Farming Communes

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The Catholic Worker, February 1944, 1,8.

Summary: Defines personalism as the realization that one "cannot find satisfaction in this life unless he reckons that there is only God and himself." Discusses the difficulties of farming communes and the need to establish the communal aspects of Christianity. (DDLW #149).

Peter is proud of being a peasant and calls attention to it. "My word is *tradition*," he says. He looks as though he were rooted to the ground, gnarled, strong, weatherbeaten as he is. He reminds me of a tree trunk, of a rock. His shoulders are broad, he has a chest like a barrel, his head is square and so is his face.

"A man has a mission, a calling, a vocation," he says. "We must get people away from being job-minded, wage-minded. A man must find out the work he is best fitted to do in the world, and then do it as best he can, singlemindedly. An artist does this. A musician does this. They are willing to accept voluntary poverty as the cost of their freedom to follow their call. Of course, if man were human to man, he would take care of his brother who had a call that did not bring him in the necessities of life. A priest, a sister, are taken care of in their work. The layman says,"They have security." Yes, they have the security which comes with community. But it is not always so. St. Paul maintained himself by the labor of his hands; he was a tentmaker. Just the same, he said, "The laborer is worthy of his hire." All the apostles emphasized hospitality, generosity one to another. They immediately began serving one another, serving the poor, serving those who gave up all to follow Christ. They were so busy they had to appoint deacons right away to do these works of mercy.

Not Always Security

"No, they do not always have security. Look at the missions, and the work priests do with nothing but their bare hands. Look at the missions set up in this country by the Franciscans, the Jesuits. Look at the foundations of the sisters. Look at the Benedictine monasteries, the Trappist monasteries. They started work with usually the worst kind of soil. They took deep woods, swamps, the places no one else wanted. Read about St. Bernard and his work, how he took a dozen warriors away from the siege of a city and built up a foundation in the wilderness. Of course they went hungry at first. They had no security until they made it with their labor and suffering.

"Did you ever hear that the Trappists asked for the Jersey meadows? I have heard that, and it sounds like them. They wanted to drain them, plant and cultivate them. But the industrialists are getting to be almost as smart as the Fathers. Joseph Day, the real estate speculator, got the swamps and sold them to factories, and now the place is a vision of hell, instead of a vision of heaven."

(Pittsburgh with its flaming mills has been eulogized in the modern novel, not only the proletarian novel but best selling and stupidly immoral romances such as "Valley of Decision," but I have never heard of a book setting forth the beauties of the Jersey waterfront and meadowland, Kearny, Bayonne, Jersey City, and all that stretch which one passes on the way to Keyport, where another Benedictine Priory has just been started a year or so.)

God and Ourselves

"In time of chaos and persecution, men escape to the desert. One of the fathers of the desert, Abbot Allois, said, 'A man cannot find true repose or satisfaction in this life unless he reckons that there is only God and himself in the world.' That's personalism. On the other hand, 'With our neighbor,' St. Anthony says, 'is life and death.' He was another desert father, and he was a communitarian. He started the foundation of monasteries, he and St. Basil, who wrote the first rule. Then St. Benedict came along and his rule is still being used by tens of thousands of monks all over the world. You can buy a copy of the rule at Brentano's or at Barnes and Noble's, on Fifth Avenue, or at the book stores on Barclay St. This rule, written thirteen hundred years ago, is still animating the lives of men. And it was a rule, written not for priests, but for laymen. Of course now it is used by priests and lay brothers, but why cannot it be used by the family? It is indeed used by Benedictine oblates who are living a Christian life in the world. But so far, it has never been used by groups of families living together."

To bring back the communal aspects of Christianity, this is part of Peter's great mission. "A heresy comes about," he said, "because people have neglected one aspect of the truth, or distorted it. Communism is just such a heresy. We have neglected the communal aspect of Christianity, we have even denied that property was proper to man. We have allowed property to accumulate in the hands of the few, and so a denial of private property has come about, ostensibly for the sake of the common good. St. Thomas says a certain amount of goods is necessary to lead a good life."

"The Green Revolution" is the expression Peter used when he first started the Catholic Worker Movement. And since that time eleven years ago there is not only a book written on "The Green Revolution" of Peter Maurin, published by the Dominican Press in Belgium, but the title has been given to many articles and editorials on the land movement, here, in Europe, and even in far off New Zealand.

Some Quaker Friends

Once when some Quaker friends came to visit us at the farming commune at Easton, they told us we had two great assets in our work on the farm,–one, our poverty, and two, our lack of leadership. We were much startled to hear this and much encouraged. It is true that our poverty should force us to use the means at hand, whether it be stone or earth for houses, if there is lacking wood. It is true our poverty should force us to work for food and clothing. It is true that when there is no educated, strong, and spiritual leadership, each man has to depend on himself.

Perhaps they were thinking of various Quaker and socialistic experiments of the past where wealth made things easy so that the poor did not exert themselves, and good leadership made the rank and file lean too heavily and depend too much on one man. So that when both funds and leadership were withdrawn, there was little hope for continuance of communities working together, and every man would be on his own again. "Too little indoctrination," Peter says.

But our Quaker visitors were not right. We did not have enough voluntary poverty. While professing poverty to the extent of going without salary, wearing cast-off clothes, sleeping in vermin-ridden and cold tenements,–still we clung to such comforts as the food we liked, the cigarettes we craved, magazines, newspapers, movies–the artificial tastes and desires built up in us by modern advertisers.

The issue of food is an important one, what with our running breadlines all over the country, and spending a great amount of money, running into tens of thousands of dollars, on food alone.

Peter remarked succinctly, "Eat what you raise, and raise what you eat, on farming communes."

Real Food

Given more land, we could raise pigs and corn and wheat on the soil we had at Easton, not to speak of cows, goats, and chickens, rabbits and bees. Such a principle would allow us bacon and ham, corn and wheat bread, honey, dairy products, fowl and eggs, and all the vegetables we could raise.

But to raise the food it was necessary to work, and those who were boss-minded and job-minded and were used to the cities, had a hard time adjusting themselves to work at the land's pace, and at the hours required by the seasons. The more people there were around, the less got done. Some cooked, washed dishes, carpentered, worked in the garden and tended the animals. But none worked hard enough. No one worked as I have seen sisters and brothers in monasteries work.

Food was the greatest trouble. You could not eat the brood sow, nor could you eat the pig you were fattening for slaughter later. You could not eat the chicks, nor did they begin to lay eggs at once. Cows eat much feed and do not give much milk at some seasons. You could not fatten the calf and eat it and still have the money for tools and seed.

Down to Basic Foods

So to make any beginning, without subsidies of any kind, voluntary poverty and asceticism of a kind were needed. One could of course live on bread and vegetables and oil or fat and wine. We had to rule out the latter at once because there were too many amongst us with a weakness, and St. Paul says to do without what causes your brother to stumble. So that brought us down to bread, fats and vegetables. And there were plenty of fruits in the summer. But most of us could not do without our tea and coffee. And the bread had to be a certain kind of bread, and the cereal a certain kind of cereal.

Corn meal mush was fit only for chickens! The yellow fresh-ground corn meal was too coarse for human consumption! When I was traveling throughout California visiting migrant camps, I saw the southerners who were staying in the government camp use the corn meal to make a paste to stop up the drafts around the floors of their ugly shanties.

The mother of one of the families on the farm made bread for all who lived on the farm, but there were those who could not eat it because it was not like store bread!

And the same family that made the bread would not use anything but refined white flour, because the children would not eat whole wheat.

Peter inveighed against packaged foods and canned goods, but those who came to us were not hermits and ascetics,–they were the poor and the bourgeois of a rich country, the poor who were used to some form of relief, the poor who with their pennies bought liquor and store foods, canned and packaged goods, because they didn't know anything about cooking, nor about foods.

They did not like fish, they did not like liver and kidneys nor anything but the red meat of an animal. They did not like salads or greens (fit for cows). And most certainly they did not like either whole wheat bread or corn meal mush.

Poor Cooks

Let me lay the blame where it belongs, and that is on the women, first of all, nor do I think I am being faithless to my sex in so saying. It was not the women who did the cooking in our houses of hospitality and our farming communes. It was the men. They did what they could, with the materials they were used to. But the result was that more time was spent in complaining about food, or doing without food, or spending money on food that should have been used to better purpose in building up the community.

Perhaps, having so nobly taken the blame on my own sex, we can put some of it on Peter too.

He was always willing, for the sake of making his point, to sacrifice order and success. He was always afraid of the argument of the pragmatist.

"Be what you want the other fellow to be," he kept on saying. "Don't criticize

what is not being done. See what there is to do, fit yourself to do it, then do it. Find the work you can perform, fit yourself to perform it, and then do it."

It was not that he did not know how things ought to be, so that he could have said, "do this, do that." His own life showed how he thought things ought to be.

"Everyone taking less, so that others can have more."

"The worker a scholar, and the scholar a worker."

"Each being the servant of all; each taking the least place."

"A leader leading by example as well as by word."

"I Am Not a Question Box"

When Peter was asked questions, he answered them if he felt strongly enough about it. If the question was too obvious, if he felt that it was not in his sphere of ethics and morality, he said, "I am not a question box." One question he always answered.

"I do not believe in majority rule. I do not believe in having meetings and elections. Then there would be confusion worse confounded, with lobbying, electioneering and people divided into factions."

No, the ideal rule was such as that of the monasteries, with an abbot and subjects. An abbot accepted by others and his authority obeyed with a perfect obedience. An abbot making the decisions, after accepting counsel of all, the youngest with the oldest.

But a farming commune, an agronomic university, was not a monastery. It should be a gathering together of families, a group of teachers whose authority was accepted, each in his own field. A baker would have charge of the bakery, the shoemaker of the shoes, the farmer of the fields, the carpenter of building.

But what if the baker makes white bread? What if the carpenter refused to use the materials God sends in the way of logs or second-hand lumber, and will not work except with the best and most expensive, and according to government specifications?

Well, they are not educated to be leaders. The work of education comes first. The work of education will be long. Meanwhile we learn by our mistakes. We learn the hard way. But is there any other way? And what if there are no leaders to direct the others?

Road to Leadership

We must build up leaders. And the leaders must first of all change themselves. And the job is so hard, so gigantic in this our day of chaos, that there is only one motive that can make it possible for us to live in hope,–that motive, love of God. There is a natural love for our fellow human being but that does not endure unless it is animated by the love of God. And even the love of family cannot endure without the love of God.

And if we do not live in love we are dead indeed, and there is no life in us.

"Do you ever become discouraged when you see our failures?" I asked Peter.

"No, because I know how deep-rooted the evil is. I am a radical and know that we must get down to the roots of the evil." And the gentle smile he turned on me was as though he said, "Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight steps and follow peace with all men."