

On Pilgrimage - December 1965

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The Catholic Worker, December 1965, 1, 2, 7.

Summary: Discusses freedom of conscience and obedience to Church and State in the context of Vatican Council II's condemnation of nuclear war. Lauds the "little way" of St. Therese as the foundation of world peace and a means of social change. (DDLW #248).

It is a happy thing to feel gratitude, so we thank our readers for these feelings of ours, as well as for the help they have sent us to pay our bills, and for the good letters upholding us in a difficult time, making us realize how wide-spread the Catholic Worker family is throughout the world.

Every night, as a small group of us go into the house chapel to say the rosary and compline, we pray for the individuals who have asked most especially for prayers and for the living and the dead, believer and unbeliever, our own family, as well as our correspondents. And we pray with deep gratitude for those who send us help to enable us to do the work of hospitality.

In the daytime you can see the wooded hillside from the chapel windows, where one of the men from the Bowery has cleared away underbrush so that the stone walls which terrace the hillside here and there are visible. The setting sun on these terraces colors the rocks a deep rose, and the trees come alive with light and color. My room faces the river, not the hill, and as I write this morning I look out at the Hudson River and marvel at how the Atlantic tide reaches all the way up to Tivoli and covers the rushes, which in turn cover the mud flats across the river. Bits of driftwood float upstream. The channel is on our side, and just now a great oil tanker went by under my window.

Downstairs in the room below me, Agnes Sidney, who is eighty-five, is bedridden. Brother Raphael, of the Christian Brothers in Barrytown, saw to it that we had a hospital bed, and six young novices brought it up so that Agnes can face the river and look out at tanker, freighter and barge. Her husband, long dead, was barge captain and she herself lived for thirty years on barges, sometimes making the perilous journey from New York to Boston, via coal barge.

Good News

The happy news on the radio this morning is that the Vatican Council has passed with an overwhelmingly majority vote, the Schema on the Church in the Modern World, included in which is an unequivocal condemnation of nuclear warfare. It was a statement for which we had been working and praying. We will report further on the details of the condemnation of modern war in next month's issue.

As to the questions this condemnation will raise in the hearts and minds of all men, Catholic or otherwise—I can only feel that such questions and the attempts to answer them will lead to more enlightened knowledge, more enlightened conscience on the part of all men. It will lead, as Peter Maurin was always fond of saying, to clarification of thought, a state of mind which should precede all action. I am sure that he thought that our action very often trod on the heels of thought too quickly and so was very imperfect. But I always felt, with St. Francis of Assisi, that we do not know what we have not practiced, and that we learn by our actions, even when those actions involve us in grave mistakes, or sin. God brings good out of evil, that evil which has come about as a result of our free will, our free choice. We learn, as the saying is, the hard way. But the promise remains: “All things work together for good to those who love God,” or who want to love Him, who seek to love Him. As Pascal said: “You would not seek Him if you had not already found Him.” In other words, the promise is there. “Seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you.” And to repeat again, since there is no time with God, the promise, the finding, and the seeking go together. Even when one is following a wrong or ill-informed conscience.

For me, this answers the question as to whether we, at the Catholic Worker, think that a man is in the state of mortal sin for going to war. I have been asked this question so often by students that I feel we must keep on trying to answer, faulty and obscure as the answer that each one of us makes may seem to be. To my mind the answer lies in the realm of the motive, the intention. If a man truly thinks he is combating evil and striving for the good, if he truly thinks he is striving for the common good, he must follow his conscience regardless of others. But he always has the duty of forming his conscience by studying, listening, being ready to hear his opponents' point of view, by establishing what Martin Buber called an I-Thou relationship. I suppose this is what priests mean when they talk about loving one's enemies, trying to reconcile the teachings of the Gospel with war. The intention, they feel, is to bring about peace and initiate rational discussion around the conference table, and from there on try to establish a relationships of love by building hospitals, repairing the damage done by war, restoring prosperity to a country exhausted and ravaged by war. (Because our modern wars are always fought on the soil of others.) But what means are being used to accomplish these good ends! The means becomes the ends, a Benedictine writer, Augustine Baker, brought out forcibly.

And even these **good** ends, as Cardinal Leger's richly provocative talk, published

in this issue of the paper, brings out, we are always trying to make others like ourselves, so convinced are we that we white, Anglo-Saxons (Protestant usually goes with this in opposition to Negro, Catholic and Jew, though we Catholics have taken on the same formula) are right.

It seems to me that those of the hierarchy who opposed the inclusion in Schema thirteen of this condemnation of nuclear war were leaving out of account Divine Providence, when they thought that without these weapons of destruction we could not face up to the threat of Communism's taking over the world. The idea of arms being used as deterrents, to establish a balance of terror, and so keeping the world at peace was long ago condemned by Benedict XV, who spoke of "the fallacy of an armed peace." Abbott Christopher Butler brought out the fallacy of such reasoning even more strongly in the quotations from his intervention at the Council which we printed on page one, first column, of the October issue of the **Catholic Worker**. (We are continuing to use other interventions, as they are called, from other members of the hierarchy in the paper, for the sake of clarification of thought on this all-engrossing problem of war.)

The primacy of conscience in the life of a Catholic is more and more brought out by the deliberations in the Council and by the very conflicts that take place there. The promulgation (a solemn word) of the doctrine on religious liberty is an example of this. When I was in Rome, one bishop (it may even have been an archbishop) said to me: "You need not worry about the problem of conscientious objection to war, since freedom of conscience is already thoroughly established in the schema on religious liberty." I always hesitate to name the bishops when I am quoting them, for fear of not being entirely accurate. We would not think of printing their letters of commendation for our "good work" when they send us their frequent contributions, knowing that they would seem to many an endorsement of our position, when it is actually our works of mercy that they are commending. Of course we consider enlightening the ignorant and counseling the doubtful works of mercy, as indeed they are. As for "rebuking the sinner" we are told not to judge, by our dear Lord, and we are only too conscious of our own all too imperfect state. However, our positions seem to imply a judgment, a condemnation, and we get the "holier than thou" accusation often enough.

Whenever this question of conscience comes up, the question of obedience immediately follows, obedience to Church and State, even when commands are not personally directed at us lay people, nor obedience exacted of us, as it is of the clergy. We have pointed out again and again the freedom the Catholic Worker has always had in the Archdiocese of New York. We have been rebuked on occasion, when we advised young men not to register for the draft; when we spoke of capitalism as a cancer on the social body, as Count della Torre, the former editor of **Osservatore Romano**, did; and on only one occasion, for our use of the name **Catholic**. This last reproach came up again in a news report recently, and we can only repeat what I said to our former chancellor, Monsignor Gaffney, (God rest his soul) that we have as much right to the name Catholic as

the Catholic War Veterans have.

Obey God and Men?

As to my oft-quoted remark that if the Cardinal asked me to stop my writing on war, I would obey, which has been brought up quite a number of times recently, I will try to clarify it: First of all, I cannot conceive of Cardinal Spellman's making such a request of me, considering the respect he has always shown for freedom of conscience and freedom of speech. But in the event of so improbable a happening, I have said that I would obey. "What becomes of your obligation of conscience to resist authority? You have quoted St. Peter's saying that we must obey God rather than men."

My answer would be (and it is an easier one to make now that the Council has spoken so clearly) that my respect for Cardinal Spellman and my faith that God will right all mistakes, mine as well as his, would lead me to obey. A respect augmented by the way he has carried out his physical duties in connection with military ordinariate, in visiting the soldiers in far-off parts of the world. This Christmas, as during the Korean conflict, he will be in a war area, since there is not a spot in Vietnam which can be considered safe. We have been a troublesome family to the chancery office, and I am sure that there are plenty of bishops around the county who are glad we are not in their dioceses. It is fitting, of course, that the Christian revolution (it has scarcely begun in its pacifist-anarchist respects) should struggle on in New York as it has these last thirty-three years. Let us pray that it continues.

Immediate Effects

As to what change will be brought about by the pronouncements of the Council? None immediately, just as there was none when Pope Pius XI spoke out against Fascism in Italy. (And was it not Cardinal Spellman who flew out with that encyclical, which was suppressed in Italy under Mussolini?) Popes speak out, as Paul VI did recently at the United Nations, but wars go on. There are cheers and rejoicings, and seeming assent to what they say, but action does not seem to be influenced, **that is, immediately**. They are respected for what they say because of their lofty position. But a Father Daniel Berrigan, S.J. is "given another assignment" to Latin America. But in the long run, these words, these pronouncements, after much blood has been shed, influence the course of history, which progresses more and more towards a recognition of man's freedom, his dignity as a son of God, as made in the image and likeness of God, whether he is Communist or imperialist, Russian or American, "North" or "South" Vietnamese. All men are brothers, God wills that all men be saved, and we pray daily, **Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**.

Meanwhile, to go from the general to the particular, I rejoice that Father Berrigan has this new assignment. He has done magnificent writing on race relations and war, he has spoken and walked on picket lines, and undoubtedly he needs some rest, some time to think, to research, to learn more about solutions to the problems that make for war, such as world poverty and hunger. If we had peace tomorrow, in Vietnam, the problem of poverty in Latin America would still be there, fermenting more violence and hatred, more use of force. Are pacifists in this present war going to be pacifist still when revolts break out throughout Latin American countries? Are we going to have trained and resourceful people ready to deal with these problems? And above all with accent on the primacy of the spiritual and knowledge of “the little way?”

A Jesuit priest from Madras, India, came in the office to visit us the other afternoon. When he spoke of the war in Vietnam he spoke as one nearer to it than we were, and he reiterated the familiar argument: If Vietnam is lost to the Communists, all Asia goes too. One of the Midwest senators answered this argument very successfully in an address printed in the **Saturday Review** last April.

But from the Christian point of view (and in this case from the Jesuit point of view) when he asked, “What are we to do?” I could only point to the example of St. Ignatius, who first of all laid down his arms, then went to support himself by serving the poor in hospitals, and then went back to school to study. Peter Maurin not only emphasized such a “simple” program, but pointed out that we should study history by reading the lives of the saints, which throw a light on what is happening in the present day. He also had a famous essay, “They and We.”

Community or Crowd?

People say:/They don’t do this,/They don’t do that,/They don’t do that,/They ought to do this,/They ought to do that./Always “They”/and never “I.” The Communitarian Revolution/is basically/a personal revolution./ It starts with I,/not with They./ One I plus one I/makes two I’s/ and two I’s/and two I’s make We./ We is a community/while “they” is a crowd.

When a mother, a housewife, asks what she can do, one can only point to the way of St. Therese, that little way, so much misunderstood and so much despised. She did all for the love of God, even to putting up with the irritation in herself caused by the proximity of a nervous nun. She began with working for peace in her own heart, and willing to love where love was difficult, and so she grew in love, and increased the sum total of love in the world, not to speak of peace.

Newman wrote: “Let us but raise the level of religion in our hearts, and it will rise in the world. He who attempts to set up God’s kingdom in his heart, furthers it in the world.” And this goes for the priest, too, wherever he is, whether he deals with the problem of war or with poverty. He may write and speak, but he

needs to study the little way, which is all that is available to the poor, and the only alternative to the mass approach of the State. Missionaries throughout the world recognize this little way of cooperatives and credit unions, small industry, village commune and cottage economy. And not only missionaries. Down in our own South, in the Delta regions among the striking farmers of Mississippi, this “little way” is being practiced and should be studied.

From California comes news this month, not only of the strike in the Delano region of the grape pickers, well covered by the **National Catholic Reporter**, but a letter too of co-op development in the California Valley. “We have visions of a complex of co-ops in the California Valley, owned and controlled by the farm workers. It will be interesting to see how long it takes vision to be translated into reality.”

Com Chautard, in his **Soul of the Apostolate**, in answer to the question as to how to find workers in all these vineyards, called attention to our Lord’s words: “Pray ye therefore, for workers.” So right where we are, at this moment, we can pause and send up such a prayer.

The Lord knows we need to around the Catholic Worker. Sometimes it seems that the more volunteers there are around the place, the less gets done. I have letters from six volunteers on my desk now. Not only are all the beds full, so that we cannot put them up for the Chrystie Street work, but also, it seems in regard to these we already have that their interest in peace keeps them from the clothes room, or from the paper work connected with the thirty or more subscriptions which are coming in each day. Paper work is scorned and yet it is an essential when you are dealing with the people who receive the eighty-five thousand copies of the paper which go out each month. Paper work, cleaning the house, cooking the meals, dealing with the innumerable visitors who come all through the day, answering the phone, keeping patience and acting intelligently, which is to find some meaning in all these encounters—these things too are the work of peace, and often seem like a very little way.

But as Pope John told the pilgrimage of women, Mothers for Peace, the seventy-five of us who went over to Rome to thank him for his encyclical **Pacem in Terris**, just the month before his death, “the beginnings of peace are in your own hearts, in your own families, schoolrooms, offices, parishes, and neighborhoods.”

It is working from the ground up, from the poverty of the stable, in work as at Nazareth, and also in going from town to town, as in the public life of Jesus two thousand years ago. And since a thousand years are as one day, and Christianity is but two days old, let us take heart and start now.