On Pilgrimage - November 1957

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Attends a conference of experts who ponder the meaning of altruistic love and isn't impressed with their rationality and science. Visits families living on the land and points to the need for community for them to survive. Shares in celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Detroit Catholic Worker houses. (DDLW #731).

On the feast of St. Francis and on Yom Kippur I attended 20 or so talks of the Conference on New Knowledge in Human values, held in Kresge Auditorium at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology just across the Charles River basin from Boston proper. The auditorium rises like a mushroom from an unadorned newly planted acre or so of grass. On the four sides glass falls like a sheet of rain from the edge of the mushroom. Inside there is a little theater where the Yom Kippur services were held on Saturday, and upstairs an auditorium seating one thousand people, and not very comfortable seats at that for two all-day sessions. But these hundreds of people – and on the Saturday morning session when Eric Fromm spoke, the auditorium was filled – sat in complete and most attentive silence for those two days, listening to sociologists, philosophers, physicists, biologists, physiologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, economists, artists, statesmen, theologians and mystics, a most extraordinary concourse of human beings, giving the best they have, limiting themselves to thirty minute talks with fifteen minutes of questions, a discipline accepted and enforced.

They talked, these scientists, of man's loneliness, his fears, his needs and the meaning of value. "Is the sole value of human life self realization? Why ought I be healthy, normal? Who represents authority? By what authority do we impose on another or try to help another have self realization?" All kinds of questions were asked from the floor. All the speakers were men but one, – Dorothy Lee, an anthropologist from Detroit and most of the questions were asked by the young men who attended the two day conference.

The conference was called by the Research Society for Creative Altruism, headed by Pitirim A. Sorokin, a man of vast knowledge and experience, a man of the east as well as of the west, since he lived the first half of his life in Russia, taught there, went through the revolution, was imprisoned, sentenced to death twice, and released perhaps because he himself contains some of this mysterious

force he speaks and writes of and which he is trying to promote, this "unselfish, creative love, about which we still know very little, which potentially represents a tremendous power, provided we know how to produce it in abundance, how to accumulate it and how to use it."

"Six years of preliminary studies by the Center about the nature, knowledge, development and application of altruistic love" convinced Professor Sorokin and his associates "beyond any question of doubt" that with "notable increase of our knowledge of love, its potentialities can be used for the service of mankind in immeasurably greater proportions." All of which reminds me how Peter Maurin used to say that the truth has to be restated every twenty years.

One of the things that impressed me was the simplicity and sincerity of these men who came from all over the world to attend the conference. They did not fear being called fools in admitting their ignorance in this field, they who had surpassed others in their own scientific fields.

But the most impressive talk was made by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. In a brief biographical sketch in the program, it was stated that he was 87 years old, son of a physician; at eighteen he became a school master in a remote Japanese village, later he attended the university in Tokyo "but did not officially graduate." He spent his spare time in this period as a novice in a Zen monastery and has for the rest of his life studied Zen Buddhism. He lived through both world wars in Tokyo, travelled widely in between, and for the last six years has lectured at Columbia.

In his talk he said that he had nothing objective or scientific to say, that he was just a layman trying to promote unselfish behaviour. There was nothing new in all these things they were discussing, they were so old they seemed like new. We had talked these values into tatters so that they were old, dilapidated, worn out and had lost their freshness. He quoted a Japanese saying, "When alive be as a dead man and then act as you will." St. Augustine, he went on to say, rephrased this in his "Love God and do as you will." The first fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil killed us and we must eat of the second fruit. When he was asked what this second fruit was he said that each must find it for himself, and he added that these old ways were condemned by the program committee of the conference. No doubt it is the age of reason and technology, he went on, but they will not solve our problems. They are fiercely fanning the flames of war. We talk about disarmament while continuing our testing of nuclear weapons in spite of the danger to all human and living beings. To believe in rationality and science is the modern superstition. In 10,000 years knowledge has increased but are we better men and women? How did we behave before World War I and how now?

These talks will be reprinted but I do not think Suzuki's will be because it was a spontaneous talk and directed against the participants in the conference in a way. But he still thought it important enough to attend.

Erie, Pa.

I left Boston on an evening bus, after two refreshing nights with the Little Sisters of Jesus, who live in an apartment in a slum of Boston. I called up Archbishop Cushing who was most cordial and wished me well in my new vocation of going to jail. The bus was a scenicruiser and very comfortable, and I slept a good part of the way to Erie. In Erie I stayed with Nora Rothschild, an old friend who had made the retreat with us at Oakmont and Easton. She is now teaching at Gannon College. I spoke there one evening and to the students at Mercyhurst another evening. During the day I visited Mary Thornton on their farm near Springboro and saw their children, Mary Ann, 9; Timothy, 8; Elizabeth, 6; Paul, 4; Teresa, 2-1/2; and Magdalene, 3 months.

Jack's program begins with getting up at four a.m. milking five cows by hand, feeding 14 head of cattle, carrying the water, driving in to work in a steam shovel factory 32 miles away, getting there at seven, coming home to more chores at four. Timothy already helps milk and he can milk a cow clean. But this is killing work for Jack. Mary pointed out that with a little capital, so that they could get some good milk cows, breed some good stock, they would be able to make the farm pay. Already they are selling some of their milk, and with chickens, pigs and truck garden they could begin to make ends meet. Why don't people invest in families? There certainly should be some of our readers who can and I wonder if some of our readers can help out here. When we put in an urgent appeal for money for a house for a family in community, relatives and friends came forward with the needed cash. Here are our brothers in need of help.

When Mary's last baby was born, Jack sent in an appeal for help but there were no available mothers' helpers around, so at the last minute the guardian angels got to work. Mary's sister took the three youngest, and a sixteen year old friend came for a week and baked and cleaned and ran the house for the three oldest. She was the oldest of the nine children of the Kalchthalers, who under the influence of Fr. Joseph Meenan went to the land some years ago, outside Butler, Pa.

Jack and Mary Thornton's farm has eighty-five acres and cost them $4,500. It is a beautiful place, on a good road, and though the house is old, it has good lines and plenty of room for a family. There are three great locust trees in front of the house, and a locust grove in the rear. Mary showed us around the little milk house; the barn full of hay and a granary full of oats. The corn had not done well and they were going to have to buy what they needed for the cows that winter. They had had to buy a hay cutter for $345 and they would be paying that off for some time at the rate of thirty a month. And next year they would have to have a wagon which would probably cost $400. They had been borrowing one long enough.

Need for Community

When you consider the equipment needed to run a farm one can see more and more the need of community, and most of the families admit this. The obstacles in the way are of course human ones. Mary said that she would not want to live in a community where there was television, that she was trying to protect her children from that. One of the things about the Protestant communities we know – they have already gotten past the hurdles of radio and television, smoking and drinking. They didn't want them and thought nothing of doing without them in order to have the more solid goods of life together on the land. I am so often amazed at the smallness of the obstacles in the way of the better life. But it is of course not things nor even desires, but men's wills. John Cort, in a current issue of **The Spiritual Life**, printed by the Carmelites and reprinted by the**Catholic Messenger**, talked of community and **The Catholic Worker** ideals about community and how impossible it had been to work out. Given a depression, brought about by disarmament, perhaps men may be forced to pool their resources and live together in community, even if they are like the "Hoovervilles" of the thirties.

Cleveland

In Avon, Ohio, there is Our Lady of the Wayside Farm where Dorothy and Bill Gauchat live. Bill works for the Edison people, and Dorothy runs what is in its little way a House of Hospitality on the land.

They have a beautiful old red brick house with about twelve rooms, and in addition to their own children, Anita, Helenmarie, Sue, Colette, Eric and David, they care for two little three-year-olds, one a spastic and the other a child three months old mentally, and blind. The spastic is unusually bright, and has a radiant little face, responding to all the love showered on him by the other children. The other child responds only to music, and when Dorothy puts him on the couch in the living room and puts a symphony on the record player, he lies there with a happy expression of content on his face. Tod and Robin are treasured responsibilities at Our Lady of the Wayside Farm. There are three grownup guests there at present and Dorothy has her hands full, though her daughters are a great help.

In back of the house there is a beautiful pond fed by a brook where there is swimming in summer and skating in winter and all around are acres of grape vineyards. Where Dorothy and Bill originally lived across the road and tried to farm, there are now 400 small houses in a project put up on the land which was sold for $15,000. Each house was sold for about that but, of course, draining the land, and piping water, and utilities and a sewage system was part of the development. It is anything but a beautiful development, this bit of suburbia and Bill often looks down the road and wonders what Peter Maurin would have thought of such a community. The children of this world are wiser in their

generation than the children of light. I am always wondering where are the men of vision in the lay apostolate, to envision a farming commune and lay out the buildings, and invest in the barns and stock and machinery and figure out the financing on some cooperative plan, that will enable our young families to make a start in some other style of community than a Levittown. Where are the builders of "the kind of society where it is easier for men to be good?"

Even if the "industry" which supports the community, comes under the title of a work of mercy, such as caring for the aged, for crippled children, for the mentally ill, all the families taking in the lame, the halt and the blind, it would financially, and humanly, support itself.

I am always hearing of the homes being started to care for the aged, or the mentally afflicted, and am aghast at the enormous sums spent for the buildings for this work. And the enormous charges made by these homes.

Detroit

The immediate occasion for this trip was the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Detroit Houses of Hospitality, St. Francis House and Martha House, which are located in Holy Trinity parish. There are also in Fr. Kern's parish homes for the aged, both old men and women, supported cooperatively on their pensions. There is also a clinic, and a cooperative and a workers' school, and Fr. Kern's rectory is also a center for travellers.

Louis Murphy has been the head of the Catholic Worker group in Detroit from the start and has been faithful in his early inspiration to see Christ in the poor. He is a third order Franciscan and there is a statue of St. Francis on the table where the men sit down to eat. He has the enthusiasm and vitality to inspire others and has had whole hearted support from the men in the house, many of whom came back for the celebration of the anniversary which began with a solemn high Mass in the church, and went on to a communion breakfast afterward in the school cafeteria. In the evening there was a dinner at Martha House and an "at home" at St. Francis House from five to eight.

Asiatic flu was going the rounds by the time I got to Detroit, and Sheila and Kevan Murphy had already had their share of it and were able to be up and around and take their share in the doings. But Justine, Lou's wife, had to take to her bed, and Christine and Eileen were sick, too. Everyone was praying little Bryan would not get it. He is their six year old invalid who had been lying in his bed since he was a month old and was stricken by some virus. Their new baby Bridget, was gay and charming in her carriage through all the celebration. What with the illnesses, I don't know what the Murphys would have done without nine year old Sheila, who answered the phone, the door bell, prepared bottles for the babies, fed the children and generally kept up the spirits of all. Kevan worked with his father just as responsibly, and served on the altar for the first time at the Mass.

The men's house is always full, and the breadline always goes on, year in and year out, and Louis thanks God for the employment office a friend of his set up in the house several mornings a week. It not only has served the men sympathetically for some years now but also has proved by its records how little turnover there has been in the men who have gotten employment, thus proving how unjust many of the criticisms are of the skid row men. Only that very week, Time magazine had another sneering criticism of the men they termed "panhandlers, who never had it so good."

Unemployment is a very real thing in Detroit, and auto plants have moved away, leaving thousands of men who have worked for them for eighteen and twenty years, idle and a little over age for jobs.

Now that there is unemployment in Detroit, families who came up from the south are returning home again, and there are more vacancies in apartments and houses, and there are not so many calls on Martha House to care for mothers and children. Louis and Justine live there with their children and there is always room for the single women or extra family who need emergency help.

In the phone book, and over the door, **The Catholic Worker** sign is used. There are any number of Houses of Hospitality in the country, but few now call themselves part of **The Catholic Worker**, what with the controversial nature of its message.

But Lou Murphy still feels with Peter Maurin that indoctrination, discussion, clarification of thought make up the beginnings of the green revolution, and that there is no revolution without a theory of revolution. I had not been in the house an hour when he was bringing books out on community and the lay apostolate, and as always in the Detroit Catholic Worker, the discussion went on until two in the morning. When I took the bus for Chicago, Louis himself was down with the flu, shivering with chills and fever, but by that time Justine was up again and had the family, the Martha House and the St. Francis House well in hand.

(To be continued)