

# On Pilgrimage - December 1961

Dorothy Day

*The Catholic Worker*, December 1961, 1, 2, 7.

*Summary: Citing recent violence against missionaries, she wonders if they are being prepared to face death. Ponders the meaning of self-defense and the need to combat fear. Keywords: non-violence, prison, jail (DDLW #788).*

## AND MORE ABOUT CUBA

To cure unemployment and poverty in Puerto Rico, the United States has advocated birth control in Puerto Rico. The Castro government has not done this in Cuba.

Abortion and sterilization clinics have been set up in Japan to handle overpopulation problems and unemployment, with the tacit (?) approval of the United States. This has not happened in Cuba.

This last month, Archbishop Bernard Mels, Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and four of his missionaries were imprisoned in Leopoldville, after they had been manhandled and insulted, and twenty other priests beaten. There were reports that thirty of the 120 nuns of the archdiocese were manhandled. A third of the Congolese troops ran amuck and there was widespread rape in Luluabourg, Albertville and Kindu.

Nothing like this has happened in Cuba, though half the priests were deported (we do not know how many nuns) and all the church property nationalized. None of the priests or nuns are leaving the archdiocese in Africa, although there is almost a complete exodus of teachers, recruited over the last few months, according to an account in the diocesan press.

The killing and dismemberment of the thirteen Italian airmen which took place during the month was because they were taken for Belgians. They were flying supplies to a U.N. garrison of 200 Malaysians in Kindu, in the Kivu province. A drunken group of 80 soldiers of the central government perpetrated the crime. None of the 200 or so Europeans living in Kindu were harmed.

## To Overcome Fear

On the one hand the Holy Father and the hierarchy of the Church are begging for lay missionaries, for a papal peace corps, for skilled teachers, doctors, technicians

to go into missionary areas and we are wondering if these new recruits are getting any teaching about the necessity of laying down their lives for their brothers.

We have reached that stage, in the evolution of peace in England and America when it is not expected of a priest or sister to take up arms to defend themselves on missionary work in foreign countries. (On the other hand, the seminaries are half empty in France, due to the Algerian war, and eighty-five priests on active duty in the army signed a protest against the torture of Algerians by French troops last year.)

On the one hand missionaries go forth ready to die. And on the other hand, we have now a priest defending the right of man to defend his life, to ward off intruders from his family air raid shelter by force of arms. Of course a man is not going to hell for defending himself with a lethal weapon when he has never been taught non-violence, love of enemy, bearing wrongs patiently, doing good to those who spitefully use him, giving up his cloak when his coat is taken, laying down his life for his brother, in other words, living the Gospel way. To speak of men making the supreme sacrifice when they have been trained to kill, to drop bombs on unarmed men, women and children, the sick and old, is blasphemy if we seriously considered it.

A new commandment (not a counsel) was given us by Jesus Christ when he said we should love others as he had loved us, and forgive those who tortured and killed us.

It seems to me a part of the training of all who are in the papal peace corps or in any peace corps, should be in overcoming fear, the fear which paralyzes the flesh and would lead a man to take to any implement handy to wipe out his opponent's threat.

The theologians who justify a man's right to defend himself, are preaching *casuistry*, dealing with *cases* which should be dealt with in the confessional, not in the pulpit or the press.

## In Jail

Forgive me if I again speak of my paltry prison experiences. I do not mean to boast, but one must speak from *experience*, and one only meets closely those who have confessed to, or been, accused of murder, in our prisons. We may have murderers around us, among the hundreds who come in from the Skid Roads of our country to eat with us, but we ask no questions—a man has to eat. One has felt violence imminent, when a crazed Negro threatened to go berserk when a Bowery woman pushed off the table his new hat which a relative had bought him to attend the funeral of his son who had died the week before. And murder was committed by accident in our Troy New York house of hospitality years ago when one man knocked another man down in a sudden brawl.

But it was in jail I met a gentle woman, mother of five children, who had endured countless beatings from her husband. She was in the cell opposite me, crowded in on an extra bed, which took up all the available room in the cell which was meant for one cot, and she lay there with a look of utter despair on her face and did not eat or move, hour after hour.

That was the last year we were imprisoned, and since we refused to pay bail, we were placed on the floor with women awaiting trial. In our corridor there were two kidnapers and five women accused of murder.

## Murder and Kidnapping

There was a kidnapper down the row who knelt down each night by her cot and said the rosary and some novena prayers, and she urged any of the other women there to join her. By the time Deane and I were imprisoned, there were eight or ten, kneeling around the bed.

It was only this praying which drew the new prisoner out of her despair. That touch of beauty in the midst of this place of horror in which she for the first time in her life found herself, drew her back into the current of life around her. She told me later of her crime, her terror as she felt her husband's hands close about her throat and before breath was choked off completely her clutching at a knife she had been using to cut bread with for her children, and her stabbing him in the side, to make him release his hold on her. It was instinctive, this seizing of any weapon. Could she be considered guilty? I don't know what disposition the judge made of the case, but I am pretty sure, with the testimony of neighbors and with good counsel, if she had it, her crime could have been called **self defense**. Certainly any priest would have absolved her in the confessional. It takes three things, all of them combined, to make a mortal sin, serious matter, due deliberation and full consent of the will.

I am sure it was of these things that Fr. McHugh was thinking as he wrote his article in **America**. Frantic with fear for his loved ones at an impending raid, and undoubtedly for himself, having sacrificed much to build, at the persuasion of our "leaders," our own Governor of New York, even our President, what he considered an adequate shelter, a dungeon where he and his family were to be imprisoned for weeks, a man pretty certainly would kill when others, as frantic as himself, and without money to build tried to crowd in with him. I can only think he is as likely to be shot as to shoot. But providing he does kill the intruder, and does get out finally and find a priest, undoubtedly that priest, with his moral theology, will find him innocent of mortal sin and not in danger of hell fire, or rather of any more hell than the hell he comes out to. We are now living in a hell with our fears, our despairs, which are filling our mental hospitals, and skid roads around the country.

## Unemployment

We have a good article by Ed Turner on Peter Maurin this month and Peter was more preoccupied with unemployment than with any other issue and certainly if you consider this old adage, “the devil finds work for idle hands to do,” we can apply it to our present arms race. It is only war and the threat of war that keeps as many people employed as we have today. And yet there is enough poverty and destitution in the world to keep our own economy busy providing for others and keep everyone here employed. “From each according to his ability and to each according to his need,” Karl Marx said. And St. Paul said, “Let your abundance supply their want.” “Bear ye one another’s burdens.” “Love one another, for love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Peter talked about a philosophy of work, which would mean, I take it, that we would accept dull work, and monotonous work, which was nevertheless useful work, as part of our human condition, necessary for the common good, and doing penance for turning from God by earning our living by the sweat of our brow. It would mean also that man would seek creative work too, and so fulfil himself as one made in the image and likeness of God Who is Creator. Fr. de Menasce said once that emphasis on sex is the result of man not being able to satisfy his creative instinct in **work**.

## Chekhov

This last month I have been reading a lot of Chekhov, beginning with an article by Thomas Mann in which he quotes Chekhov as saying continually “am I not deceiving my readers, in not being able to answer his most important question?” “No other utterance ever had such an impact on me; in fact it prompted my close study of Chekhov’s biography,” Mann writes. That question which Chekhov brings out in all his stories is “What is to be done?” What is life for? Chekhov’s conclusion is that we are here to work, to serve our brother, and he was a doctor and wrote on the side in order to support himself through medical school and to support also his father, mother and brothers. He said toward the close of his life that much had been done for the sick but nothing for the prisoner so he set out to visit the far off prison island of Sakhalin, travelling by carriage over flooded country side, and finally spending three months with the convicts, in the convict colony north of Vladivostok, a visit which resulted in many reforms.

Not to be a parasite, not to live off of others, to earn our own living by a life of service, this answered the question for him. And we have too that sureness of an answer—We must try to make that kind of a society in which it is easier for man to be good. “If you love me, keep my commandments,” God says.

Man needs work, the opportunity to work, the tools to work with, the strength to work, the will to work. And when we see a Castro dealing with the problem of unemployment and poverty and illiteracy, we can only say—“We will see this

good in him, that which is of God in every man,” and we will pray for him and for his country daily.

## **Warships South of Cuba**

I do not wonder Cuba protested the presence of warships in the waters near Cuba, facing the Dominican Republic. And that protest took the form of an assertion by Premier Castro that he was a Marxist-Leninist, and that he would work for a consolidation of his own party with that of the Communists. But even in the reports that came from radio and press there were discrepancies, and I should like very much to read the entire speech. The radio stated that he had been a communist all along, throughout his college years but did not wish to come out openly. The New York Times spoke of his “conversion” as recent. I should say it was as recent as the gunboats off the Dominican Republic.

## **Bishop Sheen’s Quotation**

I heard Bishop Sheen tell once the story of the two sons in the Gospel, a story which Jesus himself told. There were two sons, and the Father told them both to go out to certain tasks. The one son said “I will,” and then failed to do the work assigned him. The other said “I won’t,” and yet went away and did the Father’s will. And which of the two sons found favor with the Father?

Marjorie Hughes was reminded of the parable in the Gospel of the man born blind who said to his questioners, after he had been hectoring and badgered by men who said, “ ‘Give glory to God. We ourselves know that this man is a sinner.’ He therefore said, ‘Whether he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know, that whereas I was blind, now I see.’ ”

The Cuban people are in that state now, and so are the poor and oppressed of South America, of all Latin America. One thing they know, and that is that work and schooling, land and bread are being provided, and that the Colossus whom they feared and hated, the Yankee of the north, had been defied.

We are not going to win the masses to Christianity until we live it.

## **Christmas Just the Same**

One of the most cheerful thing about Christmas is contemplating the Babe in the crib, in the cold stable, worshipped by Joseph and Mary, and to realize, “the government is upon his shoulders.”

God knows whereof we are made. He knows we are but dust. He knows what we have need of. He holds us in the hollow of his hands. Even though He slay me yet shall I trust in Him. Underneath are the everlasting arms. All these echoes

from Scripture are of comfort. All power is His, weak though He appears, This I do believe, help Thou my unbelief, dear Lord.

Last year we had a snowy Christmas, some of us from the Catholic Worker, at the Peter Maurin farm. Helene Iswolsky was with us, and others came in during the day. My diary says "There is a Belgian crisis, a general strike because of the austerity regime." "Wealth used to pour into Belgium from the Congo, and this wealth was used to employ the unemployed," one newspaper commented. Now where there were 20,000 Belgians in the city of Leopoldville, there are 4,000. The rest have gone back to Belgium to swell the ranks of the unemployed."

And my diary goes on to recount our guests, Jonas and Larry Evers, Larry coming down at four o'clock in the morning, walking down icy Bloomingdale road with all his clown paraphernalia. After breakfast he put on his clown costume, and went into all his clown tricks, making bird noises, playing the shell game and a Punch and Judy show. He also had a bird and a mouse and he left with a kitten and some homemade bread. Helene said it was like a medieval player arriving on a holiday. Beth and Frances came last year and will also this year, and there was Anne Marie and others, and we feasted. On a holiday like this I comfort myself for our abundant board by remembering how the poor with whom I have lived in slums for many years, know food and how to prepare it, food bought off pushcarts, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Jews, all live well around holiday time and their kitchens smell delightfully. Feasts are truly feasts with them. At the farm, Deane has the gift of making a meal of blackeyed peas (with garlic, celery and salt pork), and corn bread on the side which is a feast. And her cinnamon bread for feast days makes a truly good and nourishing breakfast, made as it is with powdered eggs and milk, and the bread and coffee are a simple meal after Mass.

We wish all our readers a most happy and most holy feast day, this Christmas, and New Year.