

On Pilgrimage - October 1952

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The Catholic Worker, October 1952, 1, 7.

Summary: Several stories: unfair labor practices, a birthday party of a granddaughter, the public relations charade of organized labor, and a story of Peter Maurin's belief in labor as an "exchange of goods", not work for wages. (DDLW #639).

Rocco may be said to be one of the poor. Here is the story of his latest job. On Wednesday, September 10th, he went to the Louis Employment Agency on Fourth Street. He got a job in the Concord Hotel at Monticello. The next day he and seven others were driven in a big Cadillac up into the mountains. There this new help were given beds in one of the outbuildings, examined by a doctor to see if they had ruptures. He worked Thursday, Friday and Saturday and was paid \$5.82 on Saturday night. Five dollars of this went to the agency for the drive up in the Cadillac. He had eighty-two cents, which he spent riotously over Sunday.

The next week he earned \$23.33, plus board, estimated at \$7.75, a total of \$31.08. I am copying this from his receipts. Out of this came the board money; \$.47 cents for social security; \$.16 cents for disability benefit; \$3.70 for withholding tax; \$2.33 for the agency; \$5.00, which he had had advanced to him to get a tooth pulled. Rocco showed me the tooth. His net earnings for the week, aside from the \$5.00 for the dentist, has been \$11.67. His gross earnings, \$40.09. When he drew his net earnings of \$11.67, he was told that the outdoor work he had been hired for was finished. He paid \$3.51 bus fare back to New York. He got back Saturday noon, and now, Monday noon, he had no money left. What had he done with his earnings—\$11.67 minus \$3.70, which equals \$7.97. Carfare, movies and meals, and the meals were mostly hot dogs. So could he eat here until he found another job?

These are the kind of men who make up our bread line, the young ones. They work, they eat, and they have nothing left. But, of course, each one has a different story, and God loves each one with a different and special love.

Birthday Party

After we went to press last month I went down to Staten Island to Susie's birthday party. The other grandmother was there, Grannie Hennessy from Washington, and we sat under the mulberry trees for supper and the party, made a fire when it got dark, and toasted marshmallows and shot off some roman candles which Walter Vishnewskey ("Little Waltie," Stanley calls him, though he weights over two hundred) brought on his visit to us during the steel strike, when he had an enforced vacation.

Susie and Mary are the lucky ones, having birthdays in midsummer, which means picnics. We were having a grand time, and Tamar was running into the house just like one of her own children, when she stumbled and fell over a stump, rupturing a blood vessel. It sounds terrible, and the huge ugly blood blister, big as an egg, looked terrible; but aside from the pain involved, it merely meant a couple of days in bed with an ice bag on the injury and a grandmother to watch the kids. Something in the way of a treat for a busy mother!

Then that over with, David got lumbago so bad he had to stay in bed a week. So the month has meant doctor's bills. If it were not for the clothes which "come in," how would families get along nowadays? Certainly there are no family wages being paid. Lou Murphy, head of the CW work in Detroit, who visited this month for the pacifist conference, says that his daughters proudly display their dresses, saying, "They came in." Another dear friend often in need said once, very plaintively, "everything comes in at the CW except a husband for me."

Packages

We were opening packages at Chrystie Street this morning, and found one whole carton of tea! Many good children's clothes came in, too.

Annabel reminds me to continue to ask for children's clothes, now that school has started. We are surrounded by poor families and, since Puerto Ricans are coming to us every day, we need Spanish literature, too, prayer books and rosaries.

We are certainly deeply grateful for this work done by our readers. The package from Trinity Farm, Vermont, was filled with spotless clothes, neatly mended. A great work of mercy. If we ever miss thanking people most specially and particularly, please excuse us.

Visits

During the month I tried twice to get to Princeton to see my friends, Alan Tate and Caroline Gordon (Caroline made the retreat last month with me), but first I missed the train, then when I took the bus it broke down and I returned.

But later in the month I did pay a visit I had been looking forward to all summer, and that was to the Pennings and the Cantines, both near Woodstock, Peter Maurin's old stamping grounds upstate New York. A first invitation had come from the Pennings in June, to be present at the unveiling of the statue of the Madonna of the Hudson, at Port Ewen, just below Kingston, where the canal which used to bring coal from Pennsylvania, empties into the Hudson. This section used to be the home of the "canallers," as they were called, but now is the home of a number of tugboatmen. The old lady who unveiled the statue had five sons who were tugboatmen on the Hudson.

I am just as glad I did not get to the unveiling, since I would have run into that unsavory character, Joseph P. Ryan, president of the International Longshoremen's Union, attending the function, no doubt, with guns and bodyguards. There have been too many public relations stunts in the history of labor and capital, and this followed too neatly on the heels of the strike last year, for me to be anything but suspicious of the motives of the associations who are putting up the money for this statue. Evelyn Underhill writes that "our modern humanitarianisms and sentimentalisms, our ceaseless attempt to harness the supernatural in the interest of our dark Satanic mills, look very cheap and thin over against the solemn realities of religion, the awful priority of God."

These attempts to appear well in the sight of the public began with Rockefeller and his Ivy Lee after the Ludlow Massacre, when forty women and children were burnt and shot to death by his armed guards during a strike in Colorado, when the families of the miners were evicted from their homes and forced to live in tent colonies. Carnegie put up his libraries with funds stolen from the workers, and the most modern version of this type of "public relations" and restoration of stolen goods is the Ford Foundation money which is being used as a perfume to make capitalism a little less malodorous. And here are tugboatmen and longshore officialdom of the unions in power, getting very favorable notice in the press. God forgive me my suspicious nature.

Of course God writes straight with crooked lines. And of course Our Lady stands there beautiful and serene on a bluff overlooking the Hudson and tugboats whistle salutes as they go by, and our Lady is honored, or rather the statue of our Lady is honored. But who knows the bitterness in the hearts of the great mass of workers who suffer from a corrupt officialdom, who know the scandal of the waterfront in New York, who suffer from the slavery of the hiring system, the shapeup, who know all about the kickback system, who look questioningly at the salary of Ryan and his life long position as President of the longshoremen. They cannot say with David the psalmist, "Thy friends, O Lord, are exceedingly honorable." How many friends of our Lady are alienated, not won, by this lip service. Not all those who say Lord, Lord, are going to be saved.

Peter's Friend

To turn from these dour comments to something more agreeable, we enjoyed our visit with the Pennings and the beautiful religious art he showed us in his huge studio where he works with the natural blue sandstone of the quarries of the region. There is flow and simplicity about his work, a warmth and compassion. The Pennings have lived for the last twenty years in their big stone house which seems to have grown up out of the woods around them. They are a mile in from the road and in back of the house is a natural swimming pool which used to be an old quarry, not more than ten feet deep. It is only in the last five years that Tomas Penning has become a religious artist.

At dinner we met an old acquaintance of Peter Maurin to whom he used to give French lessons three times a week. And here is a story which is a healthy contrast to the last few paragraphs.

"My small daughters and I were living in Woodstock that winter," Julia Leaycraft said, "and one evening there came a knock on the door. It was Peter, quiet, dignified, anything but well dressed, but with not the air of a pan handler.

"‘I would like to give you what I have to give,’ he told me, and that meant French lessons."

He did not want to receive pay for the lessons because he did not believe in the wage system. He was making the point that he would give what he had to give, and that was a knowledge of French and the one who benefitted would give in return the meals he needed. It was an exchange of goods. It was love in action. It was not labor as a commodity, bought and sold to the highest bidder.

Mrs. Leaycraft did not particularly want to study French, she said, but he interested her, and she began to study with him, and during and after the lessons they talked of the condition of the world, politics, history, economics. He didn't talk religion to her. He seldom did. He might have talked of the love of God and the love of brothers and its implications, but not "religion."

"He was never 'Peter' to me, always Monsieur Maurin," Mrs. Leaycraft said. "One day I asked him, after we had become friendly, why he didn't take better care of his appearance. My children used to make comments on what was, to be frank, the very ragged and dirty condition he was in. We were sure, French peasant that he was, that he never bathed, and he seemed to sleep in his clothes. When I put my question to him, why did he not take better care of his appearance, his reply was simple. 'So as not to excite envy,' he said. Then one evening he came in quietly jubilant. He had been frequenting during the winter, a little lunch room under the railroad tracks, called the subway lunch, where hoboos often came in to beg for food. He conceived the idea of tacking a box up on the wall, with the sign on it, 'If you have any money to give, put it in, and if you need money, take it out. No one will know.'" That last touch showed the delicacy of Peter's charity.

Strangely enough, the box succeeded. Many men had coffee at the subway lunch, and many men put money in the little box on the wall. This went on through the winter. Then one evening, Peter came to give his lesson very downcast. What was the matter? Twenty-five dollars had disappeared from the box! A fortune. The bank had been robbed. Man had again succumbed in Peter's Eden. He had not passed the test, the simple little test of love.

Nothing was said about the box, which continued to function in a small way. Then another evening came, and Peter arrived at Julia Leaycraft's home, beaming. The money had been restored. The twenty-five dollars was back, and more too, with a note. Someone had been down and out, needed bus fare and had taken the money. Someone who had merely taken the sign at its word. He had taken what he needed, and now he had been able to restore it. Peter's faith was confirmed. "It works," I can hear him cry joyfully, seeing as he always did, Christ in his brother.

This is a proper story for the month of the feast of St. Francis, for the month of the Little Flower.