

On Pilgrimage - September 1975

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Summary: Eulogizes Arthur Sheehan who was a Catholic Worker for many years and a biographer of Peter Maurin. Remembers him as a calm presence, an ecumenist, peacemaker, author, and contemplative. Keyword: obituary (DDLW #555).

One of our editors, the only one of us who had the diligence and the perseverance to research and write the biography of Peter Maurin, our founder, died last month and was buried from Our Lady Star of the Sea Church on City Island, N.Y., where he had been living for some years. Arthur Sheehan was like a son to Peter and accompanied him on many of his speaking trips, especially through the New England area. In both the Boston and New York houses of hospitality, he was always on hand to listen as Peter worked out his ideas, which he expressed so succinctly in what we titled his Easy Essays. In fact, we were all a little bit jealous that Peter obviously chose Arthur's companionship to that of any of the rest of us around the CW. We were all too often too busy to pay attention to the clarification of thought that was going on.

Arthur was first associated with us at the Boston house on Tremont Street, which he and John Magee started early in the Thirties. It was near the Common, which, in its dignified, New England way, was like our own Union Square. Men gathered there to discuss ideas. It would be hard to tell of all the paths that clarification led Arthur on. After working in the Boston house, he went to the farm in Upton started by the Boston group. Two or three families are still living there, and there, also, the arts flourish, what with Carl Paulson and his stained-glass window work. Another house of hospitality was started in nearby Worcester, and many were the conferences held on the Upton farm for the Catholic young people of our houses in New England, which included, in those days, houses in Rutland, plus a farm and a house in Burlington, Vt.

Around New York

Arthur finally settled with us in New York, and during the Second World War helped edit the **Catholic Worker** with David Mason. He also helped run the house of hospitality, when all the young men around the place had been drafted,

or were in conscientious objector camps, or in jail. Arthur had aided in the start of these C. O. camps.

The young women with us were busy taking care of several young mothers, who came to us from the hospital with fatherless children. One baby's father had been a German waiter with Nazi tendencies, and the other young mother was a Jew, and Julia Porcelli and I had a hard time keeping the peace on the women's floors. But Arthur was always calm, though he did find the house too big to handle, and rented a little apartment across the street, where he took in several old and ailing men, exemplifying the personalism which Peter taught.

Arthur was always trying to emphasize the idea of smallness and decentralization in one way or another. When it came to the idea of a farming commune, he suggested that we start one in a nearby vacant lot, but we did not see his vision and I'm afraid we laughed. (Now, the San Francisco House has just such a garden on a nearby lot, where it produces many a good vegetable, and flowers too. It is sheltered from the street by almost a hedge of sunflowers, and is a nice place to sit and meditate in the midst of the busy city.)

After Peter's death in 1949, and Arthur's marriage, we did not see so much of him around the Catholic Worker. He enjoyed coming to Friday night meetings and entering into the discussions. I saw him also at the little chapel behind Old St. Patrick's Cathedral, where an Eastern rite liturgy was celebrated each Sunday. It was, and is still, a beautiful Russian choir and I often went on a Sunday morning. After the liturgy there was a little breakfast and a chance to meet old friends.

Varied Works

How wide and varied were Arthur's interests! He made a long and detailed study of Peter's life and got in touch with many of his relatives in France. The title of his book is unfortunate, **The Gay Believer**, but Arthur wished to emphasize Peter's joyful spirit. Arthur liked to compare him with St. Philip Neri, probably because Peter liked to speak in the parks and on street corners and buses, on his way to and from engagements where he had been invited to lecture. Philip Neri had been just such a speaker. Arthur also wrote biographies of Rose Hawthorne, Father Damien, and Pope John XXIII. And years ago he published a pamphlet on parish credit unions.

How varied his interests – not only the Russian Choir, the ecumenical movement, but also Abie Nathan's Peace Ship, which went into dangerous waters to broadcast to Israeli and Arab alike, pleas for a peaceful settlement of their tragic war. When the ship was in harbor here, and when Abie Nathan was fund-raising and travelling around the country, begging for the expensive equipment needed, Arthur lived on the ship in the harbor – just another aspect of his own work for peace.

There was a black group who came with their pastor all the way from New Jersey to City Island that early morning for Arthur's funeral. Were some of them Haitians? Arthur had worked with them and with Cardinal Terence Cooke, preparing much of the background material on Pierre Toussaint, which was presented to the Vatican in 1968 to initiate the hoped-for beatification of the saintly Haitian, who had settled in New York and who is buried in the beautiful little graveyard next to Old St. Patrick's, on Mott Street. We were happy to hear the pastor of the little church on City Island read a passage from Cardinal Cooke, adding his eulogy to ours.

It does not seem like more than a few years ago that we moved to First Street, and there we had a summer of delays, just as we have been having in the new Maryhouse on Third Street this summer. Someone had to be at First Street then to receive the workers and the steel beams, the new windows and metal self-closing doors and suchlike requirements of the city for the repair of the house, and Arthur was often on duty there until the first of his heart attacks hospitalized him for a time.

His life, I told him once, was like that of a good Buddhist; the first third given to education, the second to marriage and family, and the third to that of a hermit, after a fashion, on City Island.

A rich life, Arthur's, a scholar among the poor of Boston and New York, worshipping with the Russians in their choir, close to the blacks with the cause of Pierre Toussaint, with the Jews with Abie Nathan, even, in a small way, with the Arabs (I know of two around the Catholic Worker) and finally with the Buddhist pattern of life these last years. Now he rests with his fellow Catholics in Calvary cemetery in Brooklyn; now he is with Peter Maurin and other Catholic Workers.

We believe, O happy phrase in the Credo, in "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." We are indeed immortal.

This Summer

Last winter, I spent pretty much in solitude on Staten Island, in that I was away from the work in a little beach house, which we have been trying to keep, not only as a place for recreation, but as a little house of prayer and study. This summer, I have spent most of my time at Tivoli, at the farm, which has been teeming with visitors so that we are always being confronted at meals with people we do not know. Some are "off the road," as the saying is. Some have been brought to us by the highway police, or sent to us by the state hospital. There are scholars and workers and one never knows "who is who." Many people have taken to the road these days, young and old, looking for a congenial commune, or for work. Sometimes we do not quite know what we are, who we are, but I do know this – it is comforting, in a way, to live in a crowd. There is always some work to do; there are few pressures; there is always someone to talk to; there is always the incredible beauty of the Hudson River and surrounding woods.

And there is our beautiful, little chapel, where we say vespers and compline each night and find a silence and solitude during the day, to read, meditate, take stock, one might say. Often I am tempted to depression, thinking that I have scarcely begun to live a spiritual life, even to live the way we all profess to, that of voluntary poverty and manual labor. It is a great cleanser of conscience, this living in community, with so many poor and suffering. That harsh saying, “You love God as much as the one you love the least,” often comes to mind. But, just to say over and over again that one prayer, the **Our Father**, is to revive, to return to a sense of joy. “The worst malady of all is sadness,” caused by lack of trust in the Lord and the desire to impose our own will on Him. Pope John wrote this in one of his letters to his family. In another place, there is this – “I repeat: to know how to say the **Our Father**, and to know how to put it into practice, this is the perfection of the Christian life.”

This massive volume of Pope John’s letters to his family, printed by McGraw Hill, and which I have had for some time and should have reviewed long since, has been a most valuable spiritual reading for me. It is probably an expensive book – it is certainly heavy to hold. But for anyone trying to maintain a sense of peace and joy in a world of struggle and poverty and violence (and ceaseless preparations for war) it is invaluable. There is not only the “ordinariness” of the peasant family he came from, but his own great devotion to his family, and his humility and holiness. He gives me courage and, believing in “the communion of saints,” I pray to him often, living in community as we do and tempted, as we all are, to over much talking and neglect of immediate duties. How delightful to **read** about the spiritual life and how hard to **live** it. Here I am, late in getting my column to our managing editor, and late in answering letters. Excuse me, please.