

# No Party Line

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*Summary:*

Points to the Little Way of St. Therese of Lisieux as the way to respond to the suffering and tragedy around us. Ties Therese's desire to increase love in the world with acts of protest, picketing, speaking out - the importance of even one person's actions and collaborating with others who affirm life.

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When we read in the Daily News or Mirror of a captain of a freighter battling the elements and risking his life to save his ship in a ferocious sea, or of the killing of a pants salesman in Brooklyn, or of the death of one little child from beating and starvation, our hearts are torn. We have a fatalistic sense of taking part in a gigantic tragedy, a fearful adventure. Our life is charged with drama, about which we can do nothing. Our role is already written for us.

The war itself in which we are engaged takes on that great simplicity. We are at war because of our sins. All the suffering, the misery Of the needy and the groaning of the poor is part of the world suffering which makes up the sufferings of Christ.

Most of us try to forget and get what joy we can: "eat drink and be merry." Even the great St. Teresa was said to have remarked as she danced during a recreation hour, to the scandal of the other nuns, "One has got to do something to make life bearable," and the philosophers become existentialist and nurse their noble despair.

One of the reasons I am writing a life of the Little Flower is because she was determined to do something about it, even though she was imprisoned to all intents and purposes, in a small French convent in Normandy, unknown to all the world. She is the Saint of the little way, the Saint of the responsible.

She was a Saint, so her words were scattered like seeds profligately all over the world. Books about her are read, her autobiography has gone into many editions, but the social implications of her teachings are yet to be written. The significance of our smallest acts! The significance of the little things we leave undone! The protests we do not make, the stands we do not take, we who are living in the world!

I'm not trying to say that the Little Flower would have gone out on picket lines and spoken on Communist platforms or embraced her Protestant neighbors, if there were any in the town of Alencon. She was a product of her environment, bourgeois, middle class, the daughter of skilled workers, comfortable, frugal people who lived apart from the world with their eyes on God, and yet were very much a part of the world at that time, with the Franco Prussian war, its aftermath of fear and hysteria and visions and prophecies. She wanted everything, every apostolate, she said, both when she was a child and later as a young woman, and she used the means at her disposal to participate in everything, to increase the sum total of the love of God in the world by every minute act, every suffering, every movement of her body and soul, done for the love of God and the love of souls. She used the spiritual weapons everyone of us have at our disposal.

All this is by way of preamble for the stands we have taken, the protests we have made during the month. We have gone to Protestant meetings to listen to Thomas Sugrue and I have written favorably of him in the *Commonweal*; I have spoken at Carnegie Hall against the Smith and McCarron acts, with Communists and fellow travellers; others of us have walked on picket lines protesting the payment of income tax and lastly there have been four days of picketing the Spanish consulate in New York in protest against the executions of the five Spanish trade unionists. These last demonstrations were headed by Norman Thomas, the highly respected Socialist, and included the aid of the I. W. W., Catholics, the Independent Socialist League and others. I assume the Communists were not invited. On this last picket line, a young Negro girl, commenting on **The Catholic Worker**, said to a fellow radical, "These Catholic Workers will demonstrate with anybody."

Perhaps it was meant as an insult (we Catholics are very sensitive to insult) but one could also understand it to mean, in St. Paul's words, we were trying to be all things to all men, and also in Peter Maurin's words, "we have no party line."

In making this open confession of our collaborations, I forgot to mention that we filed a protest in the Rosenberg case (who were sentenced to death for treason), and I had been asked to serve on a Rosenberg Committee and a Woman's for Peace Committee, but had refused because the grandchildren were having mumps and I was more interested in washing diapers and minding babies than I was in serving on Committees. It was one thing to dash out into the fray and speak once in a while, or march on a picket line. It was another thing to serve on a committee.

Tony Aratari, who is at present studying at Columbia and who has written many articles for **The Catholic Worker** came in to lunch and I asked him, "Tony, why did you sign that petition for the Rosenbergs? Do you know you will be charged with collaborating with Communists?"

"It is because I am against capital punishment," he said as he covered his pancakes, (called collision mats by Smoky Joe, the marine), with maple syrup donated by Scott Nearing (some further evidences of collaboration).

In other words Tony, as the rest of us, is in favor of **life**. We are trying to work here and now for the brotherhood of man, with those minorities, those small groups of “wilfull men” who believe that even the few can cry out against injustice, against the man made suffering in the world, in behalf of those who are hungry and homeless and without work, in behalf of the dying.

Peter Maurin used to go around saying, “Fifty thousand Frenchmen can be wrong.” He was not one to talk in terms of majority rule. When Fr. Downing, the Jesuit, asked him once if he would forego his anarchist principles long enough to go into political action on a proportional representation ticket, Peter answered that he would in order to let the voice of one man be heard. At the time of the Protestant reformation, one bishop was right in England. At the time of the Aryan heresy Athanasias stood out against the world.

After all, it is a few simple points which **The Catholic Worker**, as a paper, is trying to make. The Fatherhood of God. The Brotherhood of man. “Love is the measure by which we shall be judged.” “My little children love one another.”

The Fatherhood of God is a matter of theology. I have just come across a wonderful book, two of them rather, on the subject. *God the Father*, by Emile Guerry and *A Retreat with St. Therese*, by Liagre, in which this reminder of a compassionate Father is brought out, as having supreme importance in her message.

We may be considered to be guilty of an emotional approach but what about that story of Jesus Christ, about the prodigal son which illustrates the folly of love if anything ever did. To have faith that God loves us all, Communists and Socialists and I. W. W. and Protestants and Catholics, colored and white, Jew and Gentile, because we were all made to the image and likeness of God, and we are all temples of the Holy Ghost. He is Life and if He withdrew from us His hand, we would collapse into nothingness. He sustains our fellow picketers, as He sustains us.

“Go to the poor,” the Holy Father has said. “Go to the man in the street,” Peter Maurin used to say, and he did it literally, as we are doing it when we go out behind picket signs in this way. We learn many things. We hear the voice of the suffering on the other side of the world, and sometimes they send back messages to us as they did from Mexico during the persecution of the Church there, and from Spain as they did during the Spanish War. And we hear the voice of hostility at home from the masses who do not know the Church and fear her and hate her. “We have not so much as heard that there be a Holy Spirit.” “How can they hear if the message is not brought to them?” We need to come out from behind the iron curtain, which exists even here in America.

We know that here will be no Utopias, that we will always have the poor. If the Communist economy succeeds, there will still be the poor; if the anarchist way of Kropotkin, and Francisco Ferrer, there will still be the poor. There is always the fact of the Fall, as well as the fact of our Redemption.

We knelt in the library to say the rosary this noon, and some sat and Slim turned down the radio and covered his eyes while he waited for us to finish, and Catherine ceased her cross word puzzle, and Shorty and California George sat and their lips moved soundlessly. And I knelt there, and looked at their feet, at the holes in Shorty's socks, which exposed his bony ankles; and the mismatched socks and shoes on George, too long, too stylish and ripping at the seams. They are the meek, they epitomize the poor. They do not cry out.

But we are the articulate, to speak and write for them. And we have no party line, neither Communist nor Catholic.