

Death in August - Vito Marcantonio

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Summary: A testament of Vito Marcantonio's political work with the poor. Seen as a Communist sympathizer, he is denied a Church burial. She says he lived Matthew 25 and did the works of mercy. Keywords: obituary (DDLW #674).

Even so early in August the sycamore trees were shedding their leaves, and that was a windy night, with little whirlpools of leaves and bits of paper and dust whirling in the streets. Every now and then there was a gust of rain.

Driving up First Avenue to East Harlem, I soon passed the neighborhoods where there were trees and by the time we reached the funeral parlor we were in the desolate regions of the uptown slums, huge gas tanks, five-story tenements and filthy gutters where children played, darting out between long hedges of parked cars.

Vito Marcantonio was laid out there surrounded by four walls of flowers towering over the long lines of people – the poor, who came to pay their respects. There was Negro, Puerto Ricans, Italians, the Puerto Ricans in gypsy-like color and the Italians in black. In the center of the bank of flowers, against one of the walls, sat a little wisp of a woman, Angelina, his mother, surrounded by sympathizing and mourning friends.

They were of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel's parish, around the corner, where we had made pilgrimages these last few years. It is a shine beloved by the Italian of the city, who walk barefoot from all over Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan, to attend one of the Masses which continue from midnight of her feast until noon the next day. Many of us from *The Catholic Worker* have made this pilgrimage, waiting in lines which extended around the block for three and four hours to get to Mass, and coming home at dawn to find our own neighborhood poor lying in rows on the sidewalk in front of St. Joseph's House and against the old theater building on the corner, waiting for their breakfast. The streets around 115th St. were blazing with lights during the festa and the push carts were piled high with delicacies to eat and candles to burn before the shrine. But on this night of somber pilgrimage, there were no lights, no festive spirit but one of mourning.

Vito Marcantonio dropped dead of a heart attack near his office in the vicinity of City Hall, during a drenching rain, and lay there while the police and the priest were called. The priest came from St. Andrew's Church and gave him conditional absolution and extreme unction. He had the last sacrament of the Church. When he died he was carrying on his person a rosary and a crucifix. It is not as though he had known he was going to die. He was a young man yet, as ages go these days, in his early fifties, and he probably felt he had years of work ahead of him. He carried a rosary and a crucifix, but he was not on good terms with the Church. He called himself a Catholic, and doubtless was, but he

followed “the Party line,” and it was the communists who supported him in his campaigns as he supported them so often in the positions he took, the legislation he backed or opposed in Congress, to which he had been elected so many times. If he were a communist, which he denied, one could say we had one Communist in Congress. A fearsome thing! Enough to set off another McCarthy oration on God and country! Reminding one of the brave FBI man who displayed his gun-packed holster under his arm, as he interviewed us women and children at Peter Maurin farm some months ago about a Catholic conscientious objector. A fearful country we have become with the frightful outcry we have let loose, the outlawing of the Communist party, and of anyone who ever took the same position it did in regard to labor, race relations, free speech, housing, relief, and so on.

Of course one might have asked Marcantonio, “Why were you against the war against Hitler until he invaded Russia?” Of course there are all sorts of other embarrassing questions one might ask. It was these things the Chancery office had in mind when it refused him Catholic burial from his parish church of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. But for a generation which has put the adventures of Don Camillo on its best seller list, and has laughed warm-heartedly at the adventures of the parish priest and the communist mayor of a little Italian town, it was a hard-to-explain action. Maybe none of the priests there have had time to read that bright piece of fiction. But I am sure they sweated over that decision which they felt it necessary to make, and grieved in their hearts over it and felt that it was the only thing they could do, considering that Marcantonio always seemed to flout Holy Mother Church whom they loved. But I still can’t help wondering about that rosary and crucifix. He didn’t change them from one pants pocket to another, on that rainy summer Monday morning, saying, “If I drop dead I’d better have a rosary and a crucifix in my pocket. It will look well for my party.” He was not even a member of the American Labor Party any more, saying it was communist dominated here in New York, though he was running for the House of Representatives again this fall on another ticket.

The thing that we will remember Vito Marcantonio for was “he understood concerning the needy and the poor.” The Psalmist said, “Blessed is he who understands concerning the needy and the poor.” I can’t help thinking of the rich man who sat at the table and feasted sumptuously, and the poor man at the gate, starving, covered with sores, a repulsive looking sight in all likelihood. They might even have been wine sores, such as we see so often on men of the Bowery, which are so casually and unsympathetically dismissed. “Why don’t you go to the Gouveneur Hospital clinic (that’s your district), and let them look after those sores of yours, instead of letting the dogs lick them in that horrible manner? The Municipal Lodging House is on Second Street, right off the Bowery – you can get a handout there, if you form in line and get a ticket. No bums allowed in this Rockefeller center section of the city.”

One recalls too, that other famous saying-of-the-month of the teen-age slugger of Brooklyn, “I have always hated the bums and vagrants. They are no use to

society and have no right to live.”

But the poor of East Harlem felt that Vito loved them and was interested in them. “It was like the confessional or the clinic,” someone said of his office. “There was always someone there to listen, to advise, to give help. Crowds came to him, and he always listened. He always tried to help.”

In the 25th chapter of St. Matthew there is a description of those who are the saved. It is those who feed the hungry, shelter the harborless, visit the prisoner, bury the dead, and perform the works of mercy." That is the description of what we should be doing, given by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He told another story too, of two brothers, and one said to the commands of his father, “I won’t,” and yet afterwards went and performed the works his father wanted, and the other said, “I will,” and didn’t do them.

We sang a Requiem Mass for him, on Peter Maurin farm and besides the group at the farm, and Maryanne and Helen, who were caring for the children, there were a dozen children from his own district, from 101st St. and First Avenue; Carol, Lee Samuel, Marthana, Verlene Wright and Carmen Torres, Nilda, Isabella, Esperanza, Rafael, Francisco Ortero, Felix and Pura Ruiz and Gilbert Ortiz.

May Marcantonio’s soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God (we know a little about His mercy from the story of the prodigal son) rest in peace.