

On Pilgrimage - April 1968

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes her reactions to hearing that Martin Luther King was shot and killed. Memorializes his Gospel faith and teaching of non-violence. (DDLW #252).

Just three weeks ago (we are going to press on April 25) Martin Luther King was shot as he stood on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tennessee. It was seven o'clock in the evening when the news was imparted on every television screen, and proclaimed on every radio. It was six midwest time and seven o'clock in New York. I was sitting in the kitchen of one of the women's apartments on Kenmare Street looking at a news cast when the flash came. **Martin Luther King shot in Memphis.** I sat there stunned, wondering if he was suffering a superficial wound as Meredith did on his Mississippi walk to overcome fear, that famous march at which Dr. King joined him, at which the cry "Black Power" was first shouted, about which Martin Luther King wrote in his last book **Where Do We Go From Here?** A book which all of us should read because it makes us understand what the words Black Power really mean. Dr. King was a man of the deepest and most profound spiritual insights.

These were the thoughts which flashed through my mind as I waited, scarcely knowing that I was waiting, for further news. The dreaded words were spoken almost at once. "Martin Luther King is dead." He was shot through the throat, the bullet pierced his spinal cord and he died at once. His blood poured out, shed for whites and blacks alike. The next day was Good Friday, the day commemorated by the entire Christian world as the day when Jesus Christ, true God and true man, shed His hood.

"Unless the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it remains alone. But if it die it produces much fruit." Martin Luther King died daily, as St. Paul said. He faced death daily, and said a number of times that he knew he would be killed for the faith that was in him. The faith that men could live together as brothers. The faith in the Gospel teaching of non-violence. The faith that man is capable of change, of growth, of growing in love. Dr. King died daily and already in his life there were men, his immense following capable of continuing his work in the same spirit, such as Ralph Abernathy.

Cynics may say that many used non-violence as a tactic. Many may scoff at the outcry raised at his death, saying that this is an election year and all candidates had to show honor to a fallen black hero. But love and grief were surely in the air those days of mourning and all that was best in the country—in the labor movement, and the civil rights movement and in the peace movement cast aside all their worldly cares and occupations to go to Memphis to march with the sanitation union men, on whose behalf, during whose strike, Martin Luther King

had given himself; and to Atlanta where half a million people gathered from coast to coast to walk in the funeral procession, following the farm cart and the two mules which drew the coffin of the dead leader.

Always, I think, I will weep when I hear the song, "We Shall Overcome," and when I read the words, "Free at last, great God, free at last."

But the healing of grief is in those words that I had been hearing sung every Sunday at the Church of the St. Thomas the Apostle, in the Mass composed by Mary Lou Williams, herself a black composer and jazz musician, herself internationally famous. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me shall never die but have life everlasting."

We should have had accounts this month of Bob Steed's trip to Memphis to cover the march of the sanitation workers. Bob is from Memphis and used to help the House of Hospitality which we had there for some years, just off Beale street. It was run by Helen Caldwell (Riley) for the children of the women who went out during the harvesting of cotton, who were picked up early in the morning by truck to go across the river into Arkansas, or some miles south into the Delta Region of Mississippi. I visited there, and slept in the store which was filled with little cribs and watched the mothers coming in before daylight to deposit their babies and small children with perhaps a can of evaporated milk and some bread. Helen and I slept on cots in the big store front. Later there was a house down an alley. Bayard Rustin came to see us there, from the, of course, segregated Y.M.C.A.

We should also have had a story of a 24-hour pilgrimage to Atlanta made by Paul Muller of California, who has been helping us these last months at Chrystie Street. He flew down to the funeral of Martin Luther King one night and back the next.

But it is a wonder the young people around the Catholic Worker got anything done this last month. Good weather has meant many visitors to the city, and many demonstrations in Central Park and other places. Holy Week has always a holiday (holy day) atmosphere, and all through the month, the March issue of the **Catholic Worker** was being mailed out, slowly but surely. Our chief mailer, Tom Hoey, has been ill and besides that there is a constant turnover of volunteers, what with this being war time. There is much preparing of defense before draft boards and courts, and much waiting. Our CW family is large, and everybody does what he or she can, but there is the soup line and many lame, halt and blind to be cared for, and the first work to neglect is the paper work, of course.

It made us happy this month to receive two letters, one from South America and the other from New Zealand, telling us that ship mail always meant a late arrival of the paper, but that the articles are timeless.

So we beg our readers' indulgence for being so late.