

December

% Dorothy Day

December 1948, pp. 166 - 175

Summary: Meditation on the spiritual weapons of voluntary poverty and manual labor. Lists work to be avoided and personal practices of nonparticipation while exploitation in labor continues. Calls for decentralized living. Recommends growing in acceptance of God's providence and seeing good in others. Reflects on silence during Advent, a time of waiting and a time to examine one's conscience, a time "to see only what is loveable." (DDLW #486).

FOR THE LAST month I have meditated on the use of spiritual weapons. In Father John J. Hugo's pamphlet "Weapons of the Spirit," he advocates as weapons devotion to the Sacred Heart and the Rosary. The love of the humanity of our Lord is the love of our brother. The only way we have to show our love for God is by the love we have for our brother. "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, you have done it unto Me." "You love God as much as the one you love the least."

Love of brother means voluntary poverty, stripping one's self, putting off the old man, denying one's self, etc. It also means nonparticipation in those comforts and luxuries which have been manufactured by the exploitation of others. While our brothers suffer, we must compassionate them, suffer with them. While our brothers suffer from lack of necessities, we will refuse to enjoy comforts. These resolutions, no matter how hard they are to live up to, no matter how often we fail and have to begin over again, are part of the vision and the long-range view which Peter Maurin has been trying to give us these past years. These ideas are expressed in the writings of Eric Gill. And we must keep this vision in mind, recognize the truth of it, the necessity for it, even though we do not, cannot, live up to it. Like perfection. We are ordered to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, and we aim at it, in our intention, though in our execution we may fall short of the mark over and over. St. Paul says, it is by little and by little that we proceed.

If these jobs do not contribute to the common good, we pray God for the grace to give them up. Have they to do with shelter, food, clothing? Have they to do with the works of mercy? Father Tompkins of Nova Scotia says that everyone should be able to place his job in the category of the works of mercy.

This would exclude jobs in advertising, which only increases people's useless desires. In insurance companies and banks, which are known to exploit the poor of this country and of others. Banks and insurance companies have taken over land and built huge collective farms, ranches, plantations, of 30,000, 100,000 acres, and have dispossessed the poor man. Loan and finance companies have further defrauded him. Movies [and] radio have further enslaved him. So that he has no time nor thought to give to his life, either of soul or body. Whatever has contributed to his misery and degradation may be considered a bad job and not to be worked at.

If we examine our conscience in this way, we would soon be driven into manual labor, into humble work, and so would become more like our Lord and our Blessed Mother.

Poverty means nonparticipation. It means what Peter calls regional living. This means fasting from tea, coffee, cocoa, grapefruit, pineapple, etc., from things not grown in the region in which one lives. One day last winter we bought broccoli which had the label on it of a corporation farm in Arizona or Texas, where we had seen men, women, and children working at two o'clock in the morning with miners' lamps on their foreheads, in order to avoid the terrible heat of the day, which often reached 125 degrees. These were homeless migrants, of which there are some million in the United States. Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Fields*, which you can get at any library, tells of the conditions of these workers. For these there is "no room at the inn."

We ought not to eat food produced under such conditions. We ought not to smoke, not only because it is a useless habit but also because tobacco impoverishes the soil and pauperizes the farmer, and means women and children working in the fields.

Poverty means having a bare minimum in the way of clothes and seeing to it that these are made under decent working conditions, proper wages and hours, etc. The union label tries to guarantee this. Considering the conditions in woolen mills, it would be better to raise one's own sheep and angora goats and rabbits, and spin and weave and make one's own blankets and stockings and suits. Many groups are trying to do these things throughout the country, both as a remedy for unemployment and for more abundant living.

As for the dislocation in employment if everyone started to give up their jobs? Well, decentralized living would take care of such a situation. And when we look at the dirty streets and lots in our slums, the unpainted buildings, the necessity of a nationwide housing project, the tearing down that needs to be done (if we do not in the future wish to have it done in the hard way and have them bombed down), then we can see that there is plenty of employment for all in the line of providing food, clothing, and shelter for our own country and for the world. We should read Eric Gill, A. J. Pentty, and Father Vincent McNabb on the machine.

Poverty means not riding on rubber while horrible working conditions prevail in the rubber industry. Read Vicki Baum's *Weeping Wood* and André Gide's

Congo Journey. Poverty means not riding on rails while bad conditions exist in the coal mines and steel mills. Poverty means not accepting that courteous bribe from the railroads, the clergy rate. Railroads have been built on robbery and exploitation. There are stagecoaches, of course, and we are only about a century past them. But pilgrims used to walk, and so did the saints. They walked from one end of Europe and Russia to the other. We need saints.

Father Meus, the Belgian who is a Chinese citizen since his missionary life began in China, has walked thousands of miles. He said he would dearly love to walk from one end of the United States to the other. Of course, we are not all given the grace to do such things. But it is good to call to mind the *vision*. It is true, indeed, that until we begin to develop a few apostles along these lines, we will have no mass conversions, no social justice, no peace. We need saints. God, give us saints!

How far we all are from it! We do not even see our infirmities. Common sense tells us, "Why live in a slum? It is actually cheaper to live in a model housing project, have heat and hot water, a mauve or pink bath and toilet, etc. We can manage better; we have more time to pray, to meditate, study. We would have more money to give to the poor." Yes, this is true according to the candlelight of common sense, but not according to the flaming heat of the Sun of justice. Yes, we will have more time with modern conveniences, but we will not have more love. "The natural man does not perceive the things of the spirit." We need to be fools for Christ. What if we do have to buy coal by the bucket instead of by the ton? Let us squander money, be as lavish as God is with His graces, as He is with His fruits of the earth.

Let us rejoice in poverty, because Christ was poor. Let us love to live with the poor, because they are specially loved by Christ. Even the lowest, most depraved – we must see Christ in them and love them to folly. When we suffer from dirt, lack of privacy, heat and cold, coarse food, let us rejoice.

When we are weary of manual labor and think, "What foolishness to shovel out ashes, build fires, when we can have steam heat! Why sew when it can be better done on a machine? Why laboriously bake bread when we can buy so cheaply?" Such thoughts have deprived us of good manual labor in our city slums and have substituted shoddy store-bought goods, clothes, and bread.

Poverty and manual labor – they go together. They are weapons of the spirit, and very practical ones, too. What would one think of a woman who refused to wash her clothes because she had no washing machine, or clean her house because she had no vacuum, or sew because she had no machine? In spite of the usefulness of the machine, and we are not denying it, there is still much to be done by hand. So much, one might say, that it is useless to multiply our tasks, go in for work for work's sake.

But we must believe in it for Christ's sake. We must believe in poverty and manual labor for love of Christ and for love of the poor. It is not true love if we

do not know them, and we can only know them by living with them, and if we love with knowledge we will love with faith, hope, and charity.

On the one hand, there is the sadness of the world – and on the other hand, when I went to church today and the place was flooded with sunshine, and it was a clear, cold day outside, . . . suddenly my heart was so flooded with joy and thankfulness and so overwhelmed at the beauty and the glory and the majesty of our God that I could only think of St. Dionysius, “Concerning the Godhead”:

It is the Cause and Origin and Being and Life of all creation. And It is to them that fall away from It a Voice that doth recall them and a Power by which they rise; and to them that have stumbled into a corruption of the Divine Image within them, It is a Power of Renewal and Reform; and a Sacred Grounding to them that feel the shock of unholy assault, and a Security to them which stand; an upward Guidance to them that are being drawn unto It, and a Principle of Illumination to them that are being enlightened; a Principle of Perfection to them that are being perfected; a Principle of Deity to them that are being deified; and of Simplicity to them that are being brought into simplicity; and of Unity to them that are being brought into unity.

The immanence of God in all things! “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). “He is not far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27).

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength.

And these words which I command thee this day shall be in thy heart. And thou shalt tell them to thy children. And thou shalt meditate upon them sitting in thy house, and walking on thy journey, sleeping and rising. And thou shalt bind them as a sign on thy hand; and they shall be and move [as frontlets] between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them in the entry, and on the doors of thy house. (Deut. 6:4-9)

The winter before Tamar was born, we lived in a little apartment on West Street looking out over the Hudson River docks which was as sun-filled as the chapel in which I meditated. And on the doors of that little apartment, down the street from St. Christopher’s Church, in an apartment over a tavern, there were those holy words enclosed and tacked upon the doorpost inside that house. I was strangely moved when it was explained to me by a Russian Jew, a Communist, what it meant. I understand one can find many an apartment in New York, and doubtless in many of our cities with their large Jewish populations, with such small metal containers, hanging unnoticed by the door frame. I feel like going to one of the Hebrew stores on the East Side and purchasing one so that hereafter, always, it may hang on the door of my house. We need these reminders.

When the world is too much with us, how wonderful to think on these things, to let the mind rest on these things, to rejoice in these words: God is Light, Infinite Beauty, Goodness, “for there is no good save only God.”

One very dreary, dark morning a year ago, when the dark, cold mist hung like a slime over the streets and tenements around Mott Street, I had been at Mass down at Transfiguration Church, where there was a mission going on. The priest gave a very good homily on the commandment “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” Each day he was talking on the commandments, one by one.

In his talk he said that any murmuring against God could be included in the violation of this commandment. He talked of “acceptance” of the will of God in whatever the day brought forth. His talk emphasized the virtue of abandonment to Divine Providence. He even brought in the weather.

And yet as I left the church and stopped to exchange some words with a neighbor, my first words were “Miserable weather, isn’t it?” I was immediately conscious of my lapse and laughed at myself as I went down the street.

But it is true that most of our complaining can be construed as thoughtless complaining against God and His Providence. I remember reading once in Romain Rolland that we Western people have lost the beautiful quality of acceptance. Many writers on the East have talked of the philosophical calm and “acceptance” of the Eastern, the Oriental, in the face of heat and cold, disaster and suffering.

Cynically, our Westerner may say that is why they do nothing about poverty and filth and disease. Many of our soldiers were disgusted rather than pitiful at the poverty they saw everywhere, as though it came of choice and sloth. I have heard them express themselves so in regard to our own South. Certainly we Westerners have poverty, filth, and disease side by side with our wealth and comfort. I do not think much of that wealth and comfort, that shining civilization of gadgets and electric lights and skyscrapers, radio and movies. There was the ancient city of Ur out of which Abraham came. I like to turn my thoughts back to Memphis, that great city of Egypt, and Babylon, whose walls extended for forty miles in circumference. And there the Jews sat and wept when they remembered Zion, Jerusalem the golden, so many times razed to the ground.

“Praise the Lord, O my soul. Let all that is within me praise His holy name.”

No matter what happens, it is possible to praise, and it is impossible to praise God without that swelling of joy within the breast.

And people! What about people – the evil that men do? I think of Sister Peter Claver and her saying that women’s job is to love.

One summer Sister Peter Claver was rebuilding an old farmhouse over in Jersey which was going to be used as a retreat house for Negroes. The place was a wreck – it had not been used for years – and there was work to do in roofing

it, painting it, [and] repairing it, and Sister had no money. She came to the Catholic Worker [house] and asked if anyone wanted to work for God. She had to beg for every scrap of paint, shingle, [and] lumber she put into it, getting what she needed week by week.

Two of our men volunteered. Both of them were men who drank, one steadily, the other periodically. John, who drank steadily, went out to Jersey for the summer and never touched a drop for the months he was there. Hugh went out and worked hard, but again and again was tempted and fell. In addition to his other work, he carved a huge beam which separated the sanctuary from the pews in the room they made into a chapel, and he made a crucifix. He had learned these crafts at the Catholic Worker [house].

Sister never became discouraged in her loving charity. She loved these men and brought out the best in them. I've been inclined to attribute that loving warmth of Sister Peter Claver to the fact that she is half-Jewish and half-Irish. It is in her nature to be warm and loving, to see the good in others, I argue to myself. But true it is, she forgives seventy times seven, she sees always the good in the other, she sees a man as made in the image and likeness of God, a temple of the Holy Ghost, the brother of Christ.

Oh, the joy there is in that warmth and love. Bernanos wrote, "Every particle of Christ's divine charity is today more precious for your security – for your security, I say – than all the specie in the vaults of the American government."

ADVENT IS a time of waiting, of expectation, of silence. Waiting for our Lord to be born. A pregnant woman is so happy, so content. She lives in such a garment of silence, and it is as though she were listening to hear the stir of life within her. One always hears that stirring compared to the rustling of a bird in the hand. But the intentness with which one awaits such stirring is like nothing so much as a blanket of silence.

Be still. Did I hear something?

Be still and see that I am God.

Zundel, in *Our Lady of Wisdom*, has some beautiful passages on silence:

Do we understand at last that action must be born in silence, and abide in silence, and issue in silence, and that its power must be an emanation and the radiation of silence, since its sole aim is to make men capable of hearing the Word that silently reverberates in their souls?

All speech and reasoning, all eloquence and science, all methods and all psychologies, all slogans and suggestions are not worth a minute of silence in which the soul, completely open, yields itself to the embrace of the Spirit.

In solitude Christ speaks to the heart, as a modest lover who embraces not His beloved before all the world.

In silence we hear so much that is beautiful. The other day I saw a young mother who said, “The happiest hour of the day is that early morning hour when I lie and listen to the baby practicing sounds and words. She has such a gentle little voice.”

St. James says, “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.” And how much more women need this gift of silence. It is something to be prayed for. Our Lady certainly had it. How little of her there is in the Gospel, and yet all generations have called her blessed. [James says,]

Behold, how small a fire, how great a forest it kindles. And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity. The tongue is placed among our members, defiling the whole body, and setting on fire the course of our life, being itself set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird and serpent and the rest is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But the tongue no man can tame – it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless God the Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made after the likeness of God. [James 3:5-9]

To love with understanding and without understanding. To love blindly, and to folly. To see only what is lovable. To think only on these things. To see the best in everyone around, their virtues rather than their faults. To see Christ in them.

Many people think an examination of conscience is a morbid affair. Péguy has some verses which Donald Gallagher read to me once in the St. Louis House of Hospitality. (He and Cy Echele opened the house there.) They were about examination of conscience. There is a place for it, he said, at the beginning of the Mass. “I have sinned in thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” But after you get done with it, don’t go on brooding about it; don’t keep thinking of it. You wipe your feet at the door of the church as you go in, and you do not keep contemplating your dirty feet.

Here is my examination at the beginning of Advent, at the beginning of a new year. Lack of charity, criticism of superiors, of neighbors, of friends and enemies. Idle talk, impatience, lack of self-control and mortification towards self, and of love towards others. Pride and presumption. (It is good to have visitors – one’s faults stand out in the company of others.) Self-will, desire not to be corrected, to have one’s own way. The desire in turn to correct others, impatience in thought and speech.

The remedy is recollection and silence. Meanness about giving time to others and wasting it myself. Constant desire for comfort. First impulse is always to make myself comfortable. If cold, to put on warmth; if hot, to become cool; if hungry, to eat; and what one likes – always the first thought is of one’s own comfort. It is hard for a woman to be indifferent about little material things.

She is a homemaker, a cook; she likes to do material things. So let her do them *for others*, always. Woman's job is to love. Enlarge Thou my heart, Lord, that Thou mayest enter in.

And now, with all this talk of silence, I finish this long account of the year. I send the book out with diffidence. It is the work of a journalist who writes because it is her talent; it has been her means of livelihood. And it is sent out with the hopes that it will *sell* so that the printing bill will be paid, and enough [will be] left over to bring out another book next year – perhaps the book about Peter Maurin as well as a book by another of the Catholic Worker editors. We write also to help support the work which we are doing, because we have a very big family, ranging in age from the infant twins at 115 Mott Street to an eighty-four-year-old woman who wandered in from the streets. It is written most personally because I am a woman who can write no other way. If it is preaching and didactic in parts, it is because I am preaching and teaching and encouraging myself on this narrow road we are treading.

“Life,” said St. Teresa, “is but a night spent in an uncomfortable inn, crowded together with other wayfarers.”

There are bills to pay at an inn, of course, and they are one of the reasons which led me to send this manuscript forth in the care of St. Joseph, patron of all families. May God bless it, and you who read it.

This selection is from the new edition of *On Pilgrimage* by Dorothy Day with a foreword by Michael O. Garvey and an introduction by Mark and Louise Zwick, published in 1999 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. *On Pilgrimage* is available for purchase at your local bookstore or directly from Eerdmans (800-253-7521 or sales@eerdmans.com.) Outside of the USA contact T&T Clark, LTD <http://www.tandtclark.co.uk>.