

Have We Failed Peter Maurin's Program?

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, January 1954, 3, 6.

Summary: A new year's reflection on the ways they have failed Peter Maurin's vision. Concludes "About all the above failures, I must say that I am not much concerned. I think that such failures are inseparable to a work of this kind, and necessary for our growth in holiness." Stresses trying to put ideas into action, more clarification of thought, continuing this "tiny work." (DDLW #236).

In the January, 1951, issue we had a summing up, an announcement of all we thought we had accomplished. In the last Mayday issue, together with a good drawing of Peter Maurin by Fritz Eichenberg, we had a summing up of his teaching. It seems to me, who wrote so much, that we do this very often, so often as to seem to boast unduly, and to be repetitious. But we still receive letters over and over again from readers and from those just getting acquainted with the paper, asking us to elaborate on the ideas in it, asking us, in effect, what it is all about. And from those familiar with us for a long time, who have come and stayed with us to study our ideas at closer quarters, and to give a helping hand in the work, we get the complaint that the longer they study *The Catholic Worker*, the less they understand us. One dear friend and fellow worker, not of our faith, said last month that the further away she was, and the less she actually saw of the work, the more she understood it. And she goes on searching through my books, **From Union Square to Rome**, **House of Hospitality**, **On Pilgrimage**, **The Long Loneliness**, and the more she reads, the less she understands, she says. Since she is not a Catholic, it would be easy to say with St. Anselm, as explanation, "I believed, therefore I understood." If she had the faith, if she believed in the Incarnation, in the Cross, in the resurrection, then it would be easier to understand the work in which we seem to accomplish so very little.

Self Esteem

In my glowing account of our accomplishments three years ago, I begin my article by saying, "This last year, at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, we gave out, roughly speaking, and underestimating it at that, 460,000 meals. Also 18,250 nights lodging. This is what the world sees, and if we wished to impress the world we would multiply this by eighteen years, and the figures would be truly

impressive.” And I go on for some columns to explain how little all this is and to say that our heroism today will consist in the Little Way. It seems to me I have elaborated this enough so that people should understand.

One reason for listing achievements is to build up self esteem which is so necessary to us all. Koestler says that we are afflicted with the sense of guilt these days, and it is certainly true. We cannot write about poverty without reflecting on the comfort of our lives. We cannot write about work without reflecting that our life is one of ease compared to that of the migrant laborer and the factory worker. On Mott street we always had the sight of the basement laundry down the street to impress on us the kinds of hard grueling labor there was in the world. We know that we fail in our love and self sacrifice 70 times 7 daily but that we must keep on picking ourselves up and going on, and we rejoice in the fact that if we do not strip ourselves for love of brother and of God, God himself will do it for us. Let us pray He does it gently, little by little, as He comes to us so gently in the Blessed Sacrament each day. I am sure He will always temper the wind to the shorn lamb, but that does not minimize our realization that we are but dust, and that in following Him we are carrying a cross and are in one way or another going to die on it, that we lose hair, teeth, eyes, hearing, strength—all little by little, and we pray that this purification of the outer man will be matched by an inner purification.

But enough of humility right now. Self esteem tells us that we are sons of God. A triumphant thought. One night many years ago in a lonely moment, in a little town in Arkansas, I woke up with a terrible sense of futility and helplessness. I thought, “What am I doing traveling around speaking? Who am I anyway to be so presumptuous.” And suddenly a most wonderful sense of the glory of being a child of God swept over me, so joyous a sense of my own importance that I have often reflected on it since. I would pray that our readers have it, and grow in it, this sense of their importance as temples of the Holy Ghost, sons of God, divinized by His coming. All things are possible to us, we can do all things in Him who strengthens us. We may look at the George Washington Bridge, great dams in the process of construction, air ports, men flying, smashing atoms, deeply plunging into this material world to discover the secrets of the material universe and we may return refreshed to the Gospel which is the tiny mustard seed growing into a great tree throughout the world. We return, I say, to the work we are doing, the works of mercy, the love of the poor and destitute, the living with others, the writing ideas down on paper, and speaking them from platforms and know that this tiny work, God given in that we have a vocation to His, is of the greatest and most tremendous importance.

Peter’s Mission

Peter Maurin talked much of men with a mission, and the need for men to have a sense of mission, that they were sent into this world to do some particular work. One of his little essays was about men with missions and about the women who

followed the men who had the mission. I rejoiced in being a follower of Peter Maurin, and thanked God that he had been sent to me to direct my thoughts and writings.

His program certainly was simple enough. Round Table discussions for the clarification of thought, houses of hospitality for the works of mercy, agronomic universities to teach the workers to be scholars and the scholars to be workers. He called the latter “farming communities” also, and he was flexible enough to take in the single family on the land, and the growth of the community about it, and the idea of the village economy, and the southern agrarians and the decentralists, and the English distributists.

What Are We Accenting?

Not a month passes but some visitor comes to us who asks us gently if we have not given up emphasizing some one or another aspect of Peter’s program. Didn’t it used to be labor? one will say.

Peter thought more of agrarian labor than he did of industrial labor. He referred us to A.J. Pentty and the **Guildsmen’s Interpretation of History and Means and Ends**; Tawney’s **Religion and the Rise of Capitalism**; Velblen’s **Theory of the Leisure Class** and such books as David Hennessy lists in each C.W. He hated the machine unless it was the extension of the hand of man. He hated mass action and pressure groups and feared unions deteriorating into political action. He hated class war and wanted us to love the enemy, the capitalist and industrialist and munitions maker, even while trying to “put business out of business.”

Didn’t we spend more time on pacifism than on unemployment? Didn’t we over-emphasize the works of mercy and under-emphasize the land? Didn’t we exalt the idea of personal responsibility and the single apostolate and ignore the family and the community which begins with the family? Didn’t we over-emphasize liturgy, or later, didn’t we tend to neglect to emphasize liturgy?

And many a time, no matter what we talked about we were ridiculed. Either our readers were enthusiastic and read the CW from cover to cover, or they despised what we were writing because of their disagreement with one or another aspect of the work, and threw the paper to one side. Just yesterday there was a mixed letter, addressed to Ammon Hennacy. It is pretty typical.

Friend Hennacy: The enclosed five dollars is to continue my subscription to the Catholic Worker. Several times I have been about to suggest that you stop here whenever you pass nearby on your way to Arizona or back east. I would enjoy having you. There is always an empty room here, and even more empty space on the farm. We are about a hundred miles southwest of Kansas City. I have hesitated to get in touch with you as probably we don’t have much in common. As a more or less successful farmer I am familiar with hard labor but for me

it is happy labor. Twenty five years ago when I tried to get an education and taught a while, I didn't get much pleasure out of life. Now I hope you can forgive it—I even enjoy paying taxes! However, I am an independent sort of cuss myself and admire a man with the courage of his convictions, especially when they are of the sort that can be easily misunderstood by the ordinary public. I read everything in the Catholic Worker. I just like to suffer, I guess! And I have liked your experiences very much. Also some other articles like Bill Gauchat's article on farming a couple of years ago. He really hit the nail on the head. Some of the other references to farming have seemed ludicrous from out here in Kansas. Write me if you can. You have my best wishes in your work. H. S.

Such a letter makes us feel that we have accented so many things that we misfire on practically all. Anyway, H. S. has a philosophy of work which Peter Maurin emphasizes and it is good to see someone getting joy out of their life on the land. We get too many letters of pessimistic gloom from back-to-the-landers, and one can only say that anyone who feels that way about it has missed his vocation. He wasn't cut out to be a farmer. He should find a trade, run a store, teach in a school, go in for village life rather than farm life. Caussade says that we know our vocation by our delight in it.

I feel that in our desire to stress the whole life of man, we fail to hammer in one or another point. As a paper, we take up so many issues. As individuals, we are prone to hammer away at our pet project and go single mindedly towards one aspect of the work.

Have We Failed?

I know that I will give much satisfaction to many of our fellow workers when I admit that we have failed and that on every front. We have failed to clarify thought and probably will till the end of our days. We have failed in running houses of hospitality, in that they are not indoctrination centers and places to teach "cult, culture and cultivation" as Peter wanted, and all out time is taken up with the immediate practice of the works of mercy there. We have failed in establishing farming groups, whether as agronomic universities, or farming communes of families. This is in spite of the fact that we have fourteen houses and eight farms around the country associated with The Catholic Worker, with these ideas, or some of them. The houses flourish in that there are always the indigent, the destitute, the poor to flock to our doors. There is plenty of obvious work being done and far more than enough to keep every hand and heart busy. But have we even begun to build the new social order that Peter envisioned?

The Great Failure

About all the above failures, I must say that I am not much concerned. I think that such failures are inseparable to a work of this kind, and necessary for our

growth in holiness. Such failure, for those of us who have dedicated our lives to this work, is our cross. As a matter of fact, our failure is so continuous that we never think of it, we just go on working, without judging ourselves, as St. Paul tells us to. We can list our accomplishments as glorious examples of God's providence, and of our faith in it. We grow in faith in it and in our very persistence, we are growing in hope and charity. God grant that we persevere.

Our great failure—the one that Peter would probably emphasize if he were here to talk of these things, is that we always plunge into action without sufficient indoctrination. It is almost that we act without due deliberation and full consent of the will. Our vision is not keen enough nor large enough for us to see the whole; our very hearts lead us to see what is directly before our physical senses. We are activists. We try to do too much. We bite off more than we can chew. And even while I admit these faults, these failures, and resolve to do better this coming year, I can also say that they were inevitable to our growth. If we didn't try over and over again to put ideas into effect at once, we would never learn, because we are products of our time, we are Americans, we live in a world of modern music, modern art, modern chaos and not only have to live now but also keep aiming and talking about how we would like to live, about how God meant we should live.

Who are we to know what God meant? It is not presumption to say that He meant most men to marry and bring up a family and our work as laymen is to work for that kind of social order where it is easier for men to be good, where it is easier for the family, which is man's natural community, to live. Certain it is that due to our education most of us are launched in life without skills, without an ability to make an honest living, and most important, without a philosophy of work. Practically speaking, should none get married, none have children, until we prepare, save, perfect ourselves to fit ourselves for our vocation. What nonsense!

Most of the time **The Catholic Worker** seems to be engaged in picking up the pieces, as Ammon says, instead of building a fence at the top of the cliff to keep men from falling off. If we had a better social order we would not have so many destitute to care for. If we had better indoctrinated Catholics, we would not have so big a job to do, it would be spread out throughout the families and parishes.

Our Great Comfort

But in this happy season, and even while writing of failure, I am filled with a sense of great joy that God has entrusted to us a mission, that we have been given a work to do. In twenty years we seem to have accomplished little. The same long breadlines continue at our houses. Throughout the land many a Catholic Worker family struggles and seems to get nowhere. But meanwhile the children are born, and are fed and launched into life with a more vital sense, let us pray, of God and their place in the body of Christ.