

On Pilgrimage - October 1955

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, Oct 1955, p. 3

Summary: Anticipates the ordeal of her and others' appearance in court for disobeying the Civil Defense Act. They plead guilty. Visits migrant workers in southern Minnesota and describes their hard life. Praises the work of women for donations to the stricken of the world. Lauds the factory work in Chicago of the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld. (DDLW #929).

Usually my temptation is to write on and on, like the sorcerer's apprentice, but today, the day before we go to press, the day we go to court, I must of necessity be brief.

Our wonderful Labor Day weekend brought us well into September. Then we had two wonderful afternoons at the Anadale beach which is not far from our own on Staten Island where the girls, Eileen Fantino and her three companions had taken care of their Puerto Rican children for two months.

There were a couple of lawyers' meetings while we were preparing for our trial for not obeying the Civil Defense Act of New York, and of course the ordeal is much on our minds, especially today when we are due to go into court at two o'clock. Together with members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, War Resisters, Quakers, are also Eileen Fantino, Mary Anne McCoy, Helen Russell, Pat Rusk, Michael Kovalak, Mary Roberts, Carol Perry, Stanley Borowsky, Ammon Hennacy and I. Of the group the last five listed are going to plead guilty, and will make the following statement to the court, if we have an opportunity to speak!

Our action in pleading guilty comes from the conviction as to the manner in which we should bear our Christian testimony in this instance. It does not constitute an admission that the June 15th Civil Defense Drill was in the public interest, that the law under which we are charged is good, or that the charge against us is just. Neither, therefore, does our action in pleading guilty indicate a lack of moral solidarity between us and our fellow defendants. On the contrary, we shall continue to give them and the Defense Committee spiritual and material support to the utmost of our ability.

Whatever the outcome of the trial, and it may be just another postponement, or we may be kicked out of court as nuisances and religious fanatics, or we may get

a sentence up to six months or a year, and a five hundred dollar fine – whatever the outcome it is just the same a grueling experience to go to court, to stand before a judge. Thank God for short and repetitious prayer. Gandhi said that he used to repeat the name of God over and over again to give himself courage. The Russian Orthodox believe that even invoking the Holy Name of Jesus results in His presence with you. And there are all the prayers to the Blessed Mother short and swift like arrows. Of course all those who say, “Lord, Lord,” are not going to receive a blessing, unless they go out and try to do the will of the Father. But the very doing that will may mean a stammering in our prayers. And when we cannot pray, if we cannot lift up our hearts, others will be doing it for us. We are all members of one another. We are all guilty of the sins of the world and we all lift each other up too.

One of the men says that in jail all the big shots draw two dollars a day so they can get coffee and cake at the commissary. “And if you want to write you have to buy your own paper.” Needless to say, we won’t be drawing any two dollars a day. Ammon says two dollars for the duration will be enough for him. Having been through the mill a few months ago, I remind myself to clean out my pocketbook. It is a humiliating thing to see women’s pocketbooks dumped out, with all their little personal belongings, and all the trash too that accumulates.

I must remember to remove the knife which I carry, to open packages, to peel apples, to cut flowers, to whittle things for the children. Last time I had a knife, which Smokey himself had given me, telling me he was going out to which he didn’t want to have found on him, when he was “picked up,” and landed in Riker’s Island. And here it was on me the knife was found! The Elizabeth street station still has it, but when they took it from my bag in one of the several searches of us all, they did not charge it against me.

October 2, there will be a day of recollection at Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island. Take the ferry over, then the train (32c) to Pleasant Plains, walk up Bloomingdale Rd. to the farm. Telephone Tottenville 8-2069 and ask for Beth Rogers.

P.S. – We pleaded guilty together with Judith Beck and Dick Kern and the sentence was postponed. The trial of the others was continued until October 26.

Two Days To Texas

One of the most interesting features of my week’s speaking trip to Rochester, Minnesota, famed home to the Mayo clinic, was a quick tour that Fr. Leo Neudecker arranged for me with his brother Urban, among the Mexican migrant camps around Hollandale and Maple Island, some forty miles from Rochester. An old lake bed of some 15,000 acres was drained 30 years ago by a land company and the rich peat soil, originally sold as small farms is now given over to huge tracts where potatoes, asparagus, onions are grown, tended and harvested by Mexican single men from Mexico, and families of Mexicans from Texas and the

border towns. Two thirds of them had left, and in talking to one family of twelve, living in one room, I found that they made Texas in two days, in the large truck which held them, and all their possessions, making no stops on the way, probably for lack of places to stay or eat.

There are about 1150 Mexicans in Fr. Urban Neudecker's parish. His church is set in the middle of the prairie, with rectory, and now a parish hall rapidly going up under the hammer of volunteer parish workers. It seems strange to call such rich and cultivated country "prairie," but that is the name of the nearby town we had first to go to, Blooming Prairie where Fr. O'Connell, a Redemptorist who speaks Spanish, helps every summer.

In visiting the camps where a number of families were still living, we passed thousands of acres of asparagus which Fr. O'Connell said netted \$100,000 in June alone. The stoop labor which harvests this crop gets seventy-five cents an hour, and a bonus later which brings it up to 90c. Only two or three of the thousands of migrants who have come to this area over all these years have become land owners themselves.

Along spiritual lines a great deal is being done, and the people are being reached. There is a league of women, named for our Lady of Guadalupe, who visit the families and perform the works of mercy, but their Mexican brothers and sisters are such a hard working lot, that it is mostly the spiritual works that the women can do. They provide layettes for the new babies, rummage sales every Friday night to provide them with good clothes within their means, and there is summer school for the children in a center where two hundred children gathered for catechism. This center is next to a park and is a recreation center as well as a place where Cana conferences and wedding breakfasts and parties can be held. There were 20 first communions this year and sixty were confirmed.

But far more needs to be done, and far more needs to be studied about this migrant labor situation which exists all through our rural areas. We wonder whether the Russian farmers who visited our midwest saw any of the migrant camps where these beautiful people, this hard working people whom we should be proud to call brothers, are living twelve and fourteen and sixteen in one room. True, they spend a good part of their life out of doors. True, they have radio or television, or an electric sewing machine, and washing machines, trucks for transportation. But they never have enough money for a home, for a bit of soil they can call their own.

We need to study our economy as well as the Russian economy some features of which were brought to light by our American farmers visiting there. A report in the New York Times Sunday feature section by one of the farmers tells of not only the gigantic collectives, but also the countless thousands of small acre holdings where the workers owned some livestock and raised such produce that it was thanks to them and their sales of food and milk and butter that the city dwellers could eat as well as they did.

Little Sisters In Chicago Slums

My short visit west also meant that I had a dinner with the latest Fraternity of the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld who are now settled at 1727 W. Adams in Chicago near the junction of Ogden and Paulina. I went there between trains with Nina Polcyn of St. Benet's Book Shop and had supper with Sister Responsible Marie Resjean and her companion who works in a nearby rubber factory, stamping out washers all day long in a room with half a dozen other women, Negro and white. The section is Negro and Puerto Rican and in addition to learning English, the little Sisters will have to learn Spanish too. Their fraternity (that is, the two of them) are on the top floor, under a badly leaking roof, of an old house, where they have a tiny chapel, living room, kitchen and bath. There is a back porch like most Chicago tenements have, and the noise of the alleys and the "L" two doors away is in their ears, day and night. There are the noises of the families downstairs too. Gwen Moresland, oblate of St. Benedict, who works with Nina at St. Benet's, lives across the street in a building that houses seventeen families and has only two bathrooms for all seventeen.

The little Sisters live here in a strange land, in poverty and silence and work, and by their presence, by their sharing, are witnessing the Christian faith, and calling to the attention of the world, the life of the poor, by their very sharing of it.

Work for Aged Outstanding

My midwest trip came about because I was honored by an invitation to speak at the annual convention of the N.C.C.W. of the Winona diocese which was held at Rochester, Minnesota. The convention was a one day affair, and there were exhibits shown of all the work done by the deaneries of women all over the diocese, for the Pope's Storehouse, from which he sends out help to the stricken of the world. There were an amazing collection of all kinds of goods, in the gymnasium of one of the schools as well as at the Mayo auditorium where the convention was held. The sewing, knitting, the blankets, afghans, patchwork quilts made a wonderful display, and one of the deaneries contributed a thousand dollars worth of new shoes. This is the work of an agricultural community, one of the outstanding dioceses of the country whose comfort and prosperity does not lead the women to forget the problems of the world. Their convention is also typical of other branches of the N.C.C.W.