

On Pilgrimage - January 1959

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, January 1959, 1,2,7.

Summary: Argues from the principle of subsidiarity that to replace personal responsibility with the state's is a grave injustice. Criticizes the state's inefficiency in alleviating suffering; in its quest to regulate justice it causes more injustice. Associates a close bond between poverty and love and blames industrialism for the increasing practice of carting the aged off to institutions. (DDLW #178).

Last month I read about a 67 year old “operator,” agent for a corporation, who was sentenced to fifteen days in jail because of 112 violations on the slum tenement where he was collecting rents. This was part of the “massive new attack on the slums” that Mayor Wagner is talking about. Strauss, the convicted man, was vice-president of a Realty Corporation which was operating on a lease. “This is not a rent gouging operation. It is a thankless task. No public agency will handle it,” he said.

How strange a situation for us to be in,—to be speaking sympathetically of this man! And how terrible it is to see that I myself am in the same category, a convicted criminal, under suspended sentence for being a slum landlord. This is in connection with the trouble we had in 1956 which led to us remodeling our St. Joseph's house at the cost of \$24,000 only to be told two years later we had to move out to make way for a subway. There were eleven violations in our house which led to my conviction. At the plea of my lawyer, Judge Nichols thundered that if we were a charitable group, all the worse for us because these poor people we helped could not move out!

What very strange encounters come about through the practice of the works of mercy. What strange lessons we learn through this hard way, of loving our enemy, in the class war which is basic in the world today, very much a part of all the cold war which is going on between the rich and the poor.

To Be A Landlord

Always the landlord, the collector of rents, has been considered the enemy of the poor. And here we found ourselves, I found myself, since the house at 223 Chrystle St. was in my name, in the position of the landlord, though we collect no rents.

What is the solution to such a question—for everyone to own his own home, through cooperative housing in the city, such as that of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers or the International Ladies Garment Workers—or for the city to own all the apartments? Personal responsibility, group responsibility or city or federal responsibility?

Subsidiarity

“It is an injustice, a grave evil and a disturbance of right order,” writes Pius XI In his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, “for a larger and higher association to arrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower societies. This is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, unshaken and unchangeable.”

The city is doing away with slums. You take the bus on First Avenue and ride down to South Ferry and it is amazing, the heaps of rubble, the open spaces not yet built on. The intention is good. The city fathers are trying to do the right thing. But just the same, Commissioner Moses is interested in roads and automobiles, not families. The fire department, the health department, the mayor himself, and the borough president all are undoubtedly interested in people. Every time there is a fire, there are more and more inspections, more and more notices to vacate buildings. And the problem remains that there are not enough “projects” and it is hard to fit into the classifications set up to be eligible for project. Rents go higher and higher, four room apartments are being split up into two room apartments and people become more and more cramped and there are more and more slums.

A Family Is A Person

In our search for buildings to house the House of Hospitality, we learn more and more about the law. There must be one bath room for every five persons, under such classification as ours. A sprinkler system, steel self-closing doors, a fire alarm system, a night watchman, lights over every door and in fact a thick volume of housing laws to cover the classification “multiple dwelling.”

During the tours conducted by the Mayor and the commissioner of housing terrible overcrowding was discovered which was yet quite legal. Families of ten in one room driven into rooming houses because of lack of apartments—all this is quite legal.

We Give Up

We are defeated and yet we are undefeated. We have given up the quest for a house after occupying architect and lawyer to look up laws and plans and survey

buildings, only to find them all forbidden us. After all, it is only after inspection by all city agencies that a certificate of occupancy is given, and if this is refused one cannot move in.

So we will now become renters. It is only for the last eight of the CW 25 years that we have been owners in the city. We will go back to the status of tenants, and pay our monthly rent, and in addition to a “day center” (the former little theater and dancing school which we have rented on Spring street) we will rent apartments in the near neighborhood. We have found one in an old apartment house down the street which has steam heat and hot water and is on the sixth floor. This is good exercise for the aged. Little Margaret who is over 70 says that it is good for her arthritis to walk up and down stairs all day. It keeps her from getting stiffened up. We are promised two other apartments in the same house next month. If the heat does not come up to the top floor we will put on our coats and cover our stiff knees with blankets. If there is no hot water we will not bathe in the tub which is placed quite publicly by the kitchen sink. Our first apartment has the sun shining in and windows looking out over the roofs on two sides. We can smell the east wind from the ocean when the storms begin, we can study cloud formations, we can watch the dance of the pigeons against the sky, when the boys from the neighborhood come up with their long sticks to chase their indolent flocks from their nests to exercise.

As I write, moving starts, the files are going over to the loft, the addressograph machine and the stencils. We will go to press on Dec. 29, mail out the paper the two days before New Years, and the day after New Years we will take up our beds and go. As a matter of fact, a good deal of furniture will have to be stored in a shed at the Peter Maurin Farm. Little by little we will furnish new apartments as we get them. As many as possible in house will put up with friends, and those who have been the transients have been getting jobs. Our dear friend Emma Greiner has been working overtime connected as she is the State Employment agency, in finding work for those who are able.

We Are Happy

We are happy over this solution. We know that none will be neglected and that things will work out for the best. All things work for good for those who love God and we are trying to learn to love,—it is the business of our life. God is Love and we hope some day to see Him face to face.

It is good to be beginning the new year in this way. It is a new era for us, it is getting back to poverty again, it is getting closer to the poor. It is being decentralized, mixed like leaven in the dough. (The dough is good and the leaven is good.) We will take the money paid us by the city, and begin to build a cinder block retreat house on the Peter Maurin farm, While our life is simplified in one way, it is still complicated since we still will have to deal with law and architects and lawyers and city officials. There is no getting out of at least trying hard

to follow our best judgment, our inspiration, to work harder at the farming commune idea of Peter Maurin.

If we are stopped on that level too, on that higher level we are reaching for, then that too will be considered the will of God, only accepted because we have done all we reasonably could. Fr. Roy used to tell us to follow the light of reason as far as it would take us. When we could go no further, then we had to go by faith. And it seems only reasonable to try to use our resources to build on the land. If we are stopped, we will just go on distributing the goods entrusted to us to the poor again following the light of reason as far as it will take us.

Present Help

The greatest help we have received spiritually this last month has come in the shape of a little quarterly, JESUS CARITAS, a publication of the Charles de Foucauld Association. The theme of the number is THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP and the best of the articles in it are the two of Fr. Rene Voillaume, whose volume of conferences SEEDS OF THE DESERT I have referred to before in this column.

Several times those poignant lines of St. Vincent de Paul are quoted,—“It is only by feeling your love that the poor will forgive you for the gifts of bread.” He elaborates on this in his description of the special mission of the Little Brothers in a lecture “delivered extempore at Sao Paulo, Brazil,” to the Little Brothers there.

He points out how the church has led in the works of mercy, in education down through the ages, and how many of these works are being taken over by the state when the need is so vast.

Pere Voillaume has traveled widely around the world and has seen “the terrible amount of misery, sorrow, agony and despair” there is. And he says that St. Vincent de Paul probably healed more people than Jesus did, and that shocked me into the realization that we probably have fed more people and housed more people than Jesus did, but what Jesus has done is to “take possession of all human trials and sufferings so that presented by Him to God, they might serve for the redemption of mankind.” His passion was to suffer all things, to be like in every way to us except in sin, and to be Love itself.

St. Therese of Lisieux and Charles de Foucauld, Fr. Voillaume has pointed out, though the one was a cloistered young girl and the other a man of action, both discovered the same apostolate: to be Love.

Reading a book like this makes one realize how worthless all one’s works are without love.

“One of the things of which I have become more and more convinced, as I have gone around the world, is that a certain phenomenon has been taking place throughout Christendom under different outward appearances.” Fr. Voillaume

writes. "What I am referring to here can perhaps best be illustrated by pointing to a certain lack of effectiveness with missionary charitable works as regards the propagation of the Christian faith, coinciding with an aggravation of the divisions between men." He goes on to say that what our Lord wanted was unity, "that they all might be one." Though in the last century there was a tremendous flowering of Christian charity there has never been a time when there was so much bitterness of class war, racial prejudice, nationalism. "Can one consider it normal to cull such bitter fruits from such generous sowings? They are a source of scandal for more Christians than one. I know socially minded employers who, having done the best they could to meet the workmen's movement, say: 'Look at the dreadful results.' I have heard colonials of sincere good will complain that they doubted the dictates of their own consciences. 'What,' they ask, 'was the use of going to all the trouble of setting up dispensaries on our farms to care for the sick and of looking after the children of our workmen? All we are getting is revolt.'"

And then Pere Voillaume goes on to tell of the kind of charity Jesus Christ wants of us Christians, to what limits He can ask us to go in observing His commandment. "Has He not been expecting of us a sort of increase or superabundance of charity?"

"It is plain from the Gospel, as I have already reminded you, that there is a closer bond between love and poverty than we may always appreciate."

"What the white man has been lacking in, the more often, is humility and a sense of respect for every man, however primitive, however different from him." . . . The world has come to a turning point in its history . . . either the Christians are going to comprehend what has happened and change, or the Church is going to be arrested in her development; the working classes will move farther and farther away from her, especially in those countries where they are already largely outside, and the Christian communities which have been founded among the different colored races will totter because the missionary is white and because he has come with the white official and the white business man, and whether he will or not, is therefore looked upon as one of them."

Little Sisters

I have visited the Little Sisters in Montreal, in Chicago, in Boston, and in Washington and the first three fraternities are in most miserable slums where they live in poverty, work with their hands in factories or as ward maids in hospitals. Every morning they receive our Lord in communion, and every night they kneel with empty hands before the tabernacle and bring before the Lord the misery of the world, and yes, too the beauty and joy of the world. They live in love and humility, they take the littlest place, they are poor with the poor, suffer with the poor, endure fatigue, ugliness, noise, all that is most difficult in the life of the destitute.

As Bob Lax, editor of Jubilee said, they are living the hidden life of Jesus, those thirty years of work and obscurity in the world, before He began His public life.

I write thus at length because I feel that this “way” has so much to teach us, in our own work, whether we live in the world or out of it, whether we are housewife, teacher, artist, student; whether we live, because of our vocation, in Westchester or on Mulberry St.

Jesus Caritas

It is a “gift of Friendship” which I am making you, our readers, when I tell you to send for a copy of this quarterly, **Jesus Caritas**, to

Association Charles de Jesus
11, Cite Trevisé
Paris 9e France

A contribution of 75c is asked but it is easier to send a dollar and so to help spread the work. I can assure you that this “family” now spreading throughout the world will answer many questions for you. It is made up of Little Brothers, Little Sisters of Jesus, Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart, Union of the Brothers of Jesus, a secular Institute for diocesan priests in process of official constitution, a secular institute for laymen, one for women, and the Charles of Jesus Fraternity, an association for men and women.

“Besides these,” a friend writes me, “there are diverse groups. The Sodality of the Directory which you may remember Anne Fremantle writing about in the Commonweal—the Badalya of M. Massignon; the Union of the Fraternites Nazareennes, a group of women of Bordeaux who specialize in aid to the socially and psychologically disturbed; and Groupe Charles de Foucauld in Algeria whose work is to give help to abandoned children.

“Since 1955 all these groups have been united in the framework of the Association of Charles of Jesus, Pere de Foucauld, which publishes the Jesus Caritas quarterly.”

The French edition has been coming out for some time, but this issue I am writing of is the first English edition. There are pages about the fraternities in England, Pakistan, Ceylon, Australia, Papua, Central and South Africa and North America. There is a Fraternity in a little Eskimo village a mile from Nome, Alaska, and now there are yearly sojourns on Little Diomed Island, three miles from the Russian Great Diomed. There are never more than two or three in these fraternities!

We have much to learn about poverty and love, and may we grow in both, this coming year!

Visit to Vermont

This last month I had two speaking engagements, one in New Haven and one in Boston, and there was time in between to visit the Hennessy family at Perkinsville, Vermont. The bus left New Haven at two p.m. with a colored driver, the first in my experience on the Greyhound line! We arrived in Charleston, New Hampshire at seven and Dave and Tamar met me at the lunch wagon where they were enjoying a sandwich together in peace and quiet without eight riotous children around them. Hilaire is now sixteen months old and insists on accompanying David to milk the cow and feed the pig, carry water, and pitch down hay. He goes down the steep cellar stairs to help feed wood into the insatiable furnace. It is very cold now and David has to get up three times during the night to replenish. The pipes froze up in the outer kitchen, and although the faucets ran water, the drain pipes would not work, and all the water from the washing machine and from dish washing had to be carted away. For a while there had been no water at all, but a new plumber was discovered, a fellow from Jersey, with a wife and three young children, interested in the same ideas, from a most literate family. Not only the work got done but a friend was made.

Tamar has some more weaving—this time a very fine blanket so wide that it covers the double bed and hangs to the floor on either side, so neither can pull it off the other. “I have got to get married when I grow up,” says Mary who is seven, “Because I am afraid to sleep alone.” She sleeps with Susie now. “And I am going to get married too,” says Martha who is three, “and I am going to carry a hand bag.”

All this talk about marriage was because there was a fourteen year old girl who has just left school to get married, and the little girls are fascinated at the idea of being so suddenly grown up before you know it, and having a home of your own.

The Family

Tamar had just attended a Parent-Teacher Association meeting where some films were shown. — **How to have a happy family.** The picture was about two families in Puerto Rico. One family had four children and the commentator talked about the man on the plantation only planting as many trees as he could care for, and the picture of that family was a happy one, well ordered and cheerful, everyone smiling. And then the family of eight children! What a contrast! One child withdrawn, obviously disturbed, another child feeding another, a boy talking back to his father, and so on. The point was also made that children who were happy at home would not marry so early and have so many children!

The young mother who went with Tamar had been married at seventeen and had three children, and doubtless more coming.

Talking with David about a recent book, *Political Power and Social Theory*, by Barrington Moore, Jr., Harvard University Press, 1958. Here is a sample paragraph: "One of the most obviously obsolete features of the family is the obligation to give affection as a duty to a particular set of persons on account of the accident of birth." . . . "the barbaric nature of the duty of family affection." . . . "One . . . couple agreed in the privacy of their own home that if people ever talked to each other openly about the sufferings brought on by raising a family today, the birth rate would drop to zero. . . . How many young couples . . . wished that their parents could quietly and cheaply be taken care of in an institution for the aged . . . a nurse can perform these tasks of giving affection and early socialization as well as the parents, often better." Etc.

David said that under industrialism such a way of thinking was only "normal." How good it is to get letters during the month from families who have made as much of a break with industrialism as they can, and to realize that there are many setting themselves against the system. As Silone wrote in his *Bread and Wine*, one man shouting "No" can break that unanimity of acceptance, and so keep freedom alive.

We talked also about the two books, **Man's Search for the Good Life**, by Scott Nearing and **Living the Good Life**, by Helen and Scott Nearing, "being a plain and practical account of a 20 year project, in a self subsistent Homestead in Vermont, together with remarks on how to live sanely and simply in a troubled world." These books were published in 1954 and Ammon Hennacy reviewed them. I speak of them again to tell how practical they are in their chapters on **Living in Community, Our Good Earth, Eating for Health, Rounding out a Livelihood**, etc. Dave and Tamar have had to consult it for their maple sugaring, and on how to store their winter vegetables.

The book is beautifully designed and made up and can be purchased from the Social Science Institute, Harborside, Maine.

I am always astounded however by the divergence of theory and practice. The Nearings are extreme individualists, but they have the greatest admiration for the achievements in Russia and China, and are in favor of the socialist state. They are of themselves here in the U.S. able to achieve a good life and when others do not follow the example they set, they would be willing for the State to force them to lead the better life, as they see it.

Which reminds me that my remarks on the collective farms and community farms in Soviet Russia were misunderstood in some quarters the last month. When I pointed out the contrast between the great collective farms where men and women have their homes and private gardens and stock, and our own gigantic wheat and fruit and cattle ranches where much of the work is done by migrants and tenant farmers who own nothing and who are turned away in sickness and in times of unemployment, I was not speaking in favor of giving up our **freedom**.

The children of this generation are often wiser in their generation than the children of light.

It is the zeal of the Communists, their dedication, their concern for what they consider the common good that we need to remember.