

Detroit C. W. Is Model of Hospitality

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1938, 1, 4.

Summary: Praises the hospitality at the Detroit Catholic Worker and tells of police violence against picketers on strike. Describes a night spent at a bleak Salvation Army shelter. (DDLW #334).

DAY AFTER DAY

Had lunch with Mrs. Van Aucken and Dan Foley and she was telling me of the police tactics at the Federal Screw Works strike. She saw them with her own eyes. The police were lined up to let in strike breakers and the picketers were lined upon either side of the entrance. There was a move toward the strike breakers on the part of the pickets and the mounted police rode into them, riding down women and children as well as men and clubbing right and left. There were twenty-six casualties up in the union hall, men with their jaws broken, their faces and heads bloody and arms and fingers smashed. Dr. Frazer was there helping bandage the wounded with inadequate facilities and tending to injuries that needed anesthetics and there were none. Many of the men had to be taken off to the hospital. Of course the pickets put up a fight too, using the two by two clubs on which their picket signs were mounted.

The Detroit group is feeding six hundred and more men a day now. I arrived there just at noon from New York and saw the men filling the small seven-room house that the group has been occupying for the past six months. The table is well set, the bowls of soup are rich and steaming, there is plenty of bread, and the service is swift and efficient. Lou Murphy is working every day though he lives at the house, and the men that manage the line are Pat Lynch, painter; Jack Kenny, brewery worker and crane operator; Bruce Hosmer, baker; Louis Skufer, siding applicator, and Richard Herbert, sailor. There are others there, too, but I did not get the other names. They are all unemployed and putting in a good day's work taking care of the crowds that come to the house.

Courtesy

It was their idea to have the pitchers of water and glasses at every place and that small courtesy touched me. In the center of the table stands a statue of St. Anthony with a vigil light burning before it. They are a fine lot of men being served, the men who have built up the country and now find themselves without employment and homeless, forced to live in missions. There is no Catholic Hospice for them. If there were only some vacant building turned over to them, they could easily run it themselves, and far more effectively as a cooperative venture and then the mission atmosphere would be missing.

There are many things going on in the Detroit group. The two nights I was there there were meetings which lasted until twelve. Then the eight men that sleep there get up at five thirty, and some of them get to six o'clock Mass. Not enough sleep, I'd say. But none of them consider that they are working very hard, giving their services voluntarily as they do. Such generosity will certainly be rewarded.

School

There is a workers' school being held on the east side every night and they are planning a west side school. There is a priests' class in social action, headed by Father Ehrbacher, the Franciscan at Duns Scotus, who is the chaplain of the CW group. In many parishes, Christian associations of workers are being formed according to the Pope's ideas, set up side by side with the neutral unions which the workers must of obligation to their fellows, join.

It isn't only the unemployed men who are being fed at 1414 Bagley. All afternoon women from the neighborhood come in for bread and clothes and it is seldom that they go away without something.

The atmosphere of the Catholic Workers' houses is always the same. When I am visiting a new place, I am immediately at home when I set foot in the door. The same spirit, the same comradeship, the same idea of giving, rather than getting.

Out of Mind

Reading an article in Blackfriars for March on the need for a Catholic Home for the Insane, I was reminded of the visit I paid to the New York Psychopathic Ward some time ago when I visited a woman who had been with us for some time. The place is roomy, airy and cheerful and they have many concerts and entertainments for the poor sick ones confined there. But it is a sad place to visit. One poor girl lay on the floor, up against the wall, clinging to it as though she wanted to creep into the dark and lie buried and hidden away. There were sad cries now and then, and there was a hopelessness about many of the patients that struck the heart.

It was a Holy day on my visit, and none of the Catholics had been able to get to Mass. I had a little missal in my pocket book and I left it with the woman I knew so that she could read the Mass. All her possessions had been taken from her. When I next visited her, she said that about twenty had read through the Mass, taking turns with the book.

Charity Bed

One night last week Bee and I went to stay at the Salvation Army Shelter on Rivington Street. We had to be in at eleven o'clock and we left Mott Street at ten-thirty. There was a meeting going on, a German Benedictine priest from Manchukuo was speaking, and we hated to tear ourselves away. But we had paid for our beds.

It was warm out and there was the smell of rain in the air. As we walked along the Bowery a few drops fell.

The Shelter is a five-story building on Rivington, just off the Bowery, and is right next door to an old hotel for men. It is very much like all the Bowery hotels, old lofts, made into dormitories and fireproofed. Somber on the outside, a store front window heavily curtained, a bleak entrance, and inside another bell to be rung before you see the matron. You give your name, age, religion, birthplace and state where you last lived. They also ask you whom to notify if you should get sick.

Not Enough

When Bee had gone over in the afternoon to pay for the beds she had not enough money with her and another woman called out, "Make her pay for the linen if she's only going to be here one night. There's no twenty cent beds left. She's got to take twenty-five cent ones. And ten cents extra for bedding. Make her pay it."

"If you are minus a nickle, out you go on the streets all night," Bee said.

Having registered, we took our locker keys and walked up three long flights of slate steps through brick walls, and into a large dormitory with seventeen beds in it. The women were all in bed there and the beds were close together. The air was stifling and one's ears were rasped with the coughing from various parts of the room. We went through this room, past two toilets which served for the entire floor (one of them was out of order), past some wash basins, and into another smaller dormitory. Here there were nine beds and the air was fresh. There were more windows in this smaller room than in the large dormitory in front. A woman got up silently from her bed to point out our lockers. Another woman came in and for a long time, by the side of her bed, rustled through paper bags. No eating is allowed in the room, but this poor woman used bags for suitcases.

Getting Up

There were red lights by some of the doors, but otherwise the rooms were in darkness. I was glad of the small pocket flashlight I had in my purse. It was eerie, stumbling about in the dark. Bee's bed was by a window and mine was next to hers, and they were good beds, though the covering was too light. I sat up with my little flashlight for a while to say my rosary. I've been making the rosary novena for the farm and didn't wish to miss a day. The little book of prayers was given to me on my last visit to Detroit by one of our group there, Miss O'Loughlin.

We were awakened at six-thirty by the sound of others dressing around us though we were told that we did not have to get up until the bell rang at seven, and didn't have to be down and out until eight. But St. Patrick's was around the corner, and we wanted to make the seven o'clock so we got up at once.

"I used to get up for Mass every day," the woman in the bed behind me said, "but somehow you lose heart. I just haven't the heart any more," she sighed sadly.

"That place is clean," Bee said, as we walked down Rivington Street, "but if you are in the dormitory the noise of snoring and groaning is awful. You can't sleep. They're not giving you anything at the Salvation Army. They make money on those places. For the same amount you could get a little furnished room and then you wouldn't have to get out every day. You'd have privacy. But the women pay from day to day from begging, and cleaning, or just what they can pick up. It's no charity they're getting."