

On Pilgrimage - 1954

Dorothy Day

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Summary: While convalescing she quotes the recently ill Pope on illness and suffering. Tells of being cared for, the life of the house, and the inadequate housing of Tamar's family. (DDLW #661).

Last month, the Holy Father said to me, as he said to all who are sick, "I have thought of you, beloved ailing sons and daughters, with particular right among those who are closest to our Spirit and pressed to our heart."

The Holy Father himself was sick, and with what warmth and tenderness he spoke to the suffering. My ailments were slight but painful. I was in the hospital when I read General Dean's story of his imprisonment and suffering in Korea, and I thought of the anguish of the world, and what a tiny drop mine was in the ocean of pain. There were many refugee doctors in the hospital where I was, and one of them said to me when I spoke of how the body seemed to overcome the spirit,. "Oh, it is only for about three weeks! After that one becomes more used to it, and the spirit takes hold again!" Her husband bears the scars on his body of his days in a concentration camp.

The Holy Father called the sick, and now that I am recovered I can no longer be in that noble company, "the precious jewels of the Church, and valid sources of spiritual energies," on whom he relies this year to obtain "help for humanity and the Church itself."

He speaks, he tells them, thanks to the radio, to all of them, languishing in hospitals, great and small, in sanatoriums, in clinics, in hospices, in prisons, in barracks, in the desolate garrets of the most poor, in the divided little rooms of your homes."

"Children with pallid faces like flowers growing without the warmth of the sun" (we think of the Puerto Ricans and Negroes in our slums and of little Bryan Murphy in Detroit "youth whose rare smiles express the strength of the soul rather than the freshness of your years" (we think of the wounded in our veterans hospitals, in prison camps throughout the world) "mature men bitterly removed from your proper dynamism" (and with all the others we think of Ed Willock and what he has meant to us all with his speaking, writing, drawing, building) "old people, to whom natural fatigue, disease adds discomforts and sufferings."

“We have always supplicated Jesus to make our hearts in some manner similar to His; a God heart, a kind heart, a heart open to all sufferings, and to all sorrows.”

We are grateful indeed to the Holy Father, and we know that through these desires, these prayers, such news as that which we print this month of what is happening in Russian labor camps is made possible. May God bless him and keep him with us many more years.

The Sick in the House

When I came home from the hospital to St. Joseph’s house on Chrystie Street I was filled with gratitude for having a house of hospitality to come to. We were one of those hospices the Holy Father was praying for. Up on the top floor Nelly Lampkin, as she told me her name was once years ago, tho she is generally known as Nelly Post, is failing. She is over eighty and for many years “has lived on the Bowery. She was one of the sights at Sammy’s Bowery Night Club (it is hard to see Jesus in such people as go slumming in such a night club, enjoying the wrecks around them) and she was in and out of our hospice for many years. A few years ago she came home for good, and was anointed only to go out again with fresh vigor. Now she cannot leave her bed, though she tries to keep bright. When she got news of Tom’s leaving for Paris she said pertly, “Now he’ll be finding another little lady and forget all about me.” She weighs about sixty pounds and when she had to go up to Bellevue recently for a treatment, Isidore could easily carry her up and down the four flights of stairs. (*P.S. Nellie died a week after this was written.*)

Room Service

The two top floors on the south side of the double house are for women, and the floor below for men, as well as the three floors on the other side. Mr. Murphy sits in dignified splendor on the floor below, with a potted plant, a radio, a colorful spread and usually a tray in front of him. Veronica serves him not only his meals, but mid-morning and mid-afternoon and before going to bed, tea or coffee or milk, and rolls, buns, cakes, toast.

I told him as I passed that I was taking a turn to be sick, and that he had better get back down to the kitchen again and replace Chu and Shorty, but he paid no attention to me. Natty is the one who curtains the entire house, and she surely makes the rooms of the sick cheerful with bright colors and drapes that are rich and gorgeous. I caught her hanging a brocaded curtain in Bob Ludlow’s room once that was too elegant for any bedroom, and took it from her for the chapel at Peter Maurin Farm. Just before Tom got back home he was down in his room, washing windows and hanging clean sash curtains and drapes as homecoming present.

Comings and Goings

Reference to Bob Ludlow necessitates comment on the sad news that Bob's taking a leave of absence for a year. He cheerfully refuses to look ahead a year and tell us what he intends to do, but I shall go to his new home on Forsythe Street, two rooms for fifteen a month, and drag him back by the hair of the head, come next February, God willing.

We do indeed get reconciled to the comings and goings, because we always feel assured that we never lose these friends and associates. They come back, over and over, even when they have gone on to work which is more suitable to their talents, to fields which are richer and more varied than the work we have.

One visitor we had last month was Gerry Griffin, who is finishing his course at the Pennsylvania General Hospital in a few months and is going to the near east to work among the Syrians, with whom he fell in love when he did hospital service there during the war. With that end in view, he is studying Arabic, and I hope he is reading Doughty's "Arabia Deserta," which I recommended to him when he was here.

The Good Food

Convalescence means a great appreciation of food. Just when you hope that you have become involuntarily mortified, there is a tremendous upsurge of appetite. Thanks to Chu and Shorty and Roger, meals were as good as anything served in the Waldorf. It results in great energy, which means that I was downstairs taking care of the office again by the middle of the month, in the old familiar surroundings of Puerto Rican children running in and out for clothes, mothers and babies, men shambling in, seeking shelter, shirts, sweaters, socks; visitors bringing food, shirts, sweaters and socks, but, unfortunately, not that which is most necessary these days—shelter.

Car Owner

A man came in one night, huge, stalwart, who said he had his wife and six children outside in a car and he, too, had been refused shelter. Michael, who was answering the men who came in during that particular hour asked him why. "As long as you have any money in your pocket, or a car, they won't take you," he said. "That sounded reasonable," Michael commented. "But you can't get around without a car," the man complained. Besides, if I sold it, I'd only get about \$25 for it." Nevertheless, \$25 would pay for shelter for a while. "And what kind," he retorted bitterly. "Two rooms for my wife and kids. How can a family live?" But he went back to the shelter, telling them that he would sell the car.

Fire Is Twice Bread

I groan to myself very often about the inadequacy of Tamar and David's shelter, four rooms and attic with six children. There are two bedrooms and a hall, a living room and kitchen and bath on one floor. The two littlest sleep down stairs, and the four oldest in the attic, which this year was finished off into one big room, and one small room for David's books. What would be nice, and is fun contemplating, is a house with big rooms with southern exposure for plants, because Tamar has a green thumb, and her African violet and begonias and geraniums are dreams of beauty in three of the windows. There should be a real library to hold all the books, pamphlets, magazines and pictures which clutter up the entire house as well as the attic back room. There should be a sewing room for Tamar's loom, spinning wheels, hooked rug frame, sewing machine, and other home industries like carpentry she delights in as well as Eric. She can make marvelous rag animals and she has taught the girls to knit. She hates housework, but she loves to cook, so the kitchen should be bigger. She loves to wash, too, but that now has to take place in the bathroom, which makes a fearful muddle of that. All activity takes place in two small rooms, but thank God they are warm and snug. After listening to Tom Sullivan's tales of the cold of Europe, I do thank God with all my heart for our warmth here. "Fire is twice bread" was a famous Arabic saying, according to Doughty, and I can well believe it. And as for space, I once read a wonderful book called **The Family**, by Federova, all about a group of Russian refugees who rented all their rooms and slept on and under the tables as well as in the beds. To be crowded is often to be warm, and if to be crowded also means more fights among children, which all mothers complain about, well, Stanley has a Lithuanian proverb which says, "It is better to fight than to be lonely."