

Story of a Legacy

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: After receiving \$500 in someone's will, explains why the Catholic Worker is not incorporated—the basis of the work is personal responsibility and seeing Christ in everyone who comes for help. Says "Ever to become smaller that is the aim." (DDLW #520).

Here is a story that began March 19, the feast of our patron, St. Joseph. Every now and then someone came in and said, "Did St. Joseph send you a present yet?" And then later in the day the telephone call came, from a lawyer, saying that someone had just died and left us around five hundred dollars in a will.

We were overjoyed. St. Joseph had behaved as we expected him to do on his feast day. We were broke and that five hundred dollars could have gone to the printer, to the coffee man, to the bread man or for an installment on the farm mortgage.

We went around beaming for days. Only twice before had we been willed anything. An auto worker in Hamtramck had willed us five dollars, and a Finn miner in Minnesota had told his mother when dying to send us five dollars. And here another legacy!

And then this situation arose. We were unincorporated and we did not wish to be incorporated. Nor did we intend to be, either for five hundred or five thousand dollars. It is hard for our friends and readers to get the point of this. It is difficult to explain, too. It is one of those ephemeral things, felt rather than understood, even on our part.

The way we feel about it is this. No one asked us to do this work. The mayor of the city did not come along and ask us to run a breadline or a hospice to supplement the municipal lodging house. Nor did Bishop or Cardinal ask that we help out the Catholic Charities in their endeavor to help the poor. No one asked us to start an agency or an institution of any kind. On our responsibility, because we are our brother's keeper, because of a sense of personal responsibility, we began to try to see Christ in each one that came to us. If a man was hungry, there was always something in the icebox. If he needed a bed—and we were crowded there was always a quarter [now risen to \$1.50] around to buy a bed on the Bowery. If he needed clothes, there were our friends to be appealed to, after we had taken the extra coat out of the closet first, of course. It might be someone else's coat but that was all right too.

Our houses grew up around us. Our bread lines came about by accident, our round-table discussion are unplanned, spontaneous affairs. The smaller the house, the smaller the group, the better. If we could get it down to Christian families, we would be content. Ever to become smaller that is the aim. And to talk about incorporating is somehow to miss the point of the whole movement.

So all right St. Joseph, if you have brought about clarification of thought by your little joke on your feast day, all right, we are grateful to you.

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