

On Pilgrimage - June 1961

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, June 1961, 1, 2, 6.

Summary: Recounts with gratitude the donations they receive and notes how quickly they become poor again. Upbraids herself for giving advice instead of giving leeway to each worker. Doesn't like all the clutter but respects individual freedom. Travels to Detroit, then to visit Tamar in Vermont. (DDLW #783).

Finances, June 1961

It is true we have had a long cold rainy spring and most of the time the skies have been overclouded. It is hard not to be oppressed on such days so it is not to be surprised that everyone complains, every one is looking for comfort and reassurance. "God comforts us," St. Paul tells us, "that we may comfort others." The trouble is that in trying to comfort and reassure, we plunge into giving the advice asked for, and that always adds to the problems of those who have come for comfort. I hereby withdraw all advice I have give to members of our staff about cutting down on food bills, not paying so many rents, – not accepting so much furniture which has crowded our dining room this past month at 175 Chrystie Street. By advising I have only added to people's problems. I have been giving worldly advice and have been quenching the spirit!

The Sun Shines

Today is a beautiful day with a gentle wind, the fresh cut grass smells delightfully, the frogs have begun their strange music again down by the pond at Peter Maurin Farm and some sweet clover which is cropping up by every roadside can be cut and brought into town to hang in a window and give a reminder of open fields. This fact is an answer itself to the guilt one feels at having a farm and a beach place, houses of hospitality, extensions which are so near to the city (thirty-five cents carfare one way) that picnickers can come down and spend the day.

Bills Will Be Paid

It is true that the appeal was answered and bills were paid. Twenty-one thousand dollars came in, and went out again. And now there is no money ahead for the summer! No visible means of support, as the saying is. We pay a thousand dollars a month in rents, and rent must be paid on time. Evictions are very real things. We have a mother and child with us whose furniture was put out on the street. "It disappears quickly," she told us when we were complaining of being cluttered up with furniture. "Just put it out on the street, and it disappears in the night."

But having been served with summonses before for not having the garbage can lids on, and being under suspended sentence (a \$250 fine) for being a slum landlord, we are shy about such direct methods. We must return to the daring and fearlessness of former years. We have given away what we can to all our neighbors. "Can't you take a chair with those spring hats? And what about a sack of potatoes?" But mothers' arms are always filled with bundles and babies and moving furniture up flights of stairs is a heavy job.

Yes, we are rich in furniture and in potatoes this month, and such donations come in each day, but they do not pay for the rest of the staples which seem to be consumed in vast quantities. "We spend ten dollars a day just for sugar and margarine," Dianne says. We get day-old bread which Mike picks up at an East Side bakery and some of it is good pumpernickel and rye. Dianne and Stuart, two of our editors, have charge of the kitchen and they are both in their early twenties, generous and strong. They work like Trojans and try to feed everyone who comes along, and Charlie who pays the bills and has to worry over the finances wonders, "Shall we feed everyone who comes along?" And then I start advising again. But I have to do it, – it is really talking to myself, reassuring myself when I do it.

I know that I have said in the past that we must not play God, – that we are always overcrowding, always biting off more than we can chew, always taking on more than we can accomplish. So we must try to limit ourselves. Baron von Hugel says that each morning we should think over what we have to do that day, and then cut our schedule in half. All very well for those in public life "who wish to be seen and esteemed by men." But for the mother, the householder, the family, the man at work, – this advice is not possible. The "industrial engineer," the speed-up artist, the efficiency expert is going to pile it on as much as he can in factory and workshop. And there is no end to the destitute which we will always have with us.

The second principle to remember is that as anarchists or personalists, whatever we choose to call ourselves, "we must be what we want the other fellow to be," as Peter Maurin said. In other words, look to ourselves alone, do our own job as well as we can and not worry about the other fellow's job. But what if one is in charge of the finances and worrying about the bills?

The person who is willing to take charge of the kitchen should be given leeway, his judgment should be trusted. He will do the best he can. And who is paying the bills anyway but God alone? We admit we are beggars and we are not ashamed of it. We will work as hard as we can, with no salary and trust to the Lord to care for those He sends us. He will put it into the hearts of our readers, to keep us going, as He has for the last twenty-eight years. So let us pray too for the one who carries the heavy load of our debts on his shoulders.

Chrystie Street

No one has given a realistic description of our new headquarters, St. Joseph's House at 175 Chrystie Street, and everyone who comes there is shocked at how miserable our surroundings are. If the loft on Spring Street was inadequate and dingy, though spacious, the new site is dingier and smaller. There is a cellar, half of which the landlord uses. When the cellar door fell in, we paid for a new one, seventy-five dollars, so he allows us to use the back of the cellar. Our rent is \$275 a month. The ground floor is cemented and impossible to keep clean with hundreds of people tramping in and out each day. We cannot seat more than twenty at a time and the others sit on benches towards the front of the store, or go up the one short flight to the "sitting room" floor where the clothes rooms are, for women and for men. On the third floor are offices, and the floors slant, and every time anyone walks across the room the boards shake. From the interstices of the metal ceiling, the rain pours in so that on rainy days we have had three large metal wastepaper baskets filling up with water over and over again. Tarring the roof around the skylight does not seem to have helped much.

Destitution

Even with all this, given the money for materials a few skilled workers could affect a change, but the clutter and filth would remain the same. It is not just books and papers and overflow of desks all over the place. All Catholic Workers feel their desk is their home, and all have demanded one, save Peter Maurin alone, who made his knees his desk, and his pockets his bookcases.

The filth comes from a packrat we have with us, a most lovable guy whom we have known for many years and who is evicted over and over and always returns, with more and more clutter. Boxes upon boxes of trash, garbage, old papers, books, bits of furniture, piles in every corner, hallway, toilet, cellar, and roof. He rooms in an apartment with two other men, and he has surrounded himself there also in the same way with this inconceivable quantity of trash which is impossible to get him to move, without all the moral and physical force one can command. And if one is anarchist-pacifist to the unreasonable degree that so many around **The Catholic Worker** are, an Augean stable is the result of this respect for man's freedom.

Peter Maurin

Authority and freedom, reason and faith, personalism and communitarianism – all these were the subjects of Peter Maurin’s discussions, but if you asked him what to do about Kichi Harada or Roy Bug, he would give you a few essays on the Thomistic Doctrine of the Common Good to read and digest which would help you solve your problems and come to your own decision. Peter having died in 1949, such problems are left for me to solve when I return home from a trip.

So far Hercules has not arrived to solve this problem for us. The thing to do is hire a truck, find out if we can bring it down to the river to load on one of the garbage barges to be taken off to some far off dump to be used as fill, or burned, or both. They have lost some beautiful swamp land which was a game preserve, and where even wild orchids grew, by such city efficiency. But this line of thought would lead one to give up and to wander away and become a desert father, and we are a family, which includes Roy Bug and must stick together. The only thing is to be ruthless and energetic and start afresh. Is there anyone ruthless and energetic around the CW?

But this outward show of destitution is nothing compared to the destitution suffered by those whose plumbing is out of repair, whose toilets overflow, who have no sixty dollars to call a Roto-Rooter to unstop the pipes and drains.

And of course there are always the problems of lice and dirt in slum tenements with neither bath nor shower. Such is our life in the city, and it is a gigantic effort for the destitute to try to live decently, a Herculean effort.

The Land

If we comfort ourselves that we are sharing in some small way with the misery of the migrant worker and the slum dweller by enduring these things, our places on the land, being loved, take on an aspect of true comfort. There is always work to do. Young and old, able and disabled contribute to the common good. And if some of those problems of personal dirt and disorder remain with us even there, they are more easily handled and fresh air, sky and green trees are all around us.

The Catholic Worker headquarters remains in the city because our work is here, and it is where people can find us. Visitors abound to the extent that it is hard to get work done. Mail piles up that needs to be answered, there are meetings to go to, and meetings each Friday night. There is a mysterious attraction in the great city for the young. So we remain in the cities, the gutter sweepers of the dioceses, working yet beggars, destitute yet possessing all things; happy because today the sun shines, there is a symphony on the radio, children are playing on the streets, there is a park across the way and a church around the corner where we receive our daily Bread. “Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief.” So please “give us this day our daily bread,” and the money we need to keep up with our rents.

St. Francis House of Hospitality

A few days before we went to press with the May issue, I left for Detroit, having skipped my obligations there in returning from the West in order to get back to New York in time for the air raid drill in which all the Chrystie Street group were ignored except for Philip Havey whose article in this issue is from letters from prison.

Everyone arrested received unequal sentences, some three, some five, some thirty days, and one student who antagonized the judge by saying he was an abstract painter – “Not the kind that sweats” the judge commented – and that he did not believe in Divine Providence, got a ninety days’ sentence. He came up for another trial later, after very adverse comments in the press about the judge.

I have pointed out on my travels that we are probably the only Catholic paper in existence where there are usually some members of the staff in jail. This last month it was Bob Steed fasting in the Washington jail as protest of the CIA moves in Cuba, and Philip at Hart’s Island for twenty-five days. One of the works of mercy is visiting the prisoner and this is a very practical way for our group to do it.

On the Road

When I left Staten Island May 8th there was such a heavy fog that one could scarcely find one’s way on the turnpike. I made the long monotonous drive past Albany and Syracuse where I wished I could stop to see Rosemary Straub and her family and Fr. Berrigan, our favorite poet and the spiritual adviser of Karl Meyer, who now has flown to England to resume his Peace Walk there with the others from the Committee for Non-Violent Action (CNVA). Fourteen left Wednesday and two dozen or so visited Chrystie Street.

It is peaceful and restful to have a long quiet day in the car, on a long road in the beauty of the spring fog or mist. I had to stop at a motel and was on the road again at seven-thirty and late in the morning over the bridge into Canada and on to Detroit on a two-way highway with very little traffic and through one little village after another with tree lined streets, small farms and small district school houses. There were many tobacco farms and apple and peach orchards in Ontario, and for the last hour or so of the ride, a beautiful view of Lake Erie.

Lou Murphy and Justine, his wife, Sheila, Kevin, Christine, Maureen and Bridget all met me at the door. The last named, the youngest, is four. St. Martha’s House is two-story frame unpainted house with windows on two sides, within touching distance of the next house. There are no windows in the rear, which would have made for a cross current of air. Only the front room up and downstairs is light, and of course the kitchen in the back. Otherwise artificial light is needed, all the houses on this slum street are so close together. But it is a sturdy enough house and in the winter Justine’s father lives with them, sharing a room with

Kevin and little Brian, aged nine now and no bigger than a year old baby. He still has that look of expectancy, of waiting, of listening on his fair angelic face. Here are three generations participating in hospitality, breaking down class and race and working habit barriers in a district in Detroit just off Skid Road and within walking distance of downtown and its fabulously luxurious buildings. Even the Auto Workers Union have glamorous offices, and everything to do with business and industry gleams and shines and is for comfort, while the homes of the workers who have created so much of that wealth are poor and unpainted. And when I think of the plants I think of Paul St. Marie and his wife and family of nine kids, and how half the time they had to be on relief during periods of unemployment and when he worked, he had the deadening shift from eleven at night until seven in the morning, and stood on cold cement floors, in unheated plants, on the assembly line. "It was cold," his wife said, "to keep the workers awake," and that is why he got rheumatic fever and finally died at the age of forty-five of a rheumatic heart. There are conveyor belts for the cars, but none for the men to take them the long distances from the parking space to their place of work in the plant. "But it is all automation now," Lou says, so maybe for the fewer workers there are such things now.

There is great unemployment in Detroit and one is struck by the apartments to rent everywhere, in spite of the slums being torn down to make for more and more freeways. The breadline at St. Francis House is longer than ever. They start to feed at nine in the morning and go on until one, and it is impossible to keep count.

We had dinner there the Sunday noon before I left and the house which sleeps forty men was bare and clean and well cared for the food beautifully prepared and delicious.

Some hundreds fed, up to seven hundred some days, and forty housed, – again it is like the loaves and fishes which the Lord has to multiply. And they never know where the next bit of money is coming from to pay for the utilities, light and gas and heat and all the extras needed, although a good deal of the food is donated.

I have forgotten already the places I spoke, but there was one meeting at the Casa Maria, the parish settlement house rebuilt from an old bank. And there was a trip out to Ann Arbor to speak to the Newman Club at the University of Michigan on the invitation of Fr. Bradley and it was a very good meeting. For the children, the outstanding event of the week was a picnic sponsored by the Murphy's, for the seventh and eighth grades in Fr. Kern's Holy Trinity parish school.

A Mexican, Puerto Rican and Negro mother were the chaperones, and of course Lou and Justine. The children also included Maltese and Irish. We drove in a number of cars over into Canada nineteen miles away to Mr. L'Esperance's Farm, where he spends the summer after his winter with Justine and Lou. There was to be a picnic and a hayride. It was a beautiful sunny day and a happy one

for all.

Perkinsville, Vermont

The trip to see my daughter was a pleasant one, starting out at noon from Detroit, I got to Welland by dark and stopped overnight there, then went on the next day and did not arrive at Bellows Falls, where David works, until nine. I rested there for an hour and he got off early enough from work to drive up to the farm with me and it was good to be paying a visit again after my long journeys. I had not visited Vermont since last Thanksgiving and then it was so warm they were out walking on the hills when I arrived. This visit it was cold and rainy, after a hard winter, – the hardest Tamar has ever had, with weeks of below zero weather and no man home to keep the fires going. However, David was there two days midweek and the children home from school weekends. But she could not have done without Hilaire, aged four, she said. Of course the others helped in all the chores, but they leave the house at seven-fifteen a.m. and do not get home until after four.

Martha is five now and after her sixth birthday in August she too will be going to school in the fall. She is a bossy one and always so busy. She helped me with the dishes, and when I asked her the second question of the catechism, “Why did God make you?” she answered confidently, “Because He likes me.” The children are all very independent and not at all demonstrative, and they say “like” instead of “love” but the little ones enjoy being rocked, and they enjoy Stanley’s singing to them. He joined me at Perkinsville, and gave a hand at cleaning out the barn, loading manure to be spread over the garden, and he put in three days of hard work. Hilaire followed after the neighboring farmer who ploughed up the garden, and when he came in for lunch he began unloading his pockets of eggs. Lucky his dungarees were loose, for the pockets disgorged eleven eggs, big ones too from rear and side pockets.

While Dave was home he went around taking down storm windows which brought on the cold wave, we said. Martha and Hilaire were inspired to take out the windows in the “L” hallway so they could keep an eye on the baby starlings under the eaves. The two ducks are setting, and the two bantam hens are running around with ten baby chicks working mightily scratching for them and upsetting all the babies in their hasty desire to uncover insects and other food for their thimble size little ones. Bantams are the poor man’s chickens, David says, – they fend for themselves and lay plenty of eggs, though small ones. Tamar does not like chickens. The hens are hysterical, she says, and the roosters attack the children. She is raising thirty cockerels however, for food during the summer, a dozen of them for the Bakers who will be coming up to New Hampshire as soon as school is over. It was so chilly she had to bring these chickens into the house. They were still small enough to fit in a bureau drawer with a window screen over it, and she kept them in front of the Franklin stove in the living room. But here baby Catherine takes over, and unless she is confined to her crib or on the low

couch by the window, she is at the chicks, rescuing them from one discomfort, confinement, and all but choking and squeezing them to death.

Another day Stanley moved loads of hay out of the barn for mulching. There had been so much hay the year before that Tamar sold as much as she could of it and still has a good deal left for next year. Every afternoon the children went fishing either in the brooks or down by the new lake, made by the newly constructed dam a mile or so away.

Later Articles

Now that I am home again I am settling down to writing an article on Agriculture and the Farming Commune in which I write in more detail about migrant, braceros and local field workers I encountered in my recent trip, and the work of organization which is going on in the CIO-AFL. The flesh and blood aspects of these problems is very close to us, with Puerto Rican families all around us in the city, coming in for clothes and food. There has been a number of news articles on a congressional investigation into the problems of the Puerto Rican migrant workers along the East coast, and the destitution in which they live.

Our beach house will shelter some Puerto Rican mothers and children all through July and August and we need funds to keep up with the groceries. Also we need sheets! Pillow cases! The old spreads we have used for sheets can be torn up to make towels, so sheets are the most important, single ones. So please, let your abundance supply their wants, and God bless you for it.