

On Pilgrimage - October 1948

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Summary: Describes the joys and struggles of dealing with small children during their family retreat at Newburgh. Notes that they raise a lot of food but still are in debt to the grocer. Asks St. Joseph—"Through you, of course."—to take care of the bill. (DDLW #489).

When we went to press last month we had only the day before finished the Labor Day family retreat at Maryfarm, Newburgh, and it was too late to write about it. Now it is hard to write without boasting about it. We are the only Catholic retreat house in the United States where Mother and Father and all the children can come and camp out with us for a few days to partake of refreshment for body and soul.

Over the Labor Day retreat there were twenty-two children and eleven sets of parents. Some families had left a child or two at home or with relatives. Some brought two or three or five. There were three babies around five months old. They were easy to care for, since they stayed in their cribs and were quite content to be left alone. The hardest to care for were the two-year-old ones, who could not understand why at arbitrary times their mothers answered a bell and rushed away, regardless of their very important needs which they felt could be satisfied by none but the mother.

Of course, Julia Purcelli made a very good substitute for mother for all of them, but the two-year-olds did not appreciate that. They were not to be reasoned with. At the risk of being untheological, I'd say that the four-year-olds had achieved the use of reason. They were very well behaved, indeed.

I am tempted to write only of the children: how they slept in the long barn which housed all the children and the mothers of the young babies, except a few older youngsters who went to a neighboring farm for the long week-end. How they ate outside at a long table; how they built a little shrine to Our Lady under a wild cherry tree. How they drew pictures, some of them very strange, indeed, and not only had an outdoor exhibit, but brought them in procession to the chapel to give them to God, in exchange for a blessing. They brought pretty stones, too, and fruits, and leaves and bunches of flowers. One baby ate half its bouquet before reaching the altar. Of the picnic which we all shared with the children on the last day and to which neighbors came from a nearby farm and from the town of Newburgh.

Julia says next year the girls who helped her must come a few days early to learn a few fundamentals about the care of babies, such as pinning diapers and cutting up food, not to speak of singing songs, telling stories, arranging dances and little plays. A mother has to be all these things: singer, artist, sculptor, story-teller, dancer, impresario, toy maker, inventor, cook, laundress, and nurse. What a full life! What talents to develop! It would be hard, indeed, even to get a smattering in a few days.

As for the adults, I'm sure they did not have such a good time as the children. Next time we will arrange it so that the mothers of the very young ones—those who lie in the cribs and do not try to climb out—will have their infants in a dormitory with them. The mothers of the older ones will be separated entirely from the rest of their brood. Then there can be silence, indeed.

Fr. Schott, with whom I talked in Harrisburg this month, who arranges Cana conferences for the diocese, said that on their days of recollection they have what they call a Cana silence, where the husbands and wives talk only to each other, but to no other families. Then they find they have not been really talking to each other for a long time, but to their children or about their children.

There are many things we will do differently next year, and we hope the parents will send us suggestions as to what to do. Mr. Rudzick, who came not once but twice during the summer with his five children, wife and mother-in-law, is by now a charter member of our retreat house, and I am sure can help us a lot with his ideas. He has made three retreats with us, and while he would have found it more enjoyable I am sure to go away alone by himself, he wanted to share things with his family. His wife could not get away and he would not go without her.

Staff

What a wonderful staff we have, growing food, building, repairing, canning, outside the big house and cooking, dish washing, and generally running the place and the retreats. Jane O'Donnell is in charge. Thank God for them all. But of course we did not make ends meet, and since many who came could not pay anything for their visit, and just managed to get there themselves, we have a bill for staples, another for more lumber, and what with invalids to care for this winter, we need to do things to the inside of the house in the way of putting up wall board and buying coal. Our family only amounts to a dozen or fifteen people now, but we never know who is going to walk up the road, and pay a call which lasts anywhere from a week to six months. (Some stay for ever.) We have sent out our appeal from New York and we are hoping enough comes in to take care of our farm bills, too.

Making Ends Meet

Everyone always asks whether the farm is self-sustaining. It is one of those questions which always come up when you talk about farming. How hard it is to explain that though we raise three hundred bushel of potatoes, we use a bushel a day in New York, and we try to ship in as much as we can whenever a car is going down to the city. (None has offered a truck yet.) Although we put up a few thousand cans of apple sauce and tomatoes, still that is a drop in the bucket when you count the bread line. Just this morning as I came from 7 o'clock Mass in the city I counted the men from Canal Street up to the house, and there were at that time one hundred-and-five on the street waiting and fifty inside the coffee room having their breakfast. Slim has been "on the line" serving the men year in and year out, and although he calls me "Fuhrer-ess," he is the big boss of the line. He is beginning to talk of a vacation, "and not on the farm either, to help bring the crops in."

He is thinking of a long sleep in the morning and a leisurely breakfast, unrushed by the demands of two hundred or so guests. Maybe the farm would meet expenses if we would limit our family, and think of it in terms of a family-sized farm. There was never such a family as ours. Once when the board of health was objecting to our line, we talked to their representatives about the household as being a family. "We are quite ready to regard the people living in the house (only about sixty or so) as a family, but the breadline is the public."

Quite a few of the public creep in.

Marriage

This month Tony de Falco, our corner grocer, who is also a college graduate and a M. A. and to whom we owe two thousand dollars, got married. In his new state we are sure that an early payment of his bill would be welcome. So we are asking St. Joseph, the head of our family to take care of it. Through you, of course.

As for other vital statistics, there are the twins, the youngest members of our household, a month old now, and gaining rapidly. Big appetites both of them. So how in the world can we make ends meet?