

On Pilgrimage - December 1953

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Summary: Ill and ordered to rest she reflects on sickness, life, and death. Tales of life at Peter Maurin farm—the gift of 45 chickens, a blizzard, and smog. (DDLW #660).

I should no longer be writing the On Pilgrimage column, but should be turning that job over to Ammon Hennacy, who from now on will be our roving editor, traveling from city to city and reader to reader all over the United States, for six month's of the year.

As for me, illness and a doctor's ultimatum decrees that I stay home for the next months anyway. Riding all night on buses, over the last twenty years, has caught up with me.

There are various aspects to being sick. There is the first miserable aspect when one is feverish, nightmarish, depressed, full of pain and suddenly conscious of one's mortality. In the midst of pain one has occasional flashes of insight that at least one is not doing one's own will, and that saying "Thy Will be done," and "Be it done unto me according to thy word," is something! An act of the will, to say it, even if one may be afraid of not really meaning it. But enough of such self-scrutiny. There is too much of this self-analysis.

Bossuet

"Adore God with all you have," Bossuet says, "yet without anxiety as to the degree of your success or your love, as to whether you are concentrated on God or on yourself, whether your time is profitable or wasted . . . There is no place for calculations or precautions, strive to adore and let that suffice."

There is also, on rare occasions during illness, a sudden sense of excitement and anticipation, expectation and hope. After all there is something to look forward to! Everlasting life, heaven, joy everlasting, all of which is God. "I must rejoice without ceasing though the world shudder at my joy," Ruysbroeck says.

All this might sound very morbid and a hangover of the November pre-occupation with All Saints and All Souls, death and transfiguration, except for the fact that Advent has begun and we are told in liturgy and sermon to look for the first

coming of Christ in the stable, the coming in our own lives when we die and the Last Judgment.

Two Sides

Life and Death are two sides of the one coin. Inseparable. Here we have all these growing things around us, children dashing in and out of the house in the excitement of the holiday season which begins now with Thanksgiving and is prolonged to Epiphany, everybody thinking, when there are children around, of gifts to give and gifts to be received. And what are all these but samples of God, His comfort, His Beauty and His love.

It is hard not to dwell in these too much.

Ruskin

The second aspect of sickness is the blissful “taking things easy” staying off one’s feet, leaving “activity” to others. Not so easy as it sounds in one way, when there is so much to do, and one sees others groaning under their hard work. “So much to do, so few to do it. Everybody sitting around doing nothing, leaving it to me to do.” This is so general an attitude of mind amongst workers that one longs to plunge into the cleaning, washing, cooking, dishes, or whatever else is at hand, and heartily enjoy doing it. It is hard to remember that those people who groan the most and are the most critical of others are really happy working and would be most unhappy if their work were taken from them. If people would only remember “the duty of delight,” as Ruskin said.

Lean-To.

Thank God I have a lean to, built on the side of the house, almost fifteen feet square, with a good wood-burning stove in it and windows on three sides so that I get the sun all day long. Here I can retire, close the door, read and write. And here I shall be for the next few months.

I am sorry to miss speaking at Helene Iswolsky’s Third Hour group, and to Douglas Steere’s class at Haverford. I cannot speak at the Sunday forum at Our Lady of Victory Parish in December, nor at Smith College Newman club in January. So I shall write. Letters alone take plenty of time.

Chickens

Yesterday afternoon a station wagon drove up to the door with a man and wife and a dozen children, all theirs, and forty-five chickens, which they had

culled from their flock of three thousand and had brought to us as a present. Fr. Duffy and Hans went tearing around with boards and hammers and nails, repairing one of the chicken coops, putting up chicken wire, perches, and in fifteen minutes our new guests were housed, beautiful white birds. One laid an egg immediately which Jim took for the pumpkin pie he was making. I don't know how he made six good pumpkin pies with one egg, but perhaps he used egg powder too. George showed up later and looking at the pies, went down the road to get a pint of cream which he whipped and spread over the pies. It was for Sunday, so nobody was thinking in terms of the little fast of Advent. The Thanksgiving spirit was still in the air.

Turkey

Frances Mazet and Mary Benson from Providence sent in an 18 lb. ham and a 22 lb. turkey by Greyhound bus and Stanley went in to the Fiftieth Street station to pick it up. The Hennessy family came in on the feast too. The other Granny showed up for a week's visit there, and so Tamar and Dave could walk over to see me, Tamar coming daily. One day Tamar and Mama Hennessy came with all six children. Becky who is usually the loudest of all, sat down quietly with **St. Patrick's Summer**, which is advertised as **Theology and Sanity** for children, and was engrossed in that. It is Marigold Hunt's and a fascinating exposition of the Holy Trinity. I read it myself, I read it to the children, and now Becky is reading it over again and Tamar is waiting to read it. It doesn't sound like anything to describe it, but just think of having one of the saints come to expound some point in doctrine to you, something to enlarge the mind and heart so that one suddenly feels as though one had a great lung full of good fresh air from the sea, or some draught of delicious cold water from a mountain spring.

While Becky read, Susie, Nickie and Eric vied with each other to put more wood on the fire, Mary went around taking her clothes off, not just because she was hot but because she is two and a half and you don't know what she is going to do next. As for Margaret, four months old, she lay and gurgled after a satisfactory nursing.

Another Baby

Just before Marge Hughe's last baby was born, one of our friends came to see her, and with uplifted eyebrows said, "What, more people?" Well, we have more people at the Peter Maurin farm this month—little Christina Maria arriving on November 17th. She wasn't born here in the house as Mary Elizabeth and Dan Dellinger were, but in the little hospital down at Princes Bay. Unfortunately Christina Maria and her mother are not going to stay with us long, as she is getting a position where she can work and keep the baby with her.

Blizzard

We had one good snow storm the early part of November, a real blizzard, that came upon us nine o'clock one morning and lasted all day and night. There were high winds, and a great tide came in which meant that two hundred families had to be evacuated by the Coast Guard. Peter Maurin farm is two miles up the road from the beach and one mile up from Arthur Kill which is the river which separates Jersey from Staten Island. On either side of us are fields and woods, miles of undeveloped land. And yet only a mile away also, right over the Arthur Kill, is that tremendously developed industrial area of Jersey with its towering chimneys and blast furnaces, and oil refining plants, and chemical works and the smog sometimes settles over us and sometimes is so thick one can almost taste the metallic flavor of it. There has been a great to-do about smog and smaze this past month, as though it were something new, but it dates back to the beginning of the industrial revolution. Reading Gaskell's life of the Brontë's, one is surprised to find that that wild and desolate section of the moors that surrounds Haworth is often overhung with the smog from the textile mills that bloomed in that area.

Sunday Afternoon

Mike Gunn arrived as usual, just at dinner time, and was gravely concerned over the plight of the chickens. He immediately set to work to collect the eggs, which had been laid helter skelter; and to put in some nests for them from old boxes and heaps of straw. Father Duffy has some hay stacks of oats which are coming in handy as bedding and feed, and he is gloating of the compost afoot. Other visitors come in, the coffee pot is put on the stove, people come in with hands and feet tingling, smelling deliciously of fresh cold air. One of the family arrives home slightly drunk (there is always a fly in the ointment) and one must listen and pretend not to notice anything in speech and behavior and pray that the storm subsides and that too many people don't notice. It is amazing how much can transpire in a household and nobody knows that a minor crisis is going on. If there is a great furor, as sometimes there is, the thing to do is to retire to the chapel and bow the head and let the storm pass over. Everything passes. The thing to remember is to be kind, always to be kind, and gentle. The meek will inherit the land. So, peace be to you all, and Merry Christmas.