

On Pilgrimage - February 1976

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Summary: "The joyful story of the opening of Maryhouse." Filled with gratitude she describes applying the finishing touches. Notes the large auditorium used for Friday meetings started by Peter Maurin. (DDLW #567).

Just a few mornings ago, I thought, "I will begin my column with the joyful note that it is still daylight when I go out to the five-thirty Mass in the evening. The days are getting longer. Spring will come again. And now I wake up to see snow swirling past my windows in great gusts of wind from the west. And what is more, one of our fellow creatures, an old bent-over woman who had been staying with us, has not come home these last few nights. Where is she? In what empty building is she taking shelter?

Maryhouse

She had endeared herself to us by her constant reading of the Old Testament. It was in the crammed shopping bag at her side, even at the dining room table, on top of a pile of pitiful possessions, where she could keep her eye on it. Someone said that she had been driven out by the nagging of another one of our guests. It is a sad fact that the sisters who are in our new house of hospitality are made up of the lovable and the unlovable, and we are called to remember very often that fearsome paraphrase of Fr. Hugo, that we love God as much as the one we love the least. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me." That goes for us all.

All men are brothers. (I refuse to be bullied into paraphrasing, and re-wording that beautiful saying into—"all men and women are brothers and sisters.") The men who come to our farm at Tivoli do not like to be called "the men who come in off the road." Neither do our women, I am sure, want to be called "shopping bag ladies," and we won't do it again, in print, or out of it. Aren't we all shopping bag ladies? Men and woman, bond or free, we are all accumulators. (I am the worst.)

What with the press of visitors, morning, noon and night, and all our volunteers busy scrubbing and cleaning one more room for one more guest, I have had the job of seeing lots of friends who want to see our new house, and visitors from

here, there and everywhere. One even dropped in from Nigeria, Africa! My mail is piled up on the desk beside me and I was tempted not to write this column at all this month. Deane Mowrer (as well as others at the farm) is down with the “24-hour flue” in addition to the “mid-winter doldrums” and she must skip her usual column. But I think of the times we look for mail, especially in the country, as I do when visiting my daughter in Vermont. The children there slide down the hill, through the snow, to the mailbox and everybody rejoices over every piece of mail, no matter how impersonal. It is time for seed catalogues now!

So I finally get down to the joyful story of the opening of Maryhouse, just two blocks from St. Joseph’s house (where we still get all our mail of course).

The reference to homeless women in our pages was the beginning of this house. One of our readers supplied the money for the initial purchase. Miracle of miracles, we were able to pay cash; so we have no mortgage, nor interest on a mortgage to pay. And then came the raising of the awesome sum that was required to make the house fulfill the requirements of the building, health and fire departments of the city.

The estimate of the contractors came to 125,000 dollars! We sent out our usual annual appeal and daily the dear Lord sent through you, our readers, money enough so that we could pay the workers and purchase materials as the work progressed. And money came to keep St. Joseph’s House going on First Street with its daily soup line and its three floors of guests, and to run the farm at Tivoli with its population of seventy, more or less.

St. Teresa of Avila said that she was so grateful a person that she could be bought with a sardine. It sounds obscure but I know what she meant. A man on the Bowery who presses a dollar into your hand (which he could have spent for the warming and comforting bottle) means so much to you that your heart swells with gratitude. And how much more for those of our readers all over the country who keep things going with large gifts and small. I mentioned at a Pentecostal meeting that we needed blankets (and we still do) and after the meeting a woman handed me a hundred dollar bill to buy blankets! I do pray God to bless all our readers as well as all those who break bread with us each day, and make us realize that saying of the apostles—“they knew Him in the breaking of bread.” Him Jesus Himself.

O Grateful Hearts

I have been reading a beautiful and enlightening book by Andre Louf, who is Abbot of a Trappist monastery in France, and he writes that **the organ of prayer is our heart**. Certainly I feel my heart really swelling with gratitude because of all our readers and friends. I even find myself being grateful

to the city of New York for the magical certificate of occupancy which means we can now house people in Maryhouse, all conditions having been fulfilled for their health, safety and welfare.

The house is by no means finished. As we go along, and the painter finishes painting another bedroom, Sister Anne and Sister Charity, and other volunteers (one of them a teacher) scrub the good linoleum which is encrusted with darkened wax of many years standing. We furnish the new room with some of the donated beds and dressers and comfortable chairs, which are stacked up in one corner of the auditorium on the main floor, and it is ready for another occupant. There are twenty women in the house now, and the dining room is bright with fresh paint and good lighting and the many tables donated by the sisters of the Good Shepherd at Peekskill, New York. The tables are in perfect condition and are surrounded by an assortment of chairs. I laughed at Sister Charity when she lamented the contrast between the mismatched tables and the chairs, but when one of the chairs nearly collapsed under me I “laughed on the other side of my face” as my mother used to say, and “ate my words” of derision.

Cult, Culture, Cultivation

I have mentioned that, for some time, we have been having our Friday night meetings in an auditorium here at Maryhouse, which means that I must describe the building. It is an old music school, and two years ago Sister Elizabeth, who works on the Lower East Side as a daycare coordinator, pointed it out to me after we had been looking all over for a house for women. There were many little practice rooms and rooms large enough for two or three, some large offices on the first floor, and rooms suitable for dining room, kitchen, laundry and so on, and a large auditorium where concerts had been given. I felt that the place in general was soaked up with the beauty of song and the aspirations of the young, those talented young of the East Side, of all nationalities. The officials of the school were happy that we wanted to keep the auditorium as it was.

Peter Maurin had always talked of a synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation. To us, that meant meetings which started during the very first months of the Catholic Worker in 1933. The meetings dealt with history, economics and a new social order, as well as art and song and all the aspects of **culture** which grew out of **cult**. There were lectures on stained glass windows and wood carving and music and poetry and so on, and **cultivation**, which meant the land movement, the farm and the village economy. In a recent issue we called attention to the Eric Gill school set up on St. Benedict’s Farm in Upton, Massachusetts, where Carl and Mary Paulson, almost single-handedly, have carried on Peter Maurin’s ideas of **Cult**, **Culture** and **Cultivation** for so many years that they have had time to raise a large family, eight or nine children and even an adopted two. (Forgive me for not being more definite, but one cannot really keep up with the growths and declines and re-emergences of Catholic Worker centers and groups

around the country, let alone have space in this small eight-page sheet to write about them all.)

So this house is not only for women, but it is a place where these beautiful visions of Peter Maurin can become more of reality.

How often beauty springs from deep suffering! Witness Kathe Kollwitz' art. We will have a library next to the prayer room which we are using every night for Vespers, even before it is "finished." (Beds for the poor come first.) A book which will have a special stand is a magnificent product of the New York Graphic Society, a reproduction and text of the work of Kathe Kollwitz, a gift from my friend Sue Dodd of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The book should be chained down, but it is really too large to be walked out with, so maybe I am not foolhardy in putting it out for general consumption. We need to feast on beauty to refresh ourselves and to remember Dostoevski's wonderful word—"The world will be saved by beauty"—often quoted by us, and quoted also by Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel acceptance speech.

"Lift up your hearts!" "We have lifted them up to the Lord!"

Frank Donovan drops by with Lee, on his way to look for a stove for Maryhouse. He is a driving force in the CW and so willful a man that he will not go to bed when he is sick with flu but works it off, he says. I would not be surprised to see him coming back with the large stove loaded on a pushcart, we are all so anxious to set it up and make bread in it.

He reminds me, while I write so joyfully of our present state and our visions of the future, that bills are getting higher, heating bills, light bills, food bills. The farm grew a great crop of vegetables last summer (we had squash and sauerkraut from Tivoli last night for supper). The vegetable market at

Hunt's Point in the Bronx is generous to us, on those Fridays when we can get there, with fruit and vegetables, which might spoil if kept over the weekends. Still we are paying for bread, meat, and heat and much besides. When people write and send us a donation and include an admonition that they want it spent for food, not propaganda, as some occasionally do, I advise that we send our bread bills, well over twenty dollars a day, to let them know that their money can indeed be slated for food. Not to speak of the gas to cook the gallons of soup each day for two or three hundred people, and the warmth and comfort of hot tea or coffee (and the sugar to sweeten them.)

Of course we want and will continue to work for "a new heaven and earth wherein justice dwelleth," but praise the Lord we have beauty too. (And we ourselves are warmed and comforted by your generosity to us.)