

On Pilgrimage - July/August 1963

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Goes to Danville, Virginia, and describes the brutality of the police against demonstrators. Speaks at a spirited prayer meeting devoted to civil rights. Ties civil rights to education, jobs, health care, and averting war. Participates in picketing. Says, "We all have something to give." Notes the death of friends. (DDLW #805).

An invitation for me to speak in Danville, Virginia, came last month so I set out July 8th to fill the assignment. Actually I was not asked as editor of **The Catholic Worker**, as a writer, a reporter. I was asked by Mother Teresa of the Society of Christ The King, to come and take her place because the newly assigned young priest did not think that it was fitting that a founder of a religious group of social workers, known for the past twenty years in the community should be taking her place by the side of crowd of Negro demonstrators on the steps of City Hall in Danville.

Mother Teresa had spoken on the radio several times besides. The priest is the only one for miles around; the next nearest church is Lynchburg, and it is one of the difficulties of the Church in America, that one is dependant for the Bread of Life on the one priest who may be completely hostile to one's point of view. In the big cities this does not matter. There are a number of priests in each parish and any number of parishes in each city. But in Danville there is one Catholic Church and one priest. One wishes to be friends.

The Society of Christ The King

Mother Teresa heads a small group of sisters who do social work among the poorest of the Negro and white population, town and rural. They do what comes to hand and if it is a baby, left on their doorstep or a family of half a dozen children whose mother is in a mental hospital for five months, or a group of families back in the country to be instructed in the truths of religion, – they are ready. While I was with the sisters, there was a baby, carried about with them, taken to Mass in the morning, sitting in a little stroller in their kitchen or garden while they worked.

"We have learned about mothers from them," Mother Teresa says happily. St. Teresa of Avila advises that every convent have a baby in it to humanize the nuns.

It is an all day bus trip to Danville. The bus leaves at 8:30 a.m. and arrives at 8:45 at night with few stops on the way. It is the through bus to New Orleans. Mother Teresa met me at the station and drove me out Route 4, down Industrial Avenue, past tobacco warehouses, past a sewage plant, past a street of shanties

and then a row of slightly better houses, and finally up a rutted road to the top of a hill where the sisters have put up half a dozen buildings, including a guest house, a community house, work shops, a library and so on. They began with barracks and the sisters do the building themselves. A tornado in 1953 destroyed some of their houses, and they are working on another now. There are fruit trees, a vegetable garden, lovely grounds under a great spreading oak (many of whose limbs were torn away by the tornado), and across a little valley, a good barn and milk house. They have two Guernsey cows, and have an abundance of milk, butter and cream.

Supper Party

It was not long after I arrived that a group of the young people from SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) arrived for a late supper. There was Cynthia Ann Carter from Danville; Roland Sherrod from Petersburg, Va., Ivanhoe Donaldson from New York, Bob Zellner, field secretary of the Alabama SNCC, Mary Elizabeth King and Sam Shirah from Atlanta. We ate the good farm products (there were steak and hot dogs besides) and students told me of the happenings in Danville. Stories of which had been publicized all over the country, but they still could scarcely convey the horror of the brutality which had been inflicted on a helpless, unarmed crowd of demonstrators.

Before I left New York, and it was not too heartening to hear it, Bob Gore had told other members of CORE that in all the country, the police of Danville had been the most terrible. And on July 12 Martin Luther King told a mass meeting in Danville that he had seen brutal things done by the police elsewhere in the South, "but seldom, if ever, have I heard of actions as vicious and brutal as those done by the police here." Dr. King's Assistant, Wyatt Tee Walker, called Danville the worst area with Gadsden, Alabama and Savannah, Georgia, a close second.

This is what happened the week before:

Riot

The group of demonstrators which included prominent ministers and their wives, parishioners and many young ones, were driven by deputized police into an alley between a parking lot and the City Hall and there the fire hoses were turned on them with such force that they were thrown to the pavement and in one case a woman's clothes, (skirt and blouse), ripped off her, so that she was exposed with nothing but step-ins and naked from the waist up. Women taking refuge under parked cars were dragged out and beaten with clubs and kicked. Arms were broken by the force of the blows. Men, women and children were all beaten unmercifully and deliberately. It was fear run riot.

“Deliver me from fear of their fear,” I prayed as I listened, using the words of St. Peter which had been part of the epistle of last Sunday’s Mass, thinking of the hysterical fear of guilty whites, fear of the past, of the future.

“Trouble was, they deputized untrained policemen, men who were garbage collectors and street cleaners and other workers for the city,” the students told me, as many others told me again and again. And when they said “untrained,” I thought of what I had read of how police are trained to strike blows that will not be seen, that will not kill but will render the opponent unconscious and so on. But these men were striking as though to kill by their blows and many of the demonstrators had to be taken unconscious to the hospital. At present writing two are still there, one in Duke Hospital and one in Richmond.

The local hospital, Winslow, has 25 beds for the colored and the other hospital in this town of 47,000 has 750 beds for the whites. Winslow is a city hospital, free, a fact protested by white citizens who point out that they pay fourteen dollars a day at Memorial which had started as a hospital for the needy and had been given gifts of a million or more.

Prayer Meeting

What I was invited to do in Danville was to speak at a mass meeting the following night in the High Street Baptist Church where Rev. L. W. Chase is pastor. The meeting began with songs and hymns and the hymn singing was hearty and beautiful.

“Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care? Precious Saviour still our refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer. Do thy friends despise, forsake thee, take it to the Lord in prayer. In His arms He’ll take and shield thee, take it to the Lord in prayer.”

There were other hymns and prayers and the invocation was surely a crying out to the Lord, a singing and a sobbing of a prayer, rhythmical, so that it became almost a litany. Rev. James Dixon prayed with all his strength.

And then there were the Freedom songs, many of which have been composed in jail, coming from the heart, from the suffering, from the open bleeding wounds of a people who have known indignity and sorrow for generations.

The Freedom songs were more lively than the hymns and clapping accompanied them and a light tapping of the feet. **“Keep on walking, talking . . . Ain’t gonna let no injunction turn me round, walking up the freedom way.”** There were many verses and many refrains. The singing lifted the heart, strengthened the weak knees.

Speakers

There were many speakers but they were brief. William Canada told with complete lack of emotion how he had spent nineteen days in jail. Authorities kept denying he was there, and he was sought for by his family in hospitals and there was no knowing where he was until he was released. Despite beatings he had been put to work in the quarry.

Bob Zellner talked of Moses and how he led his people out of Egypt and how tired people got of the struggle so that they wanted to go back to bondage; it was forty years before they saw the Promised Land. And he compared the non-violent struggle of the Negro to the clamorous attack made on the walls of Jericho, which, he reminded them, had come tumbling down.

Claudia Edwards of Arkansas, one of the task force of CORE, urged the Mothers to join me in a picket line in the down town area the next morning. She herself, she told me later, was going to buy her some jail clothes in an adjoining town since they were boycotting the down-town area in Danville. Jail clothes meant a pair of jeans or dungarees and a slightly heavier shirt so that if the hoes were turned on them again, her clothes would not be swept off. I saw her the next day at noon and she looked small and wiry, and very much alive. The next afternoon she and a dozen others lay down before the gates of the Danville Mills against which they are urging a world-wide boycott, and the police let them lie there and deployed the trucks to another gate. There were not enough of them to cover all the entrances to these great textile mills which have subsidiaries all through the South, and a world wide market. Ten thousand are employed by the Mill and only 500 Negroes.

There were speakers urging registration for the vote, so that next morning 47 went to the polls and registered, and they went together so they would not be intimidated. There was only one woman, very nervous, to register them, so it took a long time, and many could not join our picket line at the noon hour. The rule is that at first registration, one pays not only the year's poll tax but for three years previous, and this added burden keeps many from registering.

Lawyers spoke on the progress made in the courts. Leonard Holt from Norfolk and Arthur Kinoy from New York, both warned their audience, (there were five hundred there,) that the work could not just be done in the courts, that the people had to keep up their demonstrations, had to continue their struggle in the streets.

Reverend A. I. Dunlap, just recently appointed vice-president of Kettrell Junior College, made a statement of purpose and since he was directly in front of me and spoke so that he kept his audience in gales of laughter I could not get the gist of his talk which was also very brief.

Pope John and Integration

I was the speaker of the evening and I do not know whether I would have had the courage to speak, outsider that I was, if I had not been there to represent Mother Teresa whose work was known and loved by them all. Besides, the singing lightened my own heart, dissolved my own fear, so that I could tell them of the Women's Pilgrimage for Peace and the Pope's encyclical **Pacem in Terris**.

There was no end to what one could say about that Encyclical. There was the part where he said, "He who possesses certain rights, has likewise the duty to claim those rights as marks of his dignity, while others have the obligation to acknowledge those rights and respect them."

I took that statement on a poster placard on the streets of Danville the next morning when we picketed for an hour and a half before the hostile or indifferent stares of hundreds of people during their lunch hour.

There was a notable absence of Negroes but some of those who shopped said they were from the country and did not know about the pleas of their fellow Negroes to keep out of the downtown area and not to buy from stores where Negroes were not employed in fair ratio to the whites.

There was much to quote from Pope John: what he had to say about the rights of conscience; about unjust laws; about the place of women, the part they had to play in the world.

And I told my listeners too, that after so many years of work in the Peace Movement, I had come to the conclusion that basic to peace was this struggle of the colored for education, job opportunity, health, and recognition as men. That while we talked of averting war, we were in the midst of one of the strangest wars in history, where the side which had declared the war were using no weapons but those of suffering. They were praying they were marching they were doing without (by boycott); they were in a way offering their own flesh, their suffering, their imprisonment, for their brothers. "A new **commandment**" (not a counsel) "I give to you, that you love each other as I have loved you." And that commandment of Jesus means the laying down of life itself for one's brother, colored and white.

It is the Negro who is leading the way, and it is among the Negroes that the ranks of the martyrs is increasing. They are uncounted, unknown, many of them. Medgar Evers leads them, going out as he did with fore knowledge of his doom. He fell, and his brother is taking his place. Others are unknown, unsung heroes. Something is happening in our midst that we do not recognize. We have eyes and see not, ears and hear not. The last are becoming the first. "He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble."

“Not Worthy”

It is hard to feel that the color of our skin in a way separates us from this mass of people whom we have injured. It is with too little and too late that we are engaging ourselves. But even if it is at the eleventh hour that we are called to serve, we can respond.

We can pray too that we may be “counted worthy to suffer,” a fact the apostles rejoiced over when they put up their non-violent struggle for the Faith, and were imprisoned and beaten. I felt that I had not been counted worthy when I learned that the Danville police have been imprisoning all the pickets since I left, besides all those who have been engaged in sit-ins. The jails have been filling up.

I talked to some of the women who had been beaten by the police and their deputies and the savagery was incredible. The only thing they were spared were the humiliating stripping and searching that all women are subjected to in the Women’s House of Detention in New York.

All ages

On the picket line which I participated in through the downtown streets of Danville, I was preceded by Mrs. Chase, wife of the minister of the church where I had spoken the night before, and Mrs. Lawrence Campbell whose husband is the executive secretary of the Danville Christian Progressive Association and minister of one of the other leading churches of the city.

The very young among the Negro students have led in the integrating of public facilities, lunch counters, hospitals, libraries, theaters and housing in many places, and have engaged the minds and hearts of youth in Danville also. It was fascinating to see and hear these young ones, some of them only fourteen, talk of the work and the struggle ahead.

Just as in Birmingham, many of these young ones have already seen the inside of the prisons. Comparing them to the gangs of unemployed teen-agers who are looked upon with fear and trembling by the householder everywhere, one can only see in these young ardent souls great hope for the future.

John Davis was one of the first from Danville to take a position of responsibilities in these activities. In an interview at the office of **Liberation** in New York, he told how a group of young people were arrested for trespassing when they sat on the steps of Charcoal House, a segregated restaurant, after the manager closed the place in the face of their picket line. When they were arrested there were two news men present and Chief of Police McCain warned the police to handle their prisoners with care, but when they arrived in the jail cells where there were no witnesses they were kicked and “cursed in most vile language.”

Ivanhoe Donaldson who drove down from New York was halted by the police outside Danville and arrested for driving with faulty brakes, handcuffed, taken

to the police station, and struck in the face several times. Another student from Brandeis University who came to help the SNCC group was beaten so badly with clubs that Mother Teresa said it was a wonder he had any sense left. The police kept saying, one of the young colored girls told me, "Is you a white man or is you a nigger?" and when he would not answer, they kept beating him.

This same little one, who looked no more than twelve years old, had been thrown into prison too together with a crowd of others, and "the prison was so full that they had to put us in the side with the white people, – so we integrated the jail!" Truly this is also a children's crusade. It is not that they have been led into it, – it is hard to keep them out.

An Emergency Food Drive has been announced by representatives of SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Danville, to help ease hunger due to the cutting off of unemployment compensation and loss of jobs which occurred in reprisal for participating in demonstrations.

Parents in Jail

"There are also many families where one or both parents are in jail, and they have vowed to remain there without bail. Food is needed for their children," according to Rev. L. G. Campbell. Staples such as flour, canned milk, and canned vegetables and meat are needed for immediate distribution. "We are making a special appeal to all friends of justice for small and large packages to be sent to 226 North Union St., Danville, Va., said Avon W. Rollins, Executive Committee, SNCC.

Besides the relief that is needed and the money for all the expenses and legal fees of these committees (they are doing a lot of work and not spending much on literature) there is the problem of the building of a kind of social order which can handle the problems of automation, the building of a new society within the shell of the old. The continuation, in other words, of Peter Maurin's program of Farming Communes and Agronomic Universities throughout the country. Besides teachers, students, workers and scholars, all are needed who have funds to invest in land and enterprises, those who know how to plan and those who know how to build, those most especially who know how to teach, – to work with others. There is not much room for the individualist, but much need for the personalist, in the communitarian society where the aim will be the common good; the need to make the kind of social order "where it is easier for man to be good," as Peter Maurin said.

There is time to talk about these things in prison, in meeting halls, in times of unemployment and tension. We each have our vocation – the thing to do is to answer the call. We each have something to give.

LATE NOTES

We last went to press June 12. So far five families have had vacations at the beach house in Staten Island. There is usually a day or so in between to clean up a bit and defrost the ice box. With lots of kids there is bound to be some disorder and breakage, but this year one of the unemployed men of the family repaired a bit of plumbing, something we had been trying to get done for months. There is so much building on the island it is impossible to get a plumber. Also we like to think of the miracle of a house free from bugs all these summers. In spite of the fact that these families come from the real slums and are crowded into a few small rooms in town, none of them have brought with them any noxious insects. But as for mosquitos, – we haven't a single mosquito, says Stanley. They are all married and with large families.

Fr. McSorley Died

Our dear friend Fr. McSorley, with whose encouragement and advice Peter Maurin and I launched the Catholic Worker back in 1933, died, and was buried Saturday, July 6. I thought, during the requiem Mass, how gentle and how saintly a man. His whole life reads like the life of a saint. It was all entirely directed to the priesthood and I felt, as I never did before at anyone's passing, that here had been a man of complete innocence and yet one of whom one could go loaded down with guilt and misery and know that he was filled with loving kindness and understanding. "He is a priest forever," as the priest who preached his funeral sermon said, "and so we can still count on his help."

Sasha Died

In the mid section of *The Long Loneliness* when I wrote of a time of "natural happiness," I tell of a Russian Jewish family who figured largely in my life at that time. The father of that family died during the month and it was a shock to hear that he had gone from us. There are so many memories of discussions, literary and political, with a background of guitar music and Russian folk songs. Sasha introduced to us Dzarjevsky (who gave me his baptismal cross and for whom I am bound to pray), Salama, and the Bulgakov family, and I remember how Freda and I taught Varya how to read English from **Candide**. Sasha had a little garden and he told us once that he wished we would some day plant some dill on his grave when he died it was so delectable an herb in salads. I lived with them in the city for a time, and when I had my home on Staten Island, the Maruchess family bought a place next door and we were constant companions for years. May he rest in peace!

Michael Died

One can think peacefully of the death of a Fr. McSorley but not of a Michael who was too young to die. Michael Willock was only eighteen and the last time I saw him was when he and his father Ed had spent a Thanksgiving vacation with us on the Staten Island farm.

Suffering is a mystery and often one cries out, Why, why? We ask the prayers of our readers for Dorothy Willock and the children.

Hiroshima Day

As we go to press, Aug. 6, A. J. Muste has been leading a large group of demonstrators in a sit-down before the Atomic Energy Commission on Hudson and Houston Streets. A vigil is lined up before the block long building, which will be continued for the next three days. Hour by hour, one of the watchers goes to take his place beside A. J. Muste who has led in the sit-down, blocking the door of the main entrance to the building. We will write more of this in the next issue.

Danville Again

Late News. Rev. Chase of Danville whose wife led the Mothers for Freedom picket line in Danville in which I took part, was arrested. Police came at four-thirty in the morning and kicked in the door of this home and dragged him out in pajamas to the local jail. Later in the day eighty more pickets were arrested, including Mrs. Chase, his wife.

Retreat Movement

Fr. Marion Casey of Belle Plaine, Minnesota gave us our annual retreat which began on a Sunday night and lasted until Saturday. I am writing a book about this spiritual adventure, which the Catholic Worker Press will publish later.