

The Conversion of Ammon Hennacy

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, January 1953, 2.

Summary: An account of the conversion of Ammon Hennacy. Profiles his anarchist and pacifist beliefs, sensitivity to oppression, effect on people, and journey to Baptism. (DDLW #642).

What to say about such a conversion as Ammon's, and how happy it made us! We have known him 16 years, since the early days of the Milwaukee House of Hospitality. He sold the *Catholic Worker* and distributed it all these years, and loved it because Peter was a "one-man revolutionist" like himself and because our "personalist and communitarian revolution" was his also. Many among us will call themselves personalists, libertarian, pluralist, regionalist, but he will always call himself "anarchist." He is a pacifist and conscientious objector to all war and to all coercion. His picketing is to testify to his consciousness of the dignity and responsibility of man. He says, "I may not change the world, but I will not let the world change me." He has written for us for the last twelve years, roughly speaking, articles on poverty and hard labor showing a way which is open to all men, to resist the evil in the world today.

What kind of a man is he?

He spent three months with us this summer, making a retreat, writing and meeting with and talking to people in the East. One night he and another woman and I went to a free opera over on Bleecker Street. He had never been to an opera though his two daughters and all his family are musicians. He shed no tears over the pathos of *La Boheme* but when he came out and we looked at the Monday morning papers telling of the shooting of a group of young gangsters who were trapped in their hideout in Harlem, he groaned at what was happening to our youth today. He weeps over reality, not fiction. He told me that when he saw "I was a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang" in the movies, he went home and cried all night. He himself had been three years in Atlanta, and nine months in solitary confinement in the first world war for being a socialist and pacifist. "All men are brothers, and brothers do not kill one another."

It was there his conversion began in reading the Bible and he found himself a Christian.

His grandfather had been a Catholic, but his father and his father's seven brothers and sisters had been adopted (after his grandmother's death) by kind neighbors, all of whom were Protestants, so he was brought up in a Baptist atmosphere.

Tolstoi and Gandhi were the two great influences in his life. And *The Catholic Worker*. He came east last summer after a seven day fast, to make a six day retreat under Fr. Marion Casey, and it was this priest who baptized him, in Hutchinson, Minnesota, on November 17, on the feast of St. Gregory the Wondermaker.

While he visited with us, he won the hearts of all at *The Catholic Worker*. When he spoke in our back courtyard, the slum neighbors hung out of their windows to listen. He was silent for long periods when he worked on his book, "The Story of a Catholic Anarchist" and he talked for long hours when people wanted him to talk.

Tom Sullivan said that Ammon reminded him of Peter Maurin.

Now he is back in Phoenix, Arizona, where he hopes some day to start a House of Hospitality to be named in honor of the Italian anarchist, Vanzetti. He is a friend in that city of the southwest of bus driver and banker, of Mormon and Molokan and Indian. The pacifist and anarchist Hopi Indians count him as their friend and he has learned much from them too.

When we spoke of the Hopi Snake dance once, he said, "You can pet a snake, you know, but you must wet your finger first so it does not feel harsh. Maybe it purrs, I don't know." So he has reminded me of St. Francis, too. One of the girls at the house said that to her, he was like Daniel Boone.

In him is no class war, no hatred of any kind. He tosses the word "pipsqueak," a Shakespearean word, around rather freely, which is jarring to many, and he himself says of himself that he is a braggart. But he must speak of what he knows, and what he himself has done and can do. Now he has been made a child of God and heir to the kingdom, and he is going to daily communion to increase the grace that is in him, he will indeed exult like a giant to run the race. May he work more wonders than Gregory the Wonderworker.