, hours in the chapel; it has been a month of glorious Masses, processions, sung Masses and dialogue Masses. We have learned to sing, not only the plain chant of the church, but early hymns and folk songs. (And for teachers there were Dom Vitry, formerly of Belgium, and now of O'Fallon Missouri; Robt. B. Heywood, seminarian from Mundelein; and Joan Overboss herself, second in command, during the course.)

A Folk School

Yes, we have learned to pray, and to sing our prayers. A prayer sung is twice said, says St. Augustine. We have learned to meditate and bake bread, pray and extract money; sing and make butter, cheese, cider, wine and sauerkraut. We have made soap and costumes and pottery; we have worked as sharecroppers for a neighboring farmer and garnered our own crops, soya beans, carrots, grapes and corn. We have even witnessed the slaughtering of Isaac, the eight months' old

calf, and the skinning and dismembering of his carcass. And we have partaken (and with appetite, since the daily work was vigorous) of those parts of Isaac which do not repose in the freezer at Wheeling, namely, tripe, brains, liver, heart, sweetbreads, but not the lungs, since we were not able to find a good recipe in the neighborhood, and without a good recipe, lungs taste like rubber bands, as any of our crowd at Mott street can tell you.

And speaking of such inward parts of Isaac, we had a lecture from Janet Kalven on health during which she quoted from Dr. Price's books published by Harpers, on Physical Degeneration, and told us how primitive tribes lived on the inward parts and throw away the muscle meat which we relish so much.

Health to work and pray, health to perform one's mission as a Catholic—I am sure that St. Teresa of Avila would have enjoyed Janet's talk, in spite of her saying "When nuns become melancholy, feed them steak!"

Let me say here that we have been living in eternity and such a talk as Janet's took two and one-half hours. Perhaps it was longer. Anyway, at the conclusion of it, she was sent to the chapel to pray for two and one-half hours. That seems to be a principal here—long talkings, and still longer silences. The great silence is always observed, from Compline until breakfast the next morning. And when one considers that fifty women are living together, during such a course, and up betimes to bake bread, start chores, milk cows and wash clothes, and pray and sing the Mass, on occasion, two hours in the chapel before breakfast, it is indeed wonderful. God be praised!

It is good to look over my note book and find interspersed amongst directions for bread making and soap making, sentences from Msgr. Hillenbrand's opening discourse:

Msgr. Hillenbrand

Mass is the death of Christ. Mass is the perfect sacrifice, the best that any human being can do, infinite praise, adoration and expiation.

In this sacrifice we offer ourselves. In Mass is the moment we give ourselves completely to God. We must earn that moment through all the actions of our lives. If we stand with Christ at the altar and participate in his death, then we too must die.

We are going to act together *just the same*. If people won't do things together, they will be *compelled* to do them together, as they are under the dictatorships.

After emphasizing the priesthood of the laity and the doctrine of the Mystical Body, Msgr. Hillenbrand went on to talk of sacrifice.

Mass is my reparation, my expiation. *Back to the altar*. We participate in the Mass by communion. The best thing any human being can do. Infinite praise,

adoration, expiation. Sacrifice is “to suffer and so enter into His glory.” Rural life contains many hard elements (but half the trouble is our imagination). We must die to ourselves. We must fill in those things wanting to the Mystical Body. Hard things are one’s way of dying. The hours on land are hard. The responsibilities, the uncertainty. There we live close to the seasons. And the season of the year are caught up into Christ who is our life. We relive through the liturgical year the lifetime of Christ.

Compared to living in God, mere life is nothing.

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Fr. Vitry said:

The important thing is to be in an atmosphere where one can sing. We are all suffering from a certain amount of sophistication. It is a primitive instinct to sing. As youth grows, it fails more and more to express emotion, yet emotion grows. Sacred singing for a Catholic soul is absolutely necessary. First drawback to sacred singing—bad speaking. (Dr. Von Kersbergen is an example of clear speaking, every syllable, every vowel, so clearly enunciated. She reads and prays with the same distinctness book, so that every word sinks into the heart.) First learn to pray well. Ninety percent of the trouble is lack of buoyancy in prayer. We don’t breathe well. We don’t recognize that we are breathing in life. Many people never fill the bottom of their lungs. If there is no emotion in breathing, there is none in singing. Breathe in through the nostrils, out through the mouth.

After Fr. Vitry got through with us we were all singing, and singing “high,” too, because we were thinking high. The acoustics are good in the little chapel, and it is easy to *think high*, and lift one’s voice up, up to the peaked roof. Fr. Vitry, by the way, is editor of *Cecilia*, dealing with church music, published in O’Fallon, Mo., which comes out ten times a year and is \$2.50 a subscription.

Msgr. Ligutti

Msgr. Ligutti’s talks on The Moron Quail, the Country Pastor, the Lillies of the Field—these were highlights, of course. Fr. James F. Coffey, of Huntingdon Seminary, Brooklyn; Fr. Michael Mathis, C.S.C., with his talk on the psalms; William Gauchat, Speaking of arts and crafts in the home—each carried on days of discussion. The latter is the leader of the Cleveland Catholic Worker House of Hospitality and head of our Lady of the Wayside Farm at Avon, Ohio.

But there was not only work and prayer and lectures and parties and feasting. There were also the ember days of fasting, when a most strict fast was kept. Always, too, when we feasted with the martyrs, someone kept a fast, just as when there was much discussion, someone kept silent—silent with the eyes as well as with the lips. Always there was someone sent to the chapel to pray “for an hour and a half” for the others. Always there were little penances distributed, to illustrate the points of the meditation.

Indian Summer

As I write, this last day of the course, sitting by an open window looking out over the prairie, there is the long sleepy singing of crickets. In my nostrils still are the smell of the grapes in the vineyards that we have been harvesting, the apples from the orchard which we have been peeling, the smell of the good loaves baking in the kitchen.

The girls are leaving tomorrow, going out, some of them two by two, as the disciples went out of old. A few are going to live down near Mott street, another is going into the Negro district in Chicago to the Martin de Porres center; three are going to Arkansas to live on a farm with another one of the girls who took an earlier course here. Two are going to Bill Gauchat's farm at Avon, Ohio; one is working with a priest starting a Catholic book store in Pittsburgh, and another with a priest who is preparing a liturgical school in Chicago. The apostolate for city and country is finding its workers, all different yet all praying that "that mind be in them which was also in Christ Jesus." "Called to be saints," "fellow workers of God," "fellow helpers of the truth," they are on their way, and in them the makings of "valiant women."