

Education and Work

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Proposes a new attitude toward labor, which needs to be achieved through the educational system. Draws from Pius XII and Peter Maurin to articulate a mysticism of labor that promotes a wholeness of cult, culture and cultivation. This attitude advocates one to work for what one needs, not what one wants, so one can work for others in need. (DDLW #173).

A very interesting article in *The Life of the Spirit* (Blackfriar's, 34 Bloomsbury Rd., W.C. 1 London) on Work. "Intelligent parents of today, rather than leave their children a certain sum of money, prefer to spend their substance in giving them an education which will make them capable workers, whether the work be intellectual or manual. They are right; for persons of today, their real insurance consists in their capacity for work. The time will come for nuns also—and in a certain sense it has already come—when the most secure dowry for a young girl wishing to enter a convent will be her capacity for work." "Nuns' hands are always occupied. However, for the most part, their work has been almost entirely directed to maintaining the possessions of the community in good order. Poverty has been practiced particularly by means of economy, it has been sought to make things last; darns and patches have therefore been multiplied, time being taken up in excess of what a more rational economic organization would allow. Those who desire to produce must take account of the time factor." St. Teresa of Avila understood this when she said that she wanted her nuns to earn their living by their hands, in addition to living on the alms sent them. "To return to an economic organization" of convents "based on labor is only to return to" St. Teresa's primitive plan which was always her favorite." "While asking of nuns this effort for the organization of productive work, Holy Church has acted in a most motherly way, being anxious not only to secure their material subsistence, but also to help their spiritual life in the best way possible. Therefore, before giving expression to her requirements, as set forth in Article eight, (of the apostolic constitution, *Sponsa Christi*) Holy Church, in the explanatory part of the constitution, has represented to nuns in the happiest way how it is possible to combine this more intense application to work with that search for union with God which is characteristic of their contemplative life. These teachings are so rich, and may be foreseen as so fruitful, that they could serve as a basis for a 'mysticism of labor.' These teachings contain an appreciation of work both moral and spiritual."

This commentary shows not only how the Holy Father in his new directions to religious orders is meeting the needs of the time, and the criticisms of the time, but also how they are being received. There is meekness and humility both on the part of the vicar of Christ, and of those who comment on his pronouncements.

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We have often spoken of the collective wealth of orders and the individual poverty of religious, who often have not enough to buy stationery. We have spoken in THE CATHOLIC WORKER on how orders in the Church have been so plentifully supplied with property and the means of improving that property, of the alms of the faithful, and how little has been done to help families, each one of which is a “little church,” a “little community,” and how when that help is given, the world [sic] *alms* and *pauper* carry a stigma.

The new movements in the Church towards poverty and manual labor, a sharing with the poor and the destitute their hard lot in life, and side by side with this the persecution of the Church and its clergy and religious, and the despoiling of the Church of its property bringing about an involuntary precarity, go hand in hand with the pronouncements of Pope Pius XII who consoles his children and at the same time urges them to a new life. This new life would mean an intensification of the interior life, accent on community among the secular clergy, and accent on work, *productive work to earn a living*, among religious, according to the Holy Father’s recent directions.

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And all this renewal of life will overflow in benefits to the laity, perhaps in the very teaching that reaches the children in all our parochial schools. The teaching sisters are surely doing a tremendous job and earn their food by the sweat of their brow. But perhaps even here, and Peter Maurin talked of this so many times, there is needed a great change in attitude. Children, too, need to be taught a mysticism of labor. Peter Maurin used to call it a philosophy of work. Fr. Jimmy Tompkins used to say that all work should be considered in the light of the works of mercy. Is our work that we are preparing to do in life helping to feed, clothe, shelter people? Are children being taught a reverence for the soil, out of which all things come, since we are but dust? The table we work at, the food we eat, the bed we lie on, the covers on it, all come from the soil. To dig, to sow and reap, to build and construct,—all children love to do these things at first. But in school literacy takes first place and reading is no longer taught, beginning with the Little Office, Our Lady’s Primer.

I remember one of my young nieces coming home from school with a project book she was making. Her task was to furnish a home, to cut out all the things one would need in that home, and she pored over magazines, and cut out linoleum, furniture, kitchen sets, parlor sets, gadgets, and had a lovely time doing it. And all the while standards were being set up in her mind desires were being stimulated to buy what the advertisers present and to get the job, to get the money, to buy what the advertisers present.

I remember an Italian on Mott street just about to get married. His wife-to-be insisted on throwing out all the furniture that he had from his mother and buying a new set. Another neighbor was always discarding.

Indeed, our friends the Whelans, when they married, were able to furnish their home with the cast-offs of those who lived in tenements. Now they have acreage,

and a house built with their own hands,—they have the necessities of life, and not the luxuries.

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Are our children being taught not only to work for what they need, not what they want, and also to work for others, so that they will always have a surplus to give away? Are they taught to tithe themselves to give even one-tenth of what they are going to earn, to the poor?

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I think these things as I see my grandchildren going back to school. At home, Becky occasionally says, when she is made to run too many errands, “I am the chief slave around here.” She is seven and the eldest of six. Her mother says, “No, I am the chief slave, and you are first assistant.” Becky, Susie, Eric, Nicky and even Mary Elizabeth, at the age of two try to help. Mary will pick things up off the floor and bring them to you (she has not far to bend). Nicky loves to set the table, and bring out baskets of food when we are having a picnic under the mulberry trees. Everybody helps with the preparation of food. How they all love to go to the garden to pick squash, tomatoes, onions, cucumbers, green peppers and carrots. And they love to bring out the remainders to the 28 rabbits, 23 chickens and geese. It is the cleaning up, the washing of dishes, the putting away of things that are hard. The other night Bob Reynolds, editor of Jubilee, came by to pay a call on David to get some Belloc pictures. Tamar and I had forgotten about it, and David, when he returned home from his work at Wolfe Pond Park at four-thirty, reminded us that Bob was expected any minute.

“We haven’t a thing in the house,”—the usual womanly reaction

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But half an hour’s scurrying meant a feast. The children caught a chicken, David killed it. Tamar had the kettle on and scalded it so the feathers came off in a minute. The children loved to do this. It was cleaned, cut up, dipped in whole wheat flour and in the frying pan minutes after. Becky got busy at the cucumbers Eric brought in, and peeled and sliced them rather thick. There was sweet corn, and French fried potatoes take only a minute. There was whole wheat bread which Betty Lou had made at Peter Maurin Farm.

The children and I had our feast out under the trees, and Dave and Tamar and Bob ate in the cool and quiet house. We are never as orderly as we should be what with the accumulations of clothes in the bedrooms. If we’d thought of company, we would have picked up, instead of washing blankets. The woodwork and walls need paint. The furniture is broken down. But we all had fun, the children included.

Yesterday, Eric who is five, built a very creditable table, and Becky fed through for the chickens. “The table is very weak,” Eric said, with frank self-criticism. “But I think it is strong enough to eat ice cream on!”

How to work, to build up the habit of work, the love of work, these are the things children need to be taught. And we need the kind of schools where it is being taught.

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If we had this good foundation of productive work, culture would grow from it. Folk songs, folk art, folk dancing, are expression of the exuberance and joy and thankfulness for life. Cultivation and culture are based on Cult, which is our Holy Faith.

We have had two and three Masses a day at Peter Maurin farm for the past month. There is the rosary, prime, compline, vespers at Maryfarm. There is culture, which is the drawing which little Mac Smith does, and all the children love to do, and the reading and the listening to music, and the making of it. At Maryfarm Hector Black gave us a wonderful concert this summer on our old piano which he tuned. At Peter Maurin farm, we all joined in singing, Michael with Russian songs, Fr. Wencelaus with Polish, Stanley with Lithuanian, Fr. Pinet and the three seminarians who were visiting with French songs, and the Smith children with calypso! Cultivation completes the synthesis of cult, culture, and cultivation which Peter Maurin talked of so much.

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The farm at Newburgh, Maryfarm, is something to boast of, but the soil at Peter Maurin farm is very poor. Fr. Duffy's main job is to restore its fertility. Meanwhile, the fields begin to take on a checkerboard look, the garden is yielding us all our vegetables. The Hopi Indians raise their food from more obstinate land and they induce it with love to yield their necessities.

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To live in this way, with the sacraments of the Church and with a sacramental attitude towards the material things of life, this is indeed the good life, even though life and death are never far apart. "They [sic] has made my lines to fall in goodly places, O my God."