Without Poverty We Are Powerless

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Asserts the importance of voluntary poverty even if it means we are fools for Christ. Then gives a loving appreciation of Peter Maurin's holy poverty, blending light-hearted stories and a graphic description of his dementia and silent suffering. Quotes from Fr. Faber on death in anticipation of Peter's death within a year. (DDLW #468).

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All our talk about peace and the weapons of the spirit is meaningless unless we try in every way to embrace **voluntary poverty** and not work in any position, any job, that contributes to war, not to take any job whose pay comes from the fear of war, of the atom bomb. We must give up our place in this world, sacrifice children, family, wife, mother, and embrace poverty, reputation, and then we will be laying down life itself.

And we will be considered **fools for Christ**. Our folly will be esteemed madness and we will be lucky if we escape finally the psychopathic ward. We know, we have seen it, in ourselves and in others. The well-dressed man comes into the office and he is given respect. The ragged, ill clad, homeless one, is the hobo, the bum. "Get in line there. Coffee line forms at six- thirty. Nothing to eat until four. No clothes today."

Peter Maurin visiting the Buffalo house one time showed his face inside the door and was so greeted. "Come back at five and have soup with the rest of the stiffs." And then the comment, "one of those New York bums came in this afternoon. Said he was from the New York house."

One of the friends of the work in laughing at the incident that evening said, "Where did you go Peter?" "I went to see 'Grapes of Wrath'." Peter was always meek, obedient to all. His speech with everyone when he was not indoctrinating was always yea, yea, nay, nay. Another story told of him was that when he went to see a professor's wife at Columbia, the wife thought he was the plumber and ushered him into the cellar. He followed her confusedly, wondering why she was entertaining in the cellar. If he knew or thought of such things as rumpus rooms or basement bars, he might have thought he was being ushered into one of them.

Another tale told is of his going to speak at a Midwest college where the door brother was known for his great charity. At the very sight of Peter, the brother ushered him down into the kitchen and sat him down before a good meal which Peter gracefully ate. As the time for the lecture drew near, the harassed fathers

were telephoning and hunting all over the college, finally finding him in the cook's domain, having a discussion there.

Another case I know of, of my own knowledge, is a time he went up to Rye, or New Rochelle, or some Westchester town to make a morning address to a woman's club. He always went where he was asked. An hour or so later we received frantic calls. "Where is Peter?" People always called him Peter. Sometimes they were even more familiar and called him "Pete." Since I had put him on the train myself, I told them that he had left on the train designated, that he must be in the station.

"There is only an old tramp sitting on one of the benches asleep," was the reply. We knew it was Peter, and it turned out to be so.

We have seen many an occasion when he was shut up at a meeting by a cautious chairman before he had even gotten under way. More courteous chairmen allowed him so many minutes to "make his point" and without listening sat him down or called him to order. I have seen Fr. La Farge come to his rescue and explain what it was he was trying to say.

Bishop Boyle likes to speak of the time he had an all day discussion with Peter after one of these encounters in the lecture hall. "I had to get up and tell them what he was trying to say," the Bishop beamed. And it was not just the case of an accent, for Peter even after forty years in this country has an accent. If the accent goes with the well-groomed appearance, people make an attempt to understand it. Coming from a ragged old apostle, people make no attempt to listen.

"People will not listen," Peter used to say sadly. Or else, more directly he would rebuke, "You are listening with one ear, making your answers before you have heard what I have said. You do not want to learn, you want to teach, you want to tell me." He knew he was a man with a message.

And now Peter is more than ever in absolute poverty. He has achieved the ultimate in poverty. This last chapter is necessary for a complete picture of Peter as he is today. It is hard to make our readers understand it. They read, or half read the articles that we run month after month, and no matter how many times we explain that they are reprinted from much earlier issues, and that Peter has not written for four years, they write enthusiastically and tell us how they profited by his last thoughts, "his mind is as keen as ever," they say enthusiastically.

But something has happened to his mind. We must say it again because it is of tremendous significance. It reveals more than anything else his utter selflessness, his giving of himself. He has given everything, even his mind. He has nothing left, he is in utter and absolute poverty. The one thing he really enjoyed, exulted in, was his ability to think. When he said sadly "I cannot think," it was because that had been taken from him, literally. His mind would no longer work. He sits on the porch, a huge old hulk. His shoulders were always broad and bowed. He

looks gnomelike, as thought he came from under the earth. He shambles about, one-sidedly as though he had had a stroke. His head hangs wearily as though he could not hold it up. His mouth, often twisted as though with pain, hangs open in an effort to understand what is going on around him. Most of the time he is in a lethargy, he does not try to listen, or to understand. Doctors say that it is a hardening of the arteries of the brain. Some call it senile dementia. Some talk of cardiac asthma, to explain his racking cough. He has a rupture which gives him pain. Sometimes he has headaches. We only know when we ask him and he says yes or no.

"I have never asked anything for myself," he said, and he made every conscious effort to give all he had, to give the best he had, all of himself, to the cause of his brother. The only thing he had left in his utter poverty which made Skid Row his home and the horse market his eating places and the old clothes room his haberdasher was his brilliant mind. Father McSorley considered him a genius. Fr. Parsons said that he was the best read man he ever met. Now he remembers nothing. "I cannot remember, I cannot think."

One time we acted charades before him at the retreat house at Easton. Irene Naughton arranged three scenes in which the men aced out the three essay, "When the Irish were Irish a Thousand years ago," "When a Greek met a Greek," "When a Jew met a Jew." The contrast was that of the teachings of the fathers of Israel and the Fathers of the Church with the present. The men dressed in sheets and Angora goats' hair to give them venerable appearance and did a delightful job of it. Afterwards we asked Peter what were the essays which the charades exemplified. He did not know. We read aloud his essays to him, and [text missing in the origninal] message we had for the world today was poverty.

All the world admired and talks of the poor man of Assisi. Christ is honored even by the unbeliever, the hater of churches, as the poor man who washed the feet of his disciples and had no place to lay His head. Poverty is praised and sung of in song and story. But its reality is little known.

It is a garden enclosed, a secret beauty. It is to be learned by faith, not by reason or by sense. It is not just *simplicity*, which can be a very expensive proposition indeed.

One time we were cleaning a poor woman's house for her when she was in the hospital having her sixth child. The house was filled with rages, with junk. Some of those helping wished to throw the stuff out, clear up the place, both for the sake of the room, and of order. But to the poor, one of those who was acquainted with poverty remarked, all those things, although they look like rags are necessary. The ragged shirts, diapers, snow suits; things washed (there was little time to mend) and shapeless and grey with age, used time after time for one child after another. Poverty is disorderly, crowded, noisy, smelly, ugly and offensive to the senses. But God is a Spirit and must be worshipped in spirit and in truth. In the eyes of faith poverty can be discerned for the beauty that it is.

Peter's poverty might have been thought to be that of an old peasant who

was used to nothing better. "After all he never had anything, he was one of twenty-three children, they lived like animals, their manure pile was their greatest possession." I have heard just such remarks as these.

And of course there is truth in the fact that he was not used to soft garments nor the homes of comfort. He was always in good trim to practice the life of poverty.

One of Newman's Lenten sermons talks of our endeavors to multiply the comforts and get rid of daily inconveniences and distresses of life.

"Cold and hunger and hard lodging, humble offices and mean appearance, are considered serious evils," he writes. "All things harsh and austere are carefully put aside. We shrink from the rude lap of earth and embrace of the elements and we build ourselves houses in which the flesh may enjoy its lust and the eye its pride."

Cold and hunger and hard lodging and all things that affront the senses were well known to Peter. But what of the interior senses, the memory and the understanding and the will? These last years we have seen all these mortified in him. His memory and his understanding are gone, and his will is fixed on God. When we wake him in the morning all we have to say is "Mass, Peter," and he is struggling and puffing and panting to get out of bed. At night it is the same for compline and rosary unless we forbid him to get up and make him lie still.

There is a dear priest who used to talk to us about being victims. I could write a book about him, so great was his love of God and of souls, but this is about Peter. He too became a victim. What he loved most, after his spiritual work, was to do active work for souls, build houses, work his electric saw, make things for the chapel, travel about to talk of the things of God. He was known for his activity. Then at the age of 57, paralysis and loss of memory set in, incontinent and bedridden, he began his last days or years away from all those he loved, far from the activities he craved. I asked him if he had offered himself as a victim, and he said wryly, "One doesn't realize what one is saying often. We offer God so much, and maybe we think we mean it. And then God takes us at our word!"

Peter gave himself, he offered himself to a life of poverty, and he has been able to prove his poverty. It is not just something he was used to, or was attracted to in a superficial way. His poverty, his self-abnegation was complete.

And now he is dying (if not already dead to the things of the world). "His life is hid with Christ in God." He is not even appreciated for the saint he is (and understand that I use this term as one uses it for one not passed upon formally by the Church. A rector of a seminary once said to his students, "I want you all to be saints, but not canonized ones. It costs too much.")

Father Faber describes what Peter's actual death will be like, in one of his spiritual conferences on Death, entitled, **Precious in the Sight of the Lord**.

"Let us speak of one more death, and then close our list. Let it be the death of saintly indifference. This is a death so obscurely veiled in its own simplicity that

we can hardly discern its beauty. We must take it upon faith. It is the death of those who for long have been reposing in sublimest solitude of soul in the will of God. All complications have disappeared from their inward life. There is a bare unity about it, which to our unseeing eyes is barren as well as bare. All devotions are molten in one. All wishes have disappeared, so that men look cold, and hard, and senseless. There is no glow about them when they die. They die in colorless light. They make no demonstration when they go. There is no pathos in their end, but a look–it is only a look–of stoical hardness. They generally speak but little, and then it is not edifying, but rather on commonplace subjects, such as the details of the sick room, or news about relatives; and they speak of these things as if they were neither interested in them nor trying to take an interest. Their death, from the very excess of its spirituality, looks almost animal. They lie down to die like beasts, such is the appearance of it. Independently as if they needed none of us to help them, and uncomplainingly, as if fatalism put them above complaining. They often die alone when none are by, when the nurses are gone away for a while. They seem almost as if they watched the opportunity to die alone. As they have lived like eagles, they mostly die high up, without witnesses, and in the night. This death is too beautiful for us to see its beauty. It rather scares us by something about it which seems inhuman. More of human will would make it more lovely to us; for what is there to be seen when the will of the saint has been absorbed long since in the will of God. Like the overflow of desert wells, the waters of life sink into the sand, without a tinkling sound to soothe the ear, without a marge of green to rest the eye." *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.*