On Pilgrimage - October 1947

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Reflection on Peter Maurin's ideas of groups of farming families on the land. Notes the work Fall brings at the farm and describes the community life of Doukhobors, Shakers, and the extinct Ephrata Community. Dismisses the efficiency offered by advertising. (DDLW #459).

It is September 17 as I start to look back over the month to write this column. Almost time for the equinoctial storms, when, if you are in the country, you begin to think of putting the stoves up, filling up the wood boxes, seeing that the windows are tight and settling down for an earlier evening.

We had one violent storm the other day, blowing the windows in, and there was a wild scurrying to get the wash off the line, the Mother Goose book and the blankets in off the grass, and then there was the exultation over the full cisterns, rain barrels, which meant a big wash would be done the next day. Living in the country, the weather means a lot. "Oh, for a bucket of water to throw away," as the farm woman in the yearling says.

A man who came to us recently for hospitality says he has been working these past few years in southern Arabia, so I loaned him my Doughty (Arabian Desert) to read. That is a book which makes you appreciate the water – **living water**. An element so precious that our Lord himself compares himself to it. When you are on a farm where all the water must be carried for drinking, for cooking, for washing, then you treat it with respect, with thanksgiving.

Work

There is so much work to do, always on the land. One can understand Peter Maurin's slogan, "there is no unemployment on the land." The gathering of seed from the asparagus beds, the rhubarb, the dill, all the herbs to dry for the winter, beans to shell; getting the last tomatoes before the frost strikes them, and storing all the roots, the onions, beets, carrots, turnips, potatoes; celery to transplant, cabbages to bury in pits. All the work of storing food, gathering food, preparing food, not to speaking of eating it reminds one of our dependence on God's Providence as well as the compulsion which is on us all to labor, put

upon us by the fall of man in the garden of Eden. It is all very well to say that man had to work before this fall, this God had put him there in the garden to tend it, to a dress it." Work was a joy then. Since then man has to work with the sweat of his brow with difficulty, and no machines, no push buttons are ever going to release him from that compulsion.

I thought of these things many times this summer when I was in the city, and I thought to myself that one of the great attractions to man's fallen nature is the opportunity to sit and sit and sit. Store keepers, push cart peddlers, women with their baby carriages, children with their toys – all sitting, all playing – the proletariat these days with their time clocks, the children with their school hours – "and now my time is my own," they seem to say and there is playing and sitting in their ideal picture, and leaving things undone because the required stint has been fulfilled for the wage. Even the housewife gets that way, with her cans, her corner grocery, her bargain counter.

Living in the country with babies, there is the sewing and knitting, making what you need instead of running to the store; washing, and with the fall weather, the woolens increase, and if you have poverty, it means heating water, and carrying and lifting heavy buckets and lifting and straining and rinsing in cold water with chapped hands.

The work is always behind because there is only one person to do it until the children get bigger and can help. Of course the father helps after his own day's work, but still it is impossible to keep up with the clothes, cashing, mending, cooking, dishes – and the house.

If you sit down for a minute, the priest comes to call, and then you look around you, and suddenly see your surroundings with the eyes of another.

Fr. Veales was one of our retreat masters last year and he stressed "human respect" as one of the most bothersome tasks "motives" which kept us from doing all the things for the love of God. For human respect women become enslaved by the advertisements – dish pan hands! tattle tale grey! – instead of being proud of these evidences of hard work. Instead of reconciling themselves to the fact that clothes do indeed become old and gray and still must be used, they are ashamed of their "failures," their inefficiency, their lack of order, and recklessly throw things out, buy more, consult the advertisements, use all the gadgets (all this, that is, if one has the money, and usually one hasn't, the end is not having money enough to buy food for the family.)

Order, efficiency, cleanliness, these are the American slogans and human and divine values are sacrificed all too often. Babies are just not orderly. They put oatmeal in their ears, their hair, instead of in their mouths. It takes hours to get through the meals with little ones.

Little things

All of the above was written sitting out in a grape arbor on a delightful fall day. It is about little things, but these are big ideas. If Peter were still indoctrinating, he could give a wonderful discourse on a philosophy of work, on volunteer poverty, on private property. But Peter is silent these days and we must go back over his articles and his digests to get his thought. He is on the farm at Newburgh where, beginning this month, we will have a chaplain for some months, and daily Mass, and we cordially invite visitors for weekends, because every Sunday we are going to remember what the holy father asked for this last month, in his five point program of action. One of those points was the proper keeping of Sunday. This too was stressed by our lady of LaSalette. In the Psalms it says of the wicked, "they have done away with the holy days." and certainly in our time, Sunday is not looked upon as holy and a day consecrated to the Lord. We have not yet begun to use our spiritual weapons, our tremendously powerful spiritual weapons, to avert the tragedy that looms over the world today in the shape of another world war. We look upon our weapons as all too small, but one of them is the keeping of Sunday; another is the penance of work and voluntary poverty.

Doukhobors in Canada

One of the things the Holy Father warned men against recently was isolating themselves. We urged them to go forth among those outside the faith and the church and work among them. "In the art of winning men," he said, "learn from the adversary, or better still from the Christians of the first centuries whose constantly fresh methods of penetration into the pagan world enabled the church to progress from its lowly beginnings."

Among the readers of the Catholic Worker are some Doukhobors of Canada about whom Time Magazine carried a story last month. These religious people first burned icons in the Russian Church to protest against the State Church, then they burned firearms to protest against war. Last month they were burning their own homes to protest against greed, and also the homes of those they considered faithless Doukhobors who had gotten rich during the war while professing pacifism.

"Our appeal to the world," writes Helen Demoskoff to our friend Ammon Hennacy, "is that private ownership or love of it is the root or cause of all wars, and if everybody showed or proved their hatred for war they must prove that they own nothing and thus have nothing to defend. We tell the world that we are not afraid of voluntary poverty and would go through all kinds of deputy vacations not join in war directly or indirectly."

Ammon comments on the fact that they too are using violence, in judging the faithless Doukhobors and in burning homes and schools. Christ's teaching was

"not to judge," "to turn the other cheek" and on the other hand, when people refused to heed you, to turn from them and shake the dust of their house or city from your feet.

Shakers

During the summer I had a chance to visit a settlement in Massachusetts which exemplified the industrious life on the land of a group of Shakers whose great houses and barns are more beautiful than any in all New England. There had been a story in the New Yorker about this sect which came to this country from England in 1774. They called themselves the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, and rather like the Father Divine followers of today, they believed that Christ had been reincarnated in Mother Ann, the leader of the sect. Since Christ was here again with us, their worship consisted in singing and dancing together in their meeting hall (like David before the Lord), and it was because of this dancing that they came to be called Shakers. Their industry and their disciplined communal living certainly did bring about temporal prosperity. Great houses were erected in what they called families or villages, and the ones I saw were in Hancock, Massachusetts, and Mt. Lebanon, New York, which is not many miles from the Massachusetts family.

My visit came about because my young nephew was working for a month in a work camp which was being established in the South Family settlement, bought by a New York lawyer and his wife, with the idea of setting up a camp for boys which would combine play with the work of restoring and keeping the settlement as a museum piece. There are not more than a dozen or so members of the two communities remaining in the section, and they are combining this fall.

This sect has a part of its teaching celibacy (since now that Christ has come again for them there is no marriage or giving marriage), and so an increase comes about only by conversions. It thrived for almost two hundred years, but the last remaining members are all over 60.

This South Family which I viewed (now occupied by the camp) was made up of not only the common living quarters, the men living on one side of the house and the women on the other, but two factory buildings, in one of which the men made chairs (they invented the rocking chair) and in the other the women wove the seats and upholstery for the chairs. There were still spinning wheels for fax and wool and looms and chairs and some chests which were beautiful and durable pieces of furniture, now much sought after by antique shops. There was an infirmary and jars of herbs still on the shelves. At one end of this separate building there was a cell for one member of the community who had lost her or his mind. They could not bear to put them in a state institution so kept them with the community, and provided for confinement when necessary. The barns of the Shakers are magnificent structures. One was a circular barn, another is the largest stone barn in the United States, built in 1850 and as good today as

when it was built. It is fifty feet wide and two hundred and ninety six feet long, big enough for a dozen or more loaded hay wagons to get in in case of a sudden summer storm. Many different trades were carried on besides farming and chair making, – weaving, dyeing, tailoring, the making of hats, shoes, brooms, soap, blacksmithing, metal work, carpentry, woodworking, seed-drying and many more. The communities were self sustaining, like the Trappists are, and they supplied many of the needs of the section around them besides.

Ephrata Community

Earlier in the summer, I had visited the remains of another community in Pennsylvania founded by a group of Dunkerds who called themselves Seventh Day Baptists and who built up what was called Ephrata Cloister, now kept as a museum by the State of Pennsylvania.

The place started with two hermits and as others joined them there were three semi-independent orders, a Brotherhood, a Sisterhood and a congregation of married couples, or householders.

We went through the home of the Sisterhood, built in 1740. An Almonry, a granary, a bakeshop and other small buildings were still standing, as well as the little four and five room houses occupied by the families. There is also an academy which was built in 1837 to house the school which the order started.

The chronicles of the brotherhood and sisterhood make it possible to visualize the life, though there are no remaining survivors. The life was of rigid self denial and austerity, planned to oppose the world, the flesh and the devil. The day was divided between manual labor, meditation, and worship. The halls in the building are narrow to remind you of the straight and narrow path and the doorways are low to teach you to bow your head in humility. The men and women both wore white habits similar in design to the Capuchins. They slept on board benches and had wooden pillows, though cots and featherbeds were used for the sick. Their food was frugal, as they lived on vegetables, milk, butter, cheese, and good bread, evidently the same diet as the Trappists. The Sisters sewed, spun, wove, canned and prepared household remedies, made sulfur matchsticks, paper lanterns and artificial flowers for sale. Their worship consisted in much singing, so there are beautiful specimens of hand-lettered parchment books, very much like our own old missals. They did lettering, drawing and writing. They were known by everyone for miles around for the works of mercy they performed in nursing the sick. The men did the farming, but they also did tailoring, shoe making, and cooked their own meals and did their own housekeeping. Their greatest achievement was in opening a series of mills for the use of the surrounding country, a grist mill, saw mill, paper mill, a flaxseed oil mill, a fulling mill and a bark mill. They illuminated manuscripts and published tracts and books, and did much book binding.

It was interesting to visit the old buildings which were only taken over by the Commonwealth in 1941 (the charter for the society was revoked in 1934.)

Peter Maurin's Ideas

In the light of Peter Maurin's ideas as to groups of farming families centered around an agronomic university which would meet the challenge of the machine, and provide for the needs of the unemployed, these visits which I made were most interesting.

Peter's writings on the subject which will be reprinted in future issues were published in a time of depression and unemployment, whereas we live now in a time of war and preparation for war which means employment for all.

But families have to live, and there is room for the family, for private property, for work for all on the land. How these ideas are being worked out at St. Benedict's farm in Upton, Massachusetts will be the subject of a future article, if we can get one of the members of the group there to write about it.