

Catherine Odlivak

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Summary: A tender obituary of Catherine Odlivak, a Catholic Worker for many years. She is remembered as someone “unspotted by the world,” a woman of prayer, gentle, someone conscious of God’s presence. Keywords: retreat (DDLW #732).

During the month of November we are supposed to remember our dead, and sometimes the month is a rainy and dreary one, and it is a sad and mournful duty and brings a pang of the heart, and other times, in the glories of Indian summer, the flowers and golden warmth of the day and the cold crisp nights when walking is good, and sleeping is good, we think not only how good this life is at this dying time of the year, but also how good God is in His promises and reminders of the life to come. We who are oppressed with the certainty of dying, are made hopeful by the assurance that “life is changed, not taken away.” The trees after their radiant promise of the Fall, are dead as dead in appearance, and then in the spring, year after year, the tender buds come forth again. We have this promise, repeated over and over again in nature, all the years of our lives, so how can we be sad?

Catherine Odlivak was one of our number who died this past year and I would like to write a little about her. We of the Catholic Worker met her during the days of the retreat at Oakmont, Pennsylvania—those glowing days when Fr. Hugo and Fr. Farina and Fr. Meenan and other priests of that diocese used to give retreats during the summer months, and members of our groups from all over the country used to gather there and be renewed by the vigor of this teaching. Oakmont is a little town near Pittsburgh, and after you got off the bus after the long ride from New York, you took another bus for an hour and at Oakmont got out to walk up a long road to St. Anthony’s village, which was an orphanage for Italian children, headed by Fr. Louis Farina.

Nuns and children cheerfully cooperated with these retreats every summer, and both united to put on the best meals the Village could muster. There was a big vegetable garden in the back, and an herb garden, and during the week when retreatants kept a complete silence from Sunday night until Friday night or Saturday morning, I used to wander around the orphanage grounds, past the vegetable garden, and usually I filched a bit of basil to smell and to nibble. One of our non-Catholic retreatants who came with us, said scornfully, “Here you

are studying how to be detached from the things of this world, and meanwhile sitting down three times a day to the best meals I have ever eaten!”

We needed the comfort of those meals, the beauty of those surroundings, because in that great silence which descended upon us, many of us faced the life of the spirit for the first time, and in the resulting conversion of heart, were terrified at the prospect of what God might demand of us. Fr. Farina was especially good at describing the deserts, the tunnels, the depressions, the dark night of the soul which we might have to pass through, and perhaps it was his emphasis on St. John of the Cross that led us to accept with joy the de Montfort devotion to the Blessed Mother, feeling assured that in her hands, nothing too terrible could possibly befall us despite the grim picture we summoned up at Father Farina’s words. One of the retreatants commented mournfully, “you’d think you have to practically go through a nervous breakdown before you achieve any heights in the spiritual life!”

The fact of the matter was that many had to face up to the kind of life they were leading—a life very much of this world, filled with love of self, perhaps even sinful, with strong attachments to the forbidden samples of love. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God.” To others who lived in tragedy (I remember especially a mother with a mentally afflicted son who had tried to kill her and himself many a time) the retreat with its doctrine of the Cross, “Take up your Cross and follow Me. . . For my Cross is easy and my burden light. . . And you will find rest for your souls.” Meant that they went away consoled, finding the fulfillment of the promise.

With little Cathie, one sensed that there was never any struggle in the spiritual life. She accepted it as the bird does the air and the fish does the sea. It was no rarified atmosphere for her; this atmosphere of St. John of the Cross, this atmosphere of the Gospel and the lives of the saints. She never got the spiritual bends from too hasty a change from one atmosphere into another. One felt that she lived always in the presence of God. It is amazing how we got to know each other, during this week of silence, true silence—when the lips never moved except to recite prayers, to respond to the Mass, to confess one’s sins, to recite the rosary.

We were supposed to keep the custody of the eyes too, another kind of silence and solitude, but one caught oneself gazing at this one or that. It was humanly impossible not to see those who sat at the table with one, or that knelt before one in chapel.

I can see Cathie especially there. When she came into Church she was never in haste, but moved slowly, quietly. I did not know then that it was a severe heart condition that made this necessary. Cathie would kneel down, bow her head with great reverence, and one could sense her consciousness of the Presence. One never forgets these things. I can remember how the girl who kept the pamphlet rack at the Paulist church, a Jewish Christian by the name of Helen, who at benediction bowed so low that her head all but touched the floor. Charles de

Foucault was reconverted to the faith of his childhood by seeing Moslems at prayer. Such an attitude of Cathie's brought before the mind of those who witnessed it a sense of God's presence, His transcendence, His immanence. He was closer to us than the air we breathed.

I don't know when we all got really acquainted with Cathie. We made a number of those retreats over the years—perhaps five or more, and some time during that period Cathie got acquainted with **The Catholic Worker** and offered her services to us. She was the daughter of a Slovak miner of Pennsylvania, and in order to get her schooling, had had to hire herself out to a farmer some miles away from her home, at the age of twelve. She had done heavy farm labor all the years that she was going to school, and her hands still bore witness of it. Farm labor. Household labor. Scrubbing and washing clothes, bending that strong young back under burdens truly too heavy for her to bear. Because the fact of the matter was that her terrible heart condition meant she always in a way was living in the presence of death. She continued her schooling to learn shorthand and typing in order to be able to do lighter work, and it was in the capacity of stenographer that she offered herself to us.

We were living on Mott street at that time, and the rear house was devoted to men, all five floors, four rooms on a floor. In the stores of the front building we had our kitchen and dining room and the place for the breadline and also our offices. There still remained some of the Italian families who had lived in this house all their lives and they occupied the apartments on the second, third and fourth floors. We had all of the top floor and one apartment on the third. Here I had the front room. Next to me there was an old lady whose clothes were all held together with safety pins and who was a scavenger during the day. (We had a hard time detaching her from her hauls.) Then came Annabelle's little room and in back of that little Cathie's. There was an extra bed in that room for the unforeseen guest. Cathie kept the place spotless. It was freshly painted, the beds were covered with white spreads, and many a time, at any hour of the night or day, I used to come upon Cathie, kneeling by her bed, praying, or reading her New Testament. It seemed to be more natural to her to kneel than to sit. She was earliest at Mass each morning, and most faithful about her duties. None ever heard her utter an unkind or a harsh word—she was all gentleness. There was no gloominess about her either, when she smiled or laughed her eyes crinkled up, and many a time during conferences, even in the chapel at Maryfarm or Peter Maurin farm, when the priest said anything startling or humorous, she used to laugh out loud delightedly. She made all our retreats and loved our conferences and what she got there was reflected in her life.

I can remember one of her works of mercy. We had a woman with us, very brilliant and lively, who was going through a mental breakdown. We were trying to get her to go to the hospital willingly but were meeting with much resistance. She had gotten to the stage when she was talking night and day and had all kinds of delusions. She insisted on being active, and in giving out clothes to the needy, she gave away her own, little Cathie's or any others she could get

her hands on. Indeed she didn't hesitate to strip herself, take off her own dress, at the expense of modesty, in her attempt to clothe the naked. She had the extra bed next to little Cathie, and I can still hear Cathie's gentle quiet voice persuading her to go to sleep. How could we have done without her help! She was an example to us always. (The woman did go to the hospital, and did come out cured almost a year later, but this is not her story but Cathie's.)

The time came when our activities were too much for Catherine, and she had to find easier work and quieter living conditions. She needed, too, to follow a very strict diet because of her condition. So she moved around the corner from us on Hester street, to a little rear house with a two-room apartment one flight up, and there she painted and polished and made a little oasis of peace for herself, in the midst of that very noisy neighborhood. She had a half time job, and worked only enough to get the little she needed to pay her \$12 a month rent and the kind of food she needed. (She was fiercely independent, and was more apt to bring us food than take any from us.

She was not alone in the world and had visitors from her family as well as from **The Catholic Worker** family she adopted. There were married sisters and her mother and father still lived on a little farm in southern Ohio. Sometimes she could go home to visit them. She worked for a time with the Legion of Mary in Transfiguration Parish, but soon that too was too much for her. Her condition, as she got older, was worse, and she had several periods in the hospital. At last the doctors said that it was necessary for her life, that she allow them to perform an operation, a very difficult and dangerous one. Her heart, they explained, due to its faulty structure, had to work twice as hard as anyone else's, so that it were as though it was eighty years old already. She was getting progressively weaker and would become a complete invalid for the few remaining months of her life. So she consented to the operation. Everyone loved her, and wanted to help, so many from the parish and from **The Catholic Worker** went to the hospital to give their blood, but it was to no avail. She died under the operation. The last words she wrote were on a little tablet by her bed. "Be kind to the sick, and you are being kind to God." She asked to be buried in our plot in the fields in back of St. Joseph's Church in Rossville, near the Peter Maurin Farm, on Staten Island. The grave was dug by Mike Fitzgerald, Charles Butterworth, Stanley Vishnewsky and others, and there she rests beside little Charlie Smith and Philip Millions, a child whom she loved, and an old poor man, to whom she was always pitiful and kind. May she rest in peace, and pray for us, this little Cathie Odlivak who was so unspotted by the world.