

Poverty Incorporated

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1950, 1-2.

Summary: Contends that bigness, such as government, cities, institutions, etc., escapes personal responsibilities. One becomes lost in its array and thus is not responsible for his actions. Toys with the idea of incorporating the C.W., but prefers a decentralized organization. Comments on the power of the novena. (DDLW #167).

Everybody tries to be so helpful. Dave Mason suggests that we form Poverty Incorporated and sell shares in order to get the down payment for the new home we have in mind and Stanley recalls that it was the dream of Dan Orr before his death that we take over the Empire State building. Not that we would not be able to fill it. Especially if we had suites for each of the men on our breadline and for all the families in the Municipal lodging house and for the women who are now sleeping in Grand Central Station and Penn Station and are being picked up from Park benches and from hallways and given thirty days for their homelessness.

But we don't like the Empire State Building. It is too big. How obvious a thought. Nobody likes bigness, not even all of us who live in a city of nine million people (almost the population of Canada). People don't live in big cities because they like bigness but because they want to be little, to lose themselves in the mass, partly so that they will not be judged for their failure, and partly because they can thus escape their responsibility themselves to be big of heart and soul, as the son of God, creatures of body and soul, temples of the Holy Ghost, are supposed to be.

Since writing our SOS last month, stating that our building at 115 Mott street was sold and we would have to move at once *we have found the place we want*. It is two adjoining buildings, with backyard, in a poor neighborhood, and there is adequate space for kitchen and laundry and dining room and meeting room and dormitory and office. There is backyard in which to hang out our clothes. We can be clean and quiet and decent. We can go on with this work we started seventeen years ago, and which we cannot give up now. When I saw Archbishop McIntyre on my January trip to the coast, he told me then never to give up the work we had started, that it was a difficult and delicate and dangerous work which God evidently wanted us to do. I quote this, and I am sure he would not

mind, to show that many Bishops as well as priests are dear friends of the work and wish us to continue.

We are not incorporated however, so there is no chance of our selling shares in Poverty, Inc., nor chances for a car or a television set, so we will beg and try to raise the money. The place we have set our heart on is ideal. We don't want to look anywhere else. We have stopped looking and have started praying, the rosary novena, one to St. Joseph, Mother Cabrini, St. Paul, Miraculous Medal – in other words we are praying continually without ceasing. It is continually on our mind, in our hearts, on our lips. And all of us feel the same way, the folks on the farm, here at Mott Street, our friends and readers. We must go on with the work.

And what is the work but to love God and our neighbor, to show our love for God by our love for our neighbor. When Jesus was asked who was our neighbor He told the story of the good Samaritan. When He pictured the last judgment he listed the corporal works of mercy. The recent Popes have called for participation of the laity in the work of the hierarchy and the work of the hierarchy that Jesus stressed was "Feed My Sheep." We really should be praying to St. Stephen too, on this job of finding a place since the apostles and disciples had to call him and others in to serve tables. The women were active even before the death of Jesus, the Mary's and Martha's and others.

Always the Poor

We believe not in big, impersonal buildings, lodging houses, homes, Institutions with a capital letter, there is so much of that, and people get lost, but work done by a group of individuals banded together with a sense of personal responsibility.

Just the same, we did not know what we were getting into when the *Catholic Worker* started in May, 1933. We certainly never expected breadlines, with hundreds of men lined up for coffee and for soup. When we started giving a hot cup of coffee (and all the bread they wanted) to all who came, coffee was 19c. a pound retail and we got it for less. Now it is 63c. a pound, unground, by the hundred-pound sack. It would be an insult to St. Joseph not to go on serving coffee. Certainly, the coffee line is impersonal enough, but they probably know us better than we know them. They come in for clothes, for carfare, for help to fill out forms, and when they can get a bed nowhere else, when all the flop houses on the Bowery are full, or they are just out of the hospital, then they stay with us for a while and we get to feel them part of the *Catholic Worker* family. Peter Carey, who works with the St. Vincent de Paul at Bellevue and with the telephone company also, and who used to head the Catholic Union of Unemployed, says that he meets many a man in his contacts who has been straightened out by the CW. We see only the crises, of course.

Woman's Need

And as for women, we always have a dozen with us. They are women who have been in hospitals, jails, mental institutions. And they too, many of them, get helped and many of the stay for long periods. Sometimes we feel that we are not doing them any good and that they would far better be in one of the institutions on Long Island, where they could receive the medicines, the sedatives, the baths and other therapy but when we call the hospitals, they either refuse to take them or return them to us the next day. Literally, there is no place else for them to go. Not all are in such desperate straits in regard to illness of mind or body. But all are desperate when they come.

It is terrible to hear of a woman so frantic for a place to sleep that she will accept the offer of any man's bed. "If you are picked up on a park bench, in the station, or in a door way, you get a jail sentence," one woman said to me. "You don't know what you'll do when you are exhausted with hunger and sleeplessness."

There is a most terrible crying need for a shelter for women, a Catholic place where they can get straightened out and look for work and remain while working until they can find a room. Most furnished rooms are desolation and abomination. There are no rooms in girls' shelters for less than \$18 a week, for two meals and room, and that room to be shared. And as for free shelter, the one Catholic place which offers that puts the woman to work in its laundry so that she can neither look for work nor save for a room. It is a vicious circle.

A Double Dwelling Needed

A hospice for men and women, where there is a place for a family life together, where all without exception, even those who come to get help, can have their share in performing works of mercy, where we can have meetings and discussions as to the nature of man and his destiny and the kind of an order where it is easier for him to be good—this is our aim in running a House of Hospitality. It is a place where we can show our love for each other. It sounds so simple, but it is a hard job. Only those who know how hard it is have a right to say it.

A Matter of Mood

Some days when it rains, and the cellar flooded and drowned rats, and soaking newspapers and old mattresses contribute a peculiar odor of decay, and the walls drip and the bannisters are slimy and the lights have to burn all day even on the top floor to dispel the gloom and one of the women has had one of her spells (for several days and nights), cursing and wailing—then it is indeed hard to love one another.

On other days, like this afternoon, when the sun is shining and the women have been cleaning house and washing clothes, everything looks bright and cozy and

you forget the verminous walls and the fact that you have just bought some DDT to be used like talcum powder. All you can see then are the nice things, the fact that the little fig tree in the window is covered with tiny figs, the milk bottle vase of forsythia is in bloom, that someone has washed the windows, that Joe Cuellar keeps the office neat and clean, and that the sleeping quarters have clean bedding and that there is an empty bed for a guest and that the women are sitting companionably around the teapot in the front building and sharing buns.

The children shout in the streets with joy that the Winter is over and gone, the playground is open at night and the street is bright with people and lights, the sap is rising, one lives again after the cold and rain, the death of Winter.

Then we can say with the poet Maxwell Bodenheim, "I know not ugliness. It is a mood which has forsaken me."

A Gimme Novena

We are not at all abashed at saying that we are indulging in what is generally termed a "gimme" novena. We are told to ask by Jesus himself.

"Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you.."

This novena is generally termed the rosary novena. For three novenas (nine days each) you ask for what you need in temporal and spiritual favors. And then whether or not you have received your request, you start three more novenas in thanksgiving. It takes, you see, fifty-four days and I do know that before the time is up you are overwhelmed with favors of one kind or another. I would be so bold as to say you really get your request! And here is the kind of a story that infuriates those who term us superstitious.

My acquaintance with the rosary novena began back in 1937 when one of the girls who came to help us with the children we were taking care of for the summer began to make it to get herself a husband. She had met someone she loved and so she started to pray. Every night, before she went to sleep, when the dormitory of sleeping children was a bit of heaven and the smell of sweet clover filled the barn where we lived, she would sit with her dark head bent under the oil lamp and pray her beads with the little blue book in her hand. In the fall she was married.

So I started saying it in order that we might purchase the farm which adjoined the hill-top farm we had bought the year before. The price was four thousand dollars and we needed a thousand to make a down payment, the butcher-owner holding a mortgage on the rest. He was a Syrian separated from his wife, who lived in Lebanon.

Before I was through the first two novenas a donation of a thousand dollars came in to make our down payment. I was so overjoyed and so dizzy with success that

I probably started the end before I finished the beginning. Anyway, to buy the place, the signature of both husband and wife were needed, that being the law of Pennsylvania. So Mr. Boulous, the butcher, signed the deed, and sent it to his wife, who signed it in beautiful Aramaic, which was the script of our Lord's day, and had it notarized and sent back to Easton, Pa.

It took a time, and when it came, it was defective and had to be sent back to Lebanon, far over the seas to the Near East. Weeks passed, months passed, and somehow the money that came in for the farm was all eaten up; it had been frittered away in grocery bills, because the work of feeding people, after all, is never done, but goes on and on three times daily, day after day, and will go on as long as we shall live.

When I realized that the money had been spent, was no longer in the bank, I girded my loins and started another rosary novena. Before the first three novenas were over and done, once again a thousand dollars had come in once more. (We do assure you that such offerings are few and far between. I cannot remember when the last one came.)

We Are Confident

There have been other pleas, other critical occasions, just as vital, just as crucial in the true meaning of the word, when we have made this novena. And before the novena was well under way the cross was lightened and one wore it as a knapsack filled with all good things one could not do without on this, our pilgrimage.

Yes I am pretty sure when I say that somehow or other we are going to be able to raise the money needed to make our down payment on this ideal double house, with sufficient room for a real true House of Hospitality. We will lose some of our destitution, and still retain our poverty in these more spacious rooms which once housed thirty nuns.

The furnace is shot, but there is another to be put in to take its place. And we have plumbers and electricians with us who can make repairs. There is an old washing machine big enough for our needs which was left in the place when the nuns moved, and also many beds and chests. There is room for our office and files to be on one floor, and Charlie, who has heart trouble (he is in Bellevue right now) will not have to walk up any flight of stairs. There is a back yard with hedges and a few trees where we can hang our clothes. "Trees," Joe Monroe beamed when I told him. "Oh, I've been talking about trees, if you only knew how I missed trees."

We will hate to leave Mott street and our neighbors will miss us. But our family will go along, and there are the poor and the homeless also in this new neighborhood.

How the money is to come we know not. But we believe, we hope, we love.

And if any of you, our readers, want to exchange your mansions on earth for mansions in heaven, if any of you want to get rid of your goods and wish to choose the poor to be your burden bearers for you so that you will have them a hundred-fold in heaven, I beg you to sow in this field, and abundantly, so that you will reap such a crop that you will never hunger for any good thing.