On Pilgrimage - February 1971

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: A plea not to prejudge Angela Davis and Communists. Continues with many stories of interracial actions of Catholic Workers from the 30s onward, tying the horrible past and present war in Southeast Asia. Reminds us of the primarcy of the spiritual in the "little it is we do, or can do." Yet we are bound together, "members one of another." Even from evil God can bring great good. (DDLW #933).

Underneath a picture of Angela Davis which appeared in the "Daily World" a few weeks ago, there was a caption, "All generations shall call her blessed." To continue to quote scripture, she has been "counted worthy to suffer dishonor" for justice sake. Angela Davis is a Communist, in this case and it is a name for vilification nowadays, though the early Christians, working for the common good became communists in a very literal sense. "Property, the more common it becomes, the more holy it becomes," as St. Gertrude said in the middle ages.

That quotation from the Magnificat used by the Communist daily, reminded me of the Scottsboro case during the Depression, when we were all fighting the death sentences of nine black youths in the South. I used the headline on the front page of **The Catholic Worker** "The Scottsboro Boys are the Children of Mary," which is the name of a pious association for youth in the Catholic Church. This caused great controversy among our readers although I explained in the body of the text that they should read in John's Gospel how Jesus from the Cross, called out to Mary, his mother, "Behold thy son," and to the apostle John, "Behold thy mother." The Gospel account continues, "and from that time, the apostle took her for his own." So we are all children of Mary.

Certainly in the light of this teaching, since Christ is our brother, Angela Davis is our sister, and we love and esteem her as such. We cannot and must not prejudge her case any more than we can the case against Fathers Phil and Dan Berrigan.

Angela Davis is a beautiful young woman, a graduate of Brandeis University, and at a time when jobs even in the academic field were scarce, risked her livelihood by openly stating her faith in the kind of social order which she thought would bring justice and a better life for her black brothers and sisters. We all know the flagrant discrimination which keeps the black in the slums, the first to be fired, the last to be hired; unable to achieve the status of college students and so the first to be drafted for the ever extending war in Southeast Asia where our mad violence has laid waste the land and slaughtered its people. And then we decry the violence of a class conflict. Father Daniel Lord, the Jesuit once pointed out the main objections to the Communists. They wanted to do away with private property, they instigated class war, they denied God. And I could always point

out looking around me at the homelessness of the destitute, the ever worsening slums, the expropriation of small homes for highways and other public projects, including luxury housing–that we Americans are the most flagrant deniers of private property for the masses. And as for war used as a means to subdue our enemies, we have glorified it and continue to try to glorify it as a holy crusade against Communism; as for denying God, how often do we deny Christ in our destitute brothers, or in those of a different color, race or creed?

According to our boast as Americans we consider everyone innocent until he is proved guilty–or we are supposed to. And what a travesty we see. From the time a man or woman is arrested he is treated by judge, and court and jail attendants as though he were guilty. The very heavy bail prejudges him guilty and liable to jump bail at the first opportunity. The poor are judged because they are poor and since they cannot raise even a fifty or hundred dollar bail bond, they are kept for long months awaiting trial.

Last winter, Sister Donald Corcoran, a Benedictine nun from Minnesota who was working with us went out during the Christmas season in snow and sleet and picketed and kept vigil one night at the Women's House of Detention, where Angela was being held for the months while her lawyers tried to prevent her extradition to southern California, where the case is prejudged and by its very presence an incitement to violence on the part of the police. Of course there is many another incitement; poverty, injustice, unemployment and discrimination are already incitements to violence. I should not say "**poverty**." I should say **destitution** which is what the "poor" American suffers today, ninety-nine per cent of them, whether they are Afro-American, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Filipino, Indian or any other shade of color. Or just poor white.

Angela Davis is already judged because she admits she is a communist. She was also a teacher of philosophy at a California university and losing her job because she was a communist.

And yet today Catholics can boast that the Vatican has started an Institute of Marxist Studies. It makes me want, though it is rather late to do so, to enroll in the Marxist school here in New York. Of course we should all study Marxism, instead of thinking always of the dangers of such knowledge of a philosophy and economic theory which has dominated today the thinking of much of the world.

Black Studies

I was looking back today in the Catholic Worker past, thinking of how much we had to do with the situation of blacks, how much contact we had with them. From the very first issue in 1933 we have covered the story of discrimination as to jobs.

We were living then in an Italian, German and Irish neighborhood, so there was no close contact in New York. But as Houses of Hospitality began opening up,

we had houses in Houma, Louisiana, Memphis, Tennessee, and Baltimore. The Baltimore House was crowded with blacks coming up from the south looking for jobs. They filled every room of the old house we had rented which had formerly been headquarters of the longshoremen's union. There were many homeless and unemployed so we were certainly overcrowded and perhaps a health hazard. One of our friends donated his truck and moved in with the two young men who were running the house and there was not a day when we were not taking some of our poor friends to the hospital. There were four young men running the house and many a time they donated blood. They gave up their beds and slept on the floor to accommodate these destitute ones. What is more they endured danger and abuse. A number of times men had to be gently disarmed. They had the courage born of crisis and the sense of safety which comes from a deep religious faith. "Were you never afraid?" I asked Jim Rogan once. "When I had to take a knife away from a man, I sure did shake a bit afterward." He told me another time, rather sheepishly, that one night when he had been sleeping on a bench he awoke to find a man urinating on him. It was to show his contempt–that was the hideous part of it–the contempt, the resentment, the bitterness of the poor.

The house was eventually closed by court order as a public nuisance. The boys had already been in court a number of times. When the young men were brought to court, priests from the Josephites (Father Phil Berrigan's order) testified for them, especially when the charge was that they were running a disorderly house. Nevertheless the house was closed. Whites and blacks together under one roof was not acceptable at that time in Baltimore. Jim Rogan went into a conscientious objector camp which, to the benefit of all concerned, was a "camp" within the Alexian Brothers Hospital in Chicago. He took his training as a male nurse there. He used this training some years after his marriage to go to Durban, South Africa with his wife and two children, and work in a hospital for Africans and Indians for three years.

The Houma house was closed also because it was interracial. The young priest who started it, Father Jerome Drolet, made a vacant lot into a ball park and had interracial teams competing thereon. He also was indiscreet enough to invite men off the road into the rectory to take showers and partake of hospitality there, which was not at all acceptable to his pastor. So he was transferred and the house was closed. Perhaps he was kicked upstairs to study sociology at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. I am not sure. He has since had the courage to face a crowd, a mob (with his only companion a Protestant minister) which was trying to build up the lynching spirit against a lone black man and his two children who were trying to enter a white school when attempts were made to integrate it.

The Memphis House also is closed now. It was run as a day care center for babies of the neighborhood whose mothers were cotton picking in Arkansas and Mississippi. I stayed there also when it was against the law for whites and blacks to share the same house. The house was closed when the girl who ran it moved west. She was a young black nurse, and a skilled writer. She married and has a

family of her own now.

Our contacts continue. Right now in the house of hospitality at First Street, two black women help mail out the paper, and Jimmy, whose long hair I am always threatening to comb for him, is an interesting artist whose pictures we have never been able to reproduce in the CW because they are in wild color and certainly on the psychedelic side. Marion has a dog, where she lives down the street, who has a strong and ominous bark. She named him Heathcliff. Minerva is always bringing treats to us all from her own home in Seagate–where she has a number of grandchildren who visit us too. Her recent treat was a big pan of cornbread dressing for our Christmas turkeys, and the other date she came in with a plate of fried chicken and hot biscuits, a meal not enough for the House, but enough for the women on the third floor.

In Harlem itself there are Joe and Audrey Monroe who spend many a week end and holiday with us at Tivoli. Joe was the one who triggered the demonstration at Morningside Park over Columbia University making a deal with the city to get a piece of that Harlem public park for their gymnasium. He was the one who sat on the bulldozer and led the demonstration and was arrested with eighteen others. During the occupation of one of the Columbia buildings during the student strike, Joe and Audrey organized a mobile soup kitchen and brought food to the blacks in Jackson Hall. They should have written about this but it is like pulling teeth to get people to write of their adventures and our activists do not include good interviewers right now. Lorraine Freeman, a beautiful young woman with five children in the Tivoli slum, is a writer too and has contact with a number of those at the farm. We are a good school of non-violence, I often think, with class war (workers and scholars), race war, war of the sexes, war between young and old, children and parents, always breaking out in small ways in our midst.

"Black studies" into our own situation in the United States, our history, culture and religion is going on apace. We are calling attention to the emerging Africa, right now to such leaders as Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and Milton Obote.

In This Column

It all goes together somehow–the things I write of in this column, things that have happened in the past, things that are happening today. The past looks unutterably horrible with its lynchings and the tale has been told again and again of blacks burned alive, dragged behind cars through the street, castrated and hung, fingers cut off and kept as souvenirs, stories to match the horrors of Vietnam and Brazil today. Only a few years ago students kidnapped, beaten and buried, two of them white youths and the other a black, was not the last atrocity in this tale of suffering. I remember the black who ran a little cleaning establishment who was locked in his shop which was sprinkled with gasoline and set afire a few years ago. It took him a few days to die. And how many black students and slum youth shot to death this last year!

It is hard to be complacent about gains made. Such gains for instance on my last visit to Natchez two summers ago when we could drive around in a car together, black and white, eat together at restaurants, visit the tutoring projects where black and white worked together. But destitution continues, the war goes on in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. And how many other wars are we responsible for, providing armaments for the world as we do.

I speak of past horrors, but who knows about the conditions in the prisons today, the beating and torture which goes on. Where there is continuing suicides of young Puerto Ricans who have been beaten cruelly and who despair of any justice. Riots take place in four city prisons at one time, yet conditions remain the same and more terrorization continues. We can be glad that there are some among the whites, like the Berrigan Brothers who with all the others who have had jail experience are witnesses and accusers of the injustice of our so called justice, who are suffering side by side with their brothers.

We have a letter in this issue from Bob Graf, one of the Milwaukee 14, about the school for ex-prisoners which has been started in Milwaukee and which we will write more about as we learn more about it.

We would suggest too that more books be sent to prisoners, books such as Julius Nyerere's speeches and writings. There are two volumes of them, published by the Oxford University Press. In them are teachings for us all. Others beside me have found the similarity to Peter Maurin's writings, nobility of thought, the practicality, the simple directness of style. Keep asking for them in book stores. They are in paper back as well as hard cover.

As I am writing this I remember that in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania last September I was invited to speak to a class of sixteen Tanzanian young men who were studying journalism. They were to ask me questions, and then write an interview with me as a visiting American, an editor and writer myself. The best interview was to be reprinted in the local paper, the largest paper in Tanzania. I enjoyed the encounter with these young men, which enabled me to know something about them by the very questions they asked, and their response to my answers. And indeed a few days later an interview was printed. I had all but forgotten this meeting, and certainly did not see the significance of it until I read a report of a visiting English economist who was analyzing the economy of the country and its resources. Tanzania is an agricultural country, 95% of the population living in villages. How to build up the villages rather than the city where slums build up is one of the problems. This economist says it is not only the question of better farming methods and increasing the food supply, building schools and clinics, but it is also a cultural problem. He advocated the production of small local news sheets with contents appropriate for people living in poverty . . . Apart from the news, the poor need small pamphlets with printed matter and visual supports which describe down-to-earth possibilities of self help and self improvement–how to build a small feeder road; how to improve one's house; how to feed oneself and the children; how to paint, make music, and further develop the culture.

I wondered after I read these things if the British journalist who was teaching this group recognized the gulf which separated the city man from the country man, the antagonism between the student and the worker and so on. We see it all the time around the Catholic Worker. I have often thought, when heating systems, plumbing and electrical systems failed, it was the "worker" who could teach us to survive.

I would hate to see groups of Tanzanian journalists alienated from their people and its needs by western journalism–"giving the people what they want," recording history rather than making history.

As I Write

As I write, Arthur J. Lacey calls me to tell me of the death of Tony. He was an epileptic, he drank, he had been in the Bellevue psychiatric ward once or twice and he was a person we all loved. He used to cook for us Sundays when he finished his week's work elsewhere. He was a good cook and earned his living. He had a little apartment on Allen Street where many of our single men live. He had a girl, hoped to get married. This was a new development and I did not know her. Tony was a Russian, born in the Argentine, or just raised there, I do not know which. Today his girl who had not seen him for a week asked one of our men to go with her to Tony's apartment to find him, and there they did find him–dead. He had been dead five days, the medical examiner said.

And as I write, I must record here too, the death of Mary Hughes, 23 years old, who was living in the East Village, but who had grown up with us on Staten Island. How tragic is the death of the young. Neither Deane Mowrer nor I could write last month, so hard it was to put even this stark fact down on paper.

We in America are being afflicted for our own sins, and for the sins of our country. To me that phrase, "My country right or wrong," means that we are all responsible. We are our brothers' keeper. It was the first murderer who said "Am I my brother's keeper?" Mary was a little victim of our cruel time. And there is so little we can do, so little we have done, to bear one another's burdens.

The Primacy of the Spiritual

It is certainly borne in upon us, day after day, how little it is that we do, or can do. But we are not alone. I remember that sense of shame at turning to God, as I lay in a cell at Occoquon, Virginia, so many years ago. I wanted to stand on my own feet. I thought there was something ignoble about calling for help in my despair, at my first taste of real destitution, of utter helplessness in the face of the vast sufferings of the world. I read the Scriptures, as Ammon Hennacy did. It was the only book we were allowed in jail. But I was ashamed and turned away in the pride of youth for another dozen years. Then it was in gratitude that I turned to Him again, for my own happiness, for the beauty of

the sea and the sand, for the smallest shell, the tiniest creature, the gulls, the sky and clouds. It is easier to praise God then, to thank Him, to call upon Him, and to learn that He does indeed answer.

But when we are able to bear some small share of the sufferings of the world, whether in pain of mind, body or soul, let us thank God for that too. Maybe we are helping some prisoner, some black or Puerto Rican youth in the Tombs, some soldier in Vietnam. The old I.W.W. slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all," is another way of saying what St. Paul said almost two thousand years ago. "We are all members of one another, and when the health of one member suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered." And the converse is true. We can indeed hold each other up in prayer. Excuse this preaching. I am preaching to myself too.

January and February are those months when winter seems interminable and vitality is low. In the face of world events, in the face of the mystery of suffering, of evil in the world, it is a good time to read the Book of Job, and then to go on reading the psalms, looking for comfort–that is, strength to endure. Also to remember the importunate widow, the importunate friend. Both are stories which Jesus told. Then to pray without ceasing as Paul urged. And just as there was that interpolation in Job–that triumphant cry–"I know that my Redeemer liveth," so we too can know that help will come, that even from