

House of Hospitality

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: A detailed account of the first houses of hospitality in New York where the works of mercy, prayer, work, and community intermingle. (DDLW #342).

Dorothy Day Reviews New York House on Sixth Anniversary

If it had not been for Peter Maurin, there would have been no Houses of Hospitality throughout the country. When he came to me in 1932, urging me to start a Catholic Labor paper, he had in neat and orderly outline, his program of action. It was not enough just to publish a monthly paper, pamphlets and leaflets. It was not enough to convey by word of mouth in round table discussion the program of a new social order. It was necessary to embrace voluntary poverty and the Works of Mercy, to feed, clothe and shelter people who were in need. From Houses of Hospitality to care for the unemployed, it was but a step to the Farming Commune where a combination of communal and private property would be upheld.

House of Hospitality

In September, 1933, Peter wrote a letter to the Bishops which was printed on the first page of *The Catholic Worker*. It spoke of the hospices of the middle ages; it spoke of the need of Houses of Hospitality which could be centers of Catholic Action in every diocese.

The next month we carried a story about a woman who came in response to this letter and told of the plight of the homeless who were shunted from agency to agency and from “home” to “home.” Within the month we had started the first woman’s House of Hospitality. Already we had rented an old apartment in a condemned tenement on Fourth Street to put up three of the men who had joined with the work. Already three more were sleeping in the little store on Fifteenth street which was also an office, a dining room and a kitchen where meals were being served. Teresa and I slept in an adjoining apartment here; also, some of the women who were ill and needed care came to share it with us. Margaret came back from the hospital with her baby to this apartment and we all participated in the care of the baby when she was ill.

The large apartment for women was down the street and could accommodate fifteen. It had steam and hot water: comforts we have never had since. The rent was paid by contributions from working girls in the parish of the Immaculate Conception Church, girls who themselves lived in cold water flats.

Workers' School

It was on Fifteenth Street that we started our Workers' School and had classes every evening. Carleton Hayes, Parker Moon, Ross Hoffman, Fr Gerard Donnelly, and Fr Parsons, both of the America staff, Fr. McSorley, Paulist, Fr. Strob, Redemptorist, Fr. Benedict Bradley, and Fr. Virgil Michel, Benedictines, and many other priests and laymen of renown came and gave generously of their time to the work. Lectures began at eight and lasted until eleven.

But the expense of these four flats and stores was too much. When we were invited by a priest at St. Veronica's to look over a three-story house and basement in his parish, we decided that in our continued poverty it would be wise for us all to move into the one house.

The women took over the top floor of the house on Charles Street. During the first summer we were there, Nina Polcyn from Milwaukee and Evangeline Mercier from Cambridge came and spent the summer with us. Since then Nina helped start the Milwaukee House of Hospitality and Evangeline has joined the Carmelites.

Mott Street

On the second floor the men had their quarters. The first floor was the editorial and business office and in the basement there was a large dining room and kitchen. Often we were so crowded that guests slept on the floor of the office and the dining room.

On Charles Street we had meetings only once a week. Dr. Harry McNeil of Fordham University took over the chairmanship of the meetings, both Peter Maurin and I being away on speaking trips that winter, though neither of us were gone more than a month at a time.

We spent two winters on Fifteenth Street and one on Charles Street and in the spring of 1936 we were offered the use of the rear house at 115 Mott Street for our House of Hospitality and editorial offices. The house had not been used for some time and there was a great deal of work in getting it cleaned up and ready for occupation. Our generous friend donated paint and linoleum and Peter Maurin and Herman Hergenhan, Bill Callahan, Jim Montague and Ed Priest spent a good many days in getting it cleaned up and ready for occupation. The new house has twenty rooms and when apartments became vacant in the front building the owner generously allowed us to occupy two four-room flats and the two downstairs stores. Another family of friends have moved down to another apartment. The other five apartments are occupied by Italians who have become friends of the work and have helped us in many little ways.

Personnel

In one of the stores we feed the men on the breadline in the morning and when the line is finished and the store cleaned up, it becomes a reading room for whosoever cares to use it, Sharky, Tex, Charlie, Boston and Frank take turns on the breadline and unite in keeping the store clean and well-cared for. In the other store Frank Datillo has charge of the mailing with Dan Irwin who puts in part at his time on the farm, Kate Smith, Jim Smith, Charlie O'Rourke and many volunteers helping them. In the rear building on the first floor are the editorial offices. There are two rooms on either side of the hall, one for a print shop, manned by Eddie Priest, one a dark room for photography where Bill Callahan has his desk; on the other side, Joe Zarrella, Gerry Griffin and I have our desks, file cabinets and type writers. Thanks to Joe Galea, Maltese friend, the office is painted a cheerful blue and curtained in the same color. Joe Zarrella takes charge of the bookkeeping and buying and in general takes the responsibility of the household.

Upstairs is the kitchen, manned by Shorty and John Pohl and a cheerful dining room, the woodwork of which was painted a bright red last year in honor of one of our Catholic Worker wedding breakfasts which was held there. When any one is needed to help out anywhere around the house, Jim Brazel, our handy man, is ready. He fixes electricity, plumbing, whitewashes the rooms, takes care of the sick, and in general is on hand to be of service from morning to night.

"Littleness"

Upstairs there is a floor for men, and above that two floors for women. At present our family consists of about twenty men and eight women, but ours is a shifting population and sometimes we have to put up extra beds in stores and offices to accommodate the crowd. Other fellow workers live out in apartments or rooms but spend most of their time with us during the day

So much for the physical details of our present House of Hospitality. We have always emphasized the "littleness" of our houses, but they range in capacity from eight to two hundred and fifty. Pittsburgh has the largest since Bishop Boyle has there kindly turned over to us an entire orphanage which was not being used. The Chicago House comes next and at times they have also housed two hundred men, though that was an emergency, and they had to sleep stretched out on the floor at a time when anything was better than being on the streets in the cold and snow.

We have emphasized the idea of littleness because we wish each house to be run on a family plan rather than like an institution. Peter has always called upon the worker to become a scholar and the scholar a worker, so all have participated in the manual labor and all are invited to the study groups and forums which are held during the week. Students and scholars share rooms

with the unemployed and destitute, and all have the same fare and the same accommodations. Voluntary poverty has meant that everyone tries to share in sacrifices, one giving mental labor, another physical, some contributing money and others their time. On these principles the movement has grown to embrace many readers throughout the country.

Neighborhood

Mott Street is a slum street in the most thickly populated section of New York. There are factories, little bake shops, livery stables, laundries, fish markets and push carts all along the street, and in the tenements are large families, mostly Italian. But many Chinese have moved to the block north from Chinatown and are next door neighbors now to the Italians. Summer and winter, people live on the streets, and throughout the day the musical call of the hucksters and pushcart peddlers may be heard singing their wares. The push carts make bright splashes of color along the street.

The families are large and neighborly. Many a time they have sent in their left-over bowls of spaghetti, and ravioli and greens and on one occasion there was a delightful mess of pickled eels which arrived just in time to set before some priests who had come in to lunch. They bring us their cast-off furniture and some of them come in to our meetings. At first they distrusted us, thinking we were running a mission.

“What do you move down here for,” they wanted to know, “we are all Catholics.” Or, “Why don’t you like us?” when they read our articles opposing Fascism. But now they are free with us and tell us what they think of the Mussolini regime, and they know that we distinguish between Fascism and those who pay lip service to it by having statues of Mussolini in their windows and his picture in their homes.

The Line

They bear with our breadline which every morning for two and a half years now has lined up along the street for a block and a half, impeding traffic, blocking doorways on rainy days when the men huddle in the shadow of the buildings to escape the wet. They share in our joys and in our sorrows.

For in spite of poverty there are many joys, little celebrations, birthday parties, weddings, feast days when it is easy to be kind and to love one another, in spite of the closeness of our quarters, lack of privacy and the unevenness of many a temper and temperament.

And there are the sorrows, the sicknesses and the deaths amongst us. In the front building just before Christmas, a little girl of eight pulled a pot of scalding soup down over herself and within the week she was dead from the burns and from pneumonia contracted afterward. And a month afterward, the old janitor went to bed with the gas turned on under a tea kettle which boiled over and put out the light. On these occasions the bodies are laid out for several days in the crowded little rooms and all radios in the neighborhood are hushed and all the neighbors come to pray with and console the bereaved.

Deaths

We have had our dead too, these past years. First there was Joe Bennett, only about twenty-five, one of our first workers, a boy with too much energy for his body, crippled with inflammatory rheumatism. There was Solange Falgouste, one of the girls in the House of Hospitality who died of tuberculosis after she had been taken to the sanatorium. There was Fred Brown last year, a seaman who was staying with us between ships, a young fellow whose blood was ravaged by malaria from a stay in the tropics. And this last year there has been Dan Russell, one of the men off the breadline who came to us too late. Within a few weeks of his appearing among us, he was dead, after a life of such destitution and misery that I could only think of Lazarus at the gate as I saw him lying down at the farm, waiting for death.

Then this last month, John Ryder, John who had been with us for the past two and a half years since the seamen's strike. He had been a captain, had his master's papers, but cardiac asthma got him down and he ended up on Mott Street. He helped us first on the breadline and afterwards he led the study group of unemployed, from the breadline, that meets every Monday afternoon with Father Sheridan of Brooklyn. He led the men in the rosary; he led in the discussions; and when John Cort left us to go to the hospital, he took charge of the men's floor in the front building. He was fifty-nine years old, and we did not expect him to die, as he did, with such suddenness. He had been treated by an ambulance doctor the night before; and the next morning, when the men brought his breakfast to him, he lay there dead in his bed. May his soul, and the souls of those others, through the mercy of God rest in peace.

For almost six full years now the work of the House of Hospitality has gone on; and since we started twenty others have started. Besides our Houses of Hospitality, other hospices have opened up too; but they are not conducted along the lines of the House as we see it. They offer hospitality for a night or two and then the wayfarer is passed on to other places.

Family Life

We believe it most necessary to give a sense of family life to those who come to us. We believe a sense of security is as necessary as bread or shelter. We believe that when we undertake the responsibility of caring for a man who comes to us, we are accepting it for good. We know that men cannot be changed in a day or three days, nor in three months. We are trying "to make men." And this cannot be done overnight. Some, indeed, are shiftless and some dishonest; but our aim is to try to see Christ in these men and to change them by our love for them; and the more hopeless a case seems the more we are driven to prayer, which as it should be.

There are all nationalities among us and all ages, from eighteen to seventy-two. Some have been with us for five years and probably will die with us. Some are with us for only a few months and then find jobs and leave to make room for others. Many are unemployable and we must take care of them as we would a member of the family who cannot find work. Usually there are tasks about the house which occupy them for a few hours a day so that their lives can be given some aim and continuity.

Visitors

The rules are those which are understood in any family: no drinking, bed at a reasonable hour. Due to late meetings or to illnesses the rising hour is varied but all are usually up by eight. There is grace before meals and spiritual reading in the evening. Attendance at daily Mass is urged and there are always about a dozen receiving Communion daily.

Actually thousands of people come to us every day; counting the breadline and the visitors who come in hour by hour, not only from New York, but from other parts of the country, and even from other countries. At our last Tuesday night forum there were visitors from many states and a priest from Paris, the superior of a Dominican monastery. The next day a priest from Chile, South America, visited us. On another occasion I remember priests from California, Texas, Wisconsin and New York, who met in our office one afternoon, and have kept up their friendship since.

A tremendous volume of correspondence not only from all over the United States but also from Europe passes through our hands each week. Work begins early in the morning (five o'clock with the breadline) and continues till late at night. Right now it is nearing twelve and Gerry and Joe are finishing up the correspondence for the day. Members of the Milwaukee, Detroit and Boston groups are sitting around talking to us as we write, and tonight the floor of the office will be crowded.

Tasks

There is so much to do and we never feel that the work is done right, or that we give enough to each other's problems. There is the work of the paper, the correspondence, the visitors and the breadline. In addition there are the problems of the household of thirty people and the dozen or so others who do not sleep here but are connected with the work. We console ourselves with the thought that we are like a large family in which someone is always in trouble, someone always sick, and always the nagging sense of bills unpaid and no food for the next day. But though there may often seem to be outward disorder, there is truly a sense of unity and a deep happiness at doing the work we have been called upon to do. Those in the house are given a sense of security, that we are one and that we are bearing each other's burdens. Inward order is the thing to strive for by prayer and penance. And when things go wrong, we know we are not praying enough.

The greatest problem of the day is unemployment and the greatest threat of the day is war. To solve the one there is needed the study and the building up of a new social order and the practice of the Works of Mercy, through Houses of Hospitality. To solve the other (which the cynical say would take care of the unemployed problem) there is love and prayer, two great spiritual forces that go hand in hand.

This inadequate account of our New York House of Hospitality, is to inform all our new readers of the work which has been going on since the first issue of the paper six years ago May Day; and to beg their prayers for the continuance of the work. We know that we constantly err through lack of charity and prayer, but with confidence in God we can start each morning anew with the words of the Psalmist, "Now I have begun." So pray for us that we have the love and joy in service that go with all beginnings.