

On Pilgrimage - June 1964

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The Catholic Worker, June 1964, 1, 2, 6.

Summary: Recalls visiting the Oratory in Birmingham, England and the life of St. Philip Neri who founded the Oratory in Rome. Stories about money-ill spent tax dollars to alleviate the heavy traffic in their neighborhood, the windfall they received from selling their Staten Island property, capital gains taxes, and fees to lawyers and real estate agents. Explains how they used the windfall to acquire a new farm at Tivoli. (DDLW #816).

I have been reading Fr. Bouyer's **Life of Newman** for some months now and have gotten to the part where Newman and his little band are starting the Oratory in Birmingham, England. I visited there last Fall, when I went to England to speak at Spode House, the Dominican Retreat center near Birmingham. Canon Drinkwater who had visited us in New York obtained a car and chauffeur and drove us to these hallowed spots, holy to me because of their association with Newman. The writings of Cardinal Newman were introduced to me by Father John J. Hugo of Pittsburgh, himself in a way, another Newman struggling against the inertia, apathy, and even corruption of his own day.

The Oratory

St. Philip Neri, who founded the Oratory in Rome, was born in Florence in 1515, the same year as St. Teresa of Avila, in Spain, and he lived all his life in Rome. He was one of the most influential persons of his time. According to my missal, "he was a man of original character and happy disposition. He had a great love of God and of people of all conditions. He lived as a pilgrim touring the streets of Rome for fifteen years, exerting powerful influence on many people. At 36 he was ordained a priest. He gathered around him about 20 priests who formed the congregation of secular priests of the Oratory."

One of the things I remember reading about St. Philip Neri is how he knelt in the window of his Rome dwelling and looking out over the city prayed for it. Ever since reading that, I have followed that practice, and enjoy it. I do this because I am half the week in New York, and half the week in Tivoli at our new farm.

The City

We have three women's apartments on Kenmare Street in New York and they are full, with cots which can be set up in the kitchen for extra and unexpected guests.

My front corner room looks down over the crossroads of Mott and Kenmare and receives the morning sun and plenty of breezes which dispel to some extent the fumes from the traffic outside. Kenmare St. leads directly east to the Williamsburg Bridge and west to the Holland tunnel, and of course the traffic is enormous. Perhaps the new Verrazano Bridge, with its cross-Staten Island expressway to Goethels Bridge leading to New Jersey will handle this traffic when the new Bridge is completed this year. But our city fathers are still trying to get the go ahead signal to demolish our neighborhood in favor of a cross-Manhattan expressway to handle the traffic problem. There is ninety million dollars involved, to be put up by the Federal government, to the city's ten, and this great sum will not lightly be relinquished. If it only could be put into better housing for the poor of the East side! Housing where there are no automatic lifts, where murder, rape and other violence have been committed, where there are enough community servants to man the elevators, halls, the playgrounds and work as recreation directors and camp leaders and exploration guides to siphon off the unemployed youth hungry for movement, hungry to satisfy their curiosity about the world around them. (We know one such leader in Springfield, Vermont where my daughter lives, who has a science club and takes the members all over the state to visit factories, powerplants, museums or to climb mountains.)

But no, there is money for arms and for traffic but not for the poor and unemployed, - - nothing for youth!

Last night I sat at my window and watched the world passing by, trucks from all over the country, and where is Marianna, Florida? Trucks laden with furniture, lumber, animals, sacks of saw dust, potato chips, fruit and vegetables, gasoline, milk, cement, cane syrup, garments, lowing cattle. There was an occasional horse and wagon, noisy on the cobblestones which pave the street. There are traffic lights on each corner so there is the shifting of gears, the roar of motors. When the traffic flows uninterrupted, there is the clatter and the bounce and the jangle of empty trucks over uneven pavement. There are police cars, police ambulances, fire trucks, chartered busses going to and from the World's Fair. There are trucks gathering up waste fats from all the butcher shops around to bring to soap factories in Brooklyn. There are sanitation department trucks that make a noise like an air raid siren as they grind up the boxes and furniture and tin cans and garbage collected daily from all the battered ash cans which stand in rows in front of each tenement. And there are people bringing down bundles of trash to push into these already crowded cans, old women marketing with their shopping bags, young women pushing baby carriages, still other young women in stretch pants, pink pants, purple pants, green pants, orange pants. Clothes hanging from fire escape to window on short lines, crowded together.

Bed clothes airing on window sills.

We have lived long in this neighborhood, Mott Street, Spring Street, Chrystie Street; all our ten apartments are in this section where Chinese, Puerto Rican, Negro, Italian, Jew - - all Americans, live in comparative peace. We all feel safe here in this radius surrounding the Bowery because we know each other and are known. To a certain extent, that is.

On the other hand, the Daily News features each day scenes of violence and crime, all the tragedies which are taking place among six million or eight million or more people. This ceaseless news of violence repeated every hour, on the hour, on radio, and then dished up again with pictures when the Daily News comes out in the night, builds up the fear which is growing up in our midst, a fear almost deliberately stirred up by the press, which makes whites fear Negroes and the rich the poor, and one neighborhood another. There is wild talk of people arming themselves, first tear gas pencils are suggested, and now guns! Are the newspapers building up to rioting like that of the Know Nothings in the last century? I write these things because I believe that each one of us participates in building up an atmosphere, - - whether it is of fear or of the love which casts out fear.

Tivoli

One of the letters which came in this morning was from a Holy Cross Brother who writes that thirty years or more ago he was Boys' Director of what was the Leake and Watts Farm School, a branch school of their larger home in Yonkers. He went on to say that he thought this same property which we purchased was ideal for us and is looking forward to reading more about it.

One of the questions that has been asked was "How did you find it?" It was by reading the real estate ads in the New York Times. Once realizing that we were selling the entire farm at Staten Island, though we thought at first we were selling only some acreage which we did not use and which had brought up our taxes to astronomical figures, I set out to look for a place. We had thought of selling part and keeping house and barn and gardens. But there was trouble with the fire department for having a chapel in the barn. We had no permit, they said. There was trouble with the building department who said we could not put up a fire escape on a wooden dwelling. We did it anyway, risking a fine of \$250. New England and Canada are filled with wooden houses with outdoor stairways. The building department also told us we could have only one family and four extra people in the house. If there were no family brood, one person would count as a family. Which would mean only five people. I hesitated to write about this idiotic interpretation of the law in our regard since I continued to break it. But what a relief to get away from such harassment. How easy it is to understand the grief of the small landlord and store keeper and businessman in this day of corporations with their corporation lawyers.

Another reason for our moving was the sudden realization that we were going to get a large amount of money for our sale of the property. This was shocking not only to us, but to our friends. To think that we were going to “make money” in this speculative fashion - - there was something immoral about it. There was the capital gains tax. Were we going to pay it, the twenty five per cent which goes to the federal government and which in turn goes for “defense” and moon shots, and the making of poison gas and all kinds of fearful missiles? A certain amount of course goes for the upkeep of our huge veterans hospitals where the wrecks left over from former wars are cared for or kept in dead storage. A certain amount goes also for “foreign aid” which usually means too our occupation of territory for missile bases, and for alliances. Not much money is given without strings attached.

The thing to do was not only to rejoice in our windfall but to spend it as quickly as possible. I certainly felt that God, our Father, who is a personal God, a personal Father, who sees our needs, who foresees the means we must have to do the kind of work we envision, directly intervened here.

We could have inherited money or unencumbered property. No one would have objected to this. I could have written a best seller, perhaps. The fact of the matter was that we were caught in a land boom. A piece of property which we paid \$16,000 for could be sold for \$175,000. This was the prospect before us.

The sum before we were through all the negotiations was whittled down to a smaller amount. First of all there was a payment of \$25,000 on the signing of the contract almost a year ago. Five thousand of that went to a lawyer who was extricating us from a mistake which would have permitted another speculator to have the property on a ten year mortgage with a comparatively small down payment and “no interest.” Charles Butterworth and I were sued for seventy thousand dollars and five thousand dollars or delivery of the property, which suits dragged on for months until they were dealt with out of court on the payment of fifteen thousand dollar settlement. I felt this was theft on the part of the unscrupulous real estate dealer, but “business is business.”

Actually \$12,000 was contributed by a new buyer. We paid \$3,000 to the first dealer and three thousand to the first agent. Which made six thousand less on the \$175,000 offered. The twenty thousand left over after the initial payment to the lawyer went to pay an accumulation of bills which had plagued the CW family for some time. It costs us a thousand dollars a month in rents in the city and another seventy thousand or more dollars a year to keep our two large households going in city and country which means the total support of sixty people, not counting our breadline and the daily petty cash outlay which is anything but petty.

The new farm, which comprises sixty-five acres cost \$78,000 and a nine passenger International Harvester station wagon will set us back another three thousand five hundred. We sold the mortgage at an eighteen percent discount which lops off another ten thousand or more. But we have no interest to pay and interest to

take and since we sold the mortgage to the very people, a family which bought the place, we are not putting them in the position of paying interest. But we have not converted them by any means from the desire to make money on the Staten Island property by chopping it up into lots and building on it houses similar to a greater or lesser degree to those you see advertised in other developments to sell for \$19,999 with a long term mortgage which will all but double the price. Indeed, one buyer of such a house once said to me that the house he was buying would fall apart before he had the mortgage paid off. These jokes one sees portrayed in cartoons where the all of one apartment collapses when leaned against to show some young couple at table, or some young lady in the tub, are an indication of what is happening in the building line. A grim joke indeed.

I have not all the figures handy, but what with penalties, fees to two agents, discounts and so on, not to speak of our purchasing our new home for cash, there will remain enough of the money to pay all debts and to get through the summer on.

Tivoli

For a time we wondered what to call the new place which boasted of three buildings. The old de Peyster mansion which is at present uninhabitable aside from two little apartments built into it for summer guests, will eventually be repaired. On one great cornerstone the words **Beata Maria** were chiseled and on another **Watts**, the names of two of the de Peyster children evidently. So we thought at first of calling the place **Beata Maria**, as we had called the farm at Easton. That was too hard for many of our readers and visitors to remember, so we decided to call the whole place, the **Catholic Worker Farm**; the first old school house, the **Peter Maurin House**; the second **Beata Maria**, and the third house in which we are living, **St. Joseph's**. Catholic Worker Farm at Tivoli, New York, will be our address.

Originally there had been the mansion of one of the river barons, then the stables were remodeled into the school dormitory building where our Holy Cross correspondent worked over thirty years ago.

The school building was used and so was the mansion. We have already started the library and chapel in the Peter Maurin House. And in St. Joseph's house, everyone from Peter Maurin Farm and from the beach houses are by now almost moved in. Stanley has set up his press in one dusty room of the mansion; and the two apartments will be occupied by Lorraine and her sons and a professor from Purdue and his wife and children who are coming to help us get started this summer.

Past History

After the school no longer functioned at Tivoli, the land army took over during the second world war, and again the dormitories were used by young people who worked in the crops up down the Hudson valley. Then I understand the Jehovah's Witnesses took over and ran the place as a camp and farm for a time. The last owner was John Mastrion and his family, who ran the place as a resort for families and the place was beautifully built up with new roof, rooms for families, big dining room and kitchen, recreation room and swimming pool.

When I read the ad in the New York Times, it said "suitable for a religious group" and since they mentioned three houses I thought that here would be room to grow and to house the groups that came to us for discussion and retreat so many times during the year.

The fact that the Good Friday over a year ago had seen two hundred young people descending on Peter Maurin farm to spend the day and night before going on with their pilgrimage to the United Nations; and that the Labor Day week end crowd was made up of one hundred and forty peace workers, made me the more convinced that this was something we needed. So after visits in December and January, and actually no visits to any other places, a down payment was made and then all we had to do was to wait to get the money in hand to complete the purchase. In the spring Mr. Mastrion, his son and some of his relatives came and put in a new boiler in the main house and started it to working, and stayed to show us how to operate the pool, the pump and the reservoir. He and his family had been coming up summers for the past eight or nine years and they were sorry to leave the place, but the father, for whom the place had originally been purchased, had died, and so the family wished to concentrate their work in the Sheepshead Bay area where they lived and the New York city area where John Mastrion worked in construction. We found him generous and cooperative to a degree, and are intensely grateful to the family for all the loving work they put into this project not only when they themselves were the owners, but for us, to get us started up there. I told them when they left us, when their work was finished, that I would be remembering them when we said our nightly rosary and compline together. And they assured us they would remember us too.

This is not too complete an account and is written with many interruptions and distractions and again we beg our readers to excuse us for long delaying the answering of letters. During the course of our moving from the Peter Maurin Farm, the beach houses, and some folk from the city also to the land - -the transferring of files, past and present, trays of mail, answered and unanswered and to be filed, - - all have gotten into an awful hodge podge and a lot of sorting out of papers will have to take place. But on the one hand, Marquette University Library is receiving our archives. If they are not already discouraged at the masses of material they have received, we can ship a lot more off to them. And on the other hand, I am reading a delightful book, **Maryknoll's First Lady**, by Sister Jeanne Marie, published by Dodd Mead and Company and learning

about all the hard beginnings and paper work they had to do, and so am less discouraged at not having been more successful even after thirty years in getting our own files in order. Will we ever, undisciplined laymen as we are, be any more orderly? Just now some students came in, and after an hour with them, I must stir up my desk still more to find some lost sheets and articles to go off to the printer. It is the same with Tom Cornell, with Martin Corbin, with all editors of wide interests, it would seem. Humans and books and papers are inextricably mixed up.

Let us hope that this is our last move, in the rural area at least. Stanley, the Melancholy Slav says that doubtless the state will decide some day to put a Throughway along the river. But I doubt it. Expressways and urban renewal may mean other moves in the city but we will be in our same district, God willing, for many years to come.