

On Pilgrimage - March 1959 - The Story of Jack English's First Mass

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Summary: Reports on her trip to Georgia for the first Mass of Jack English, now Fr. Charles, in the Trappists. Chronicles his life with the Catholic Worker, war years, and vocation. Then travels to Florida and reflects on the harsh conditions of migrant labor. Keyword: anarchism (DDLW #750).

The sun is pouring down and melting the heavy frost on the fields around me and the mocking birds are singing on the fences. Song sparrows make a clamor in the ivy on the gate house where the women are put up. But otherwise it is quiet down here in Conyers, Georgia, where the Trappist Monastery of our Lady of the Holy Ghost is situated and I'll try to write the story of Jack's ordination and first Mass. Jack is the first editor of **The Catholic Worker** to be ordained a priest, although men who worked in Houses of Hospitality have gone to the priesthood and into monasteries all over the country. I'd have a hard time counting them. I can't talk about women entering the convent because practically all the houses have been headed by men and this has been from the beginning, thanks to Peter Maurin being the founder and teacher of a movement of men.

I've known Jack English since he was a boy in college, the John Carroll University in Cleveland, and he was one of the first to start a house of hospitality. There was another house in Cleveland, the Blessed Martin House started by a bunch of high school kids, who got the house under way which was then headed for years by Bill Gauchat (who is still active in Avon, Ohio). This house that Jack started was the Sacred Heart House in a store and basement, in a colored section of Cleveland in one of the worst slums. I can remember to this day going down into that clean white-washed basement, brightly lit and lined with beds covered with neat spreads (Monica and Carlotta Durkin were helping) and the big rat that scurried across my feet as I went down the stairs. Another ran squealing along the wall at the end of the room. It was in the thirties and we had not started to climb out of the depression. (But now there are five million unemployed again.)

Our readers are well used to my digressions so they won't mind if I jump around and tell here how yesterday at six a.m. when I was waiting half asleep for a car to drive me over to the monastery for early Mass a few hours before the

ordination, Jack burst into the room to talk to me about integration in Georgia, and the editorial writer on the Constitution who has done so much of the cause. I was in no mood to talk about social justice and interracial justice at six in the morning, after four hours sleep and a twenty-six-hour bus trip from New York, non-stop. But just like with God, there is no time with Jack English, now Father Charles. I'll keep calling him Jack through these pages, because this story is specially designed to reach all those who knew him in the past, to let them know how it is now with him. After all, with 63,000 copies of **The Catholic Worker** going all over the world, and him writing for it for some years right after the war, there are many who will be interested.

When the war struck Jack was in it. His main interest had been interracial justice and the works of mercy, and books and reading and writing as well as tearing around and having a good time all the while. Somehow or other Jack missed out on the sadness and bitterness that struck other Catholic Workers when there were great arguments about war, "just wars" and whether conditions which made for a just war could be fulfilled, and about "purification of means" and means and ends; all of which discussion split up our houses and groups around the country. Or maybe it was just because John Cogley was the more articulate then, heading the house of hospitality in Chicago, as he was, and editing a fine paper, the **Chicago Catholic Worker**. Anyway it seemed no time at all that Jack was in uniform and of all things gunner on a bomber and on his way to England. He ran into an old Communist friend of mine in London, Charles Ashleigh, who had been one of the hundreds of I.W.W.'s arrested in Chicago during the First World War, and who had served a term of several years in Leavenworth (he had been sentenced to fifteen years, and then pardoned after the war). He had continued his Communist activities and had gone over to Russia, edited the Moscow Daily News for a time and then when the Second World War broke out, was doing public relations work in London, selling the Russian ally to the English people as it were. Jack ran into him in an English pub, and the two of them sent me a postal from that London bar. Jack with his usual effervescence had been telling the old Communist all about **The Catholic Worker**, and was delighted to discover one of my old comrades in Ashleigh. This morning I remembered him at Jack's Mass, wondering if he were alive or dead, but knowing just the same that those potent spiritual weapons of Father Charles would be reaching out to him, reaching farther than any intercontinental ballistic missile, but life-giving rather than death-bearing.

Jack was shot down over Rumania and held prisoner there and for a time our letters came back marked all over the envelope MISSING IN ACTION. Then we got word of him through the Red Cross. He was in a prisoner-of-war camp and the correspondence was resumed. He was rescued by the Russians, shipped into London again where he went through the worst of the blitz bombings.

Jack has always been maddeningly casual about his war and prison experiences, —all we knew was that he had an injury to his spine and many wounds which kept him in the hospital a year after he came home, and which rated him total

disability compensation from the government, and that his teeth were kicked in by a guard, and that what he didn't lose that way he did through starvation.

Anyway the day he returned to New York the first thing he said was that he wanted to wander down on the East Side and eat strawberries and sour cream such as he had enjoyed when he was first rescued from his prison camp in Rumania. As always around **The Catholic Worker**, there were so many visitors that one could not savor them singly. Armando Guzman from Mexico City, whom I had known in 1929, who with his sister Guillermina, had taken Tamar to the Zocalo every day so that I could write, came in at the same time. Armando wanted to thank me courteously for teaching him English then, so that now he was a translator for the New York Central and he went along with Jack and me to share our strawberries and sour cream, and sit on a park bench overlooking the East River while Jack poured out his talk, his enthusiasm, a Niagara of talk that dealt mostly with ideas, with books, so that it was hard to pin him down as to what he was going to do next.

I believe Charlie O'Rourke, God rest him, was the influence that kept Jack in New York. Anyway Tom Sullivan from the Chicago house returned from the South Pacific at that time, and he and Charles and Jack were cronies, and there they were, with Bob Ludlow and Joe Zarella and Gerry Griffin and Jack Thornton and a whole house full of young people returning from wars and conscientious objector camps and prisons and American Field Service, and David Mason and Arthur Sheehan and Stanley Vishnewsy and Michael Kovalak, Smoky Joe and Duncan Chisholm who had been there all along.

Anyway, the house of hospitality was full after all the lean war years when it took weeks to mail out the paper and there was still a breadline and a clothes room and on the farm a retreat house. Now there were so many people they were falling over each other.

Now that I look back on it, Jack was searching for his vocation then. He thought of the Dominicans in Providence and the Benedictines in New Jersey, and in between he was back again, with wild enthusiasms, books and people and ideas and a passionate desire for justice for the colored still deep in his being. Who would ever have thought he would finally choose the Trappists, the order of silence and hard manual labor? But of course he did not choose - - God chose him. How little we do ourselves, except mess things up, run around in circles, put all kind of obstacles in the way. But Jack was a "man of desire" as they called the prophet Daniel, and God likes such. He wanted everything, he wanted the abundant life and was straying all over the lot to find it. But oh the mystery of God's grace, that somehow or other, he was caught. Some casual visitor, a newspaper man came in and talked about Conyers and the Trappists starting there a foundation from Gethsemane, Kentucky where Abbot Dunne was our good friend who had said that he felt **The Catholic Worker** was a companion work to the Trappists.

It is eight years now since Jack came to the Trappists, and now, as I write,

he is an ordained priest offering a sacrifice of praise and adoration, and petition and penance for us all.

Five of his aunts, his sister, brother-in-law, his uncle, his niece and nephew, his friends Fr. Pierre Conway, O.P. and Father Larry O'Neill, Maryknoller were here and are here still, and Tom Sullivan and I representing the Catholic Worker. Tom flew in and flew out, since he had to get back to teaching his fifth grade kids, and Gerry Griffen loaned him the money which will take him three months to pay back out of the salary he gets.

"Don't say I was not present at your first Mass," Tom told Jack, "because after all, right after your ordination you con-celebrated with Bishop Hyland of Atlanta. That was your first Mass." Technically that is true but Jack, whom from now on I shall call Father Charles, insisted that his first Mass was this morning.

It was bitter cold as we got up at five, well below freezing and the red roads were frozen hard. But how it smelled like spring! Even at five-thirty there were dawn sounds in the air, the birds were clamorous.

This first Mass, a low requiem by special permission, was most specially for Fr. Charles' father and brother as well as all the living and dead of his family. "And if you will go over in your mind, and recall all those whom **you** wish to remember," he told us solemnly, "from now on, for the rest of my life, I will be remembering your intentions in each Mass I offer up."

Down the road and to the right from the gatehouse, past the little lake, and looking out over a gully full of trees, there is a little chapel, built completely by the monks, where Mass is offered each Sunday morning for some hundred or so of the neighbors around the Abbey. The building is of cement block and plywood. The benches and pews are all made at the monastery, also the iron candle sticks and flower holders on either side of the altar. The altar itself is the only thing not made on the place. It is a huge stone altar of granite, quarried and polished from a neighborhood quarry, a magnificent place of sacrifice.

It was here that Fr. Charles, clad in the black raw silk, hand-woven vestments from Prinknash Abbey in England sent to him by Natalie Darcy of Brooklyn College and Fordham, offered his first Mass alone, assisted by his uncle, Fr. Conway and Fr. O'Neil, his aunts, his sister and I. The requiem is a beautiful and a happy Mass and I joined in the prayers most heartily:

O God, whose property is ever to pity and to spare, have mercy on the souls of Thy servants and handmaids, and forgive them all their sins, that being loosed from the bonds of mortality, they may be found worthy to enter into life. . . . O God, the bestower of pardon and lover of man's salvation, we beseech Thy clemency, through the intercession of the Blessed Mary, ever a Virgin, and all thy saints, that brethren, kindred and benefactors of The Catholic Worker

movement who have passed out of this world may together enjoy everlasting happiness. . .

Consent, we beseech Thee, O Lord, that this oblation benefit the souls of Thy servants and handmaids, as Thou hast granted that by the offering of it the sins of all the world should be forgiven . . . O God Whose mercy is boundless, mercifully receive the prayers of our lowliness, and grant, through these sacraments of our salvation, to the souls of our brethren, kindred and benefactors eternal rest.

And now tomorrow morning there will be the first sung Mass in the monastery church and then during the day all of us visitors will depart, and the monks and brothers and the newly ordained priests who have been involved with visitors will settle down to the work of silence, of study, the manual work of building the permanent monastery, pushing wheel barrows of cement and rocks and gravel up long inclines, making and setting in stained glass windows, the carpentry work, the cobbling, the baking and cooking, the farming – all the activities which make a monastery self sufficient and prosperous, so that the benefits are spilled out in all directions over the countryside. And the hard work of prayer will go on, the seven hours a day beginning at two in the morning of chanting the psalms, the prayers, the hymns and canticles, the Masses of praise and worship, – offering Christ Himself, and with Him, themselves and all of us, – a worthy offering to God, creator of Heaven and Earth, in whose hands all things rest, in Whom is our peace. Father Charles English, pray for us all, as we do for you.

On to Florida

This afternoon we visited some of the migrant camps near Lake Worth and talked to some beautiful people, mothers and children, young fellows going to school and one home from the fields because of an injury. It's tomato picking time, one day they pick, and another they tie up the vines and they get to the field at seven in the morning and often have to wait until ten because of the dew on the vines before they can start picking. They earn six fifty a day and the wife earns five fifty and of course when the children are not in school they pick too and that increases the family earnings.

Back in Brownsville where one family came from, they got only three fifty a day. Too many workers, too many Mexicans. So this family of mother and father and six children set out on what they said was a three day trip from Texas. It was bitter cold a month ago, and all they had were their blankets, and they slept by the roadside.

What they were coming to was warm sunlight, the balmiest of breezes, orange trees in blossom and in fruit, and the mango trees in blossom perfuming the air. It is a sample of heaven, this Florida weather. No wonder their looks were

radiant, no wonder the mothers smiled as the children played in the dust of the road of the camp.

On either side were hovels or double tents, two rooms each. In them rickety oil stoves were smoking and smelling.

Down the lane, one water faucet for fifteen families, one of which had eighteen and another one twelve children and there were three toilets and one shower for all the families. The children looked clean and sweet and so did the mothers.

But oh the unspeakable shacks, the squalor, the cramped breathless living quarters! I suppose half of the children slept out under the stars or in the back seats of their cars.

Madeleine Krider, our friend in Florida, formerly of Staten Island, makes visits to the camps with clothes which friends have given her and when she opens the trunk of the car in the lane, all the women start spilling out of their shacks, and the children gather around laughing, and there is always something for everybody. Often the women need some household articles, small mattresses for the children, rubber sheets, a bit of blanket, pots and pans, a few dishes, always the odds and ends every house lacks. These people travel with only their clothes and blankets.

Yes, they have cars. Yes, some of them have portable television sets and radios and electric sewing machines. But none of them have a **home**. You can buy many second hand, reconditioned luxuries our American way of life teaches people to want. But the one thing these folks need is a home. A place of their own, a bit of soil, some "private property" a chance for a regular education for their children. And not much chance of ever getting it. We need them, so our economists tell us, to harvest our crops. A million and a half of them, which is a conservative estimate when you see the mothers and children.

Last night on the radio came the report of 700 stranded migrants, colored and white, in Nevada. The boll weevil had gotten the cotton crop in Arizona and they had moved north, lured probably by lying advertisements, to work the harvest, or do some other work there. But the work will not start for a month or so, and there they were starving, cold, without shelter. The governor declared a state emergency, national guards flew in with cots and tents and food, a great gesture of good will toward the poor in this sudden emergency. But when the emergency is over, what then?

Last year it was a very bad year here in Florida and there was a fund-raising drive around Belle Glade, Pahokee and thousands of dollars were raised. There was even some great sum left over this year to be administered for them. Over the radio the broadcaster talked of Secretary of Labor Mitchell calling for a minimum wage law and other benefits. There is talk of organizing these workers into unions. (Everyone who tried it in California and New Jersey were jailed after bloody strikes years ago.)

I have visited these workers from California, to Arkansas, to Florida and in

other sections of the country and their conditions constantly get worse – worse than they were when GRAPES OF WRATH was written and made into a movie.

The migrants pay \$8 a week rent for these hovels they live in. Del Ray camp was recently closed but it probably was not as bad as others, and the old tenants were forced into worse rural slums. It's just like the New York slums.

Madeleine told me of Negroes from Granada brought in on an agricultural contract by a grower, who had to pay back their passage. \$7 a week out of their pay; \$11.50 for their food and \$3 a week compulsory saving to be given back when they returned.

"I saw earnings of 54c, 72c, \$1.19 which was their weekly salary after these deductions," Madeleine said. "There were 200 brought here."

"Some camps want only men, no families, no cars. One worker said he was shanghaied from New Jersey. Asked to help drive a carload of workers down from the North, he suddenly found himself **locked in** with other men & women, driven night and day until they reached Florida."

Where meals are not served as to the Granadans, people must buy everything at the chain stores. With one-crop farming, tomatoes, egg plant, beans, – one cannot live only on one. Madeleine often carried surplus from one camp to another.

Lover of the Poor

She has been doing this work ever since she moved down there, giving her time and strength, using what slender resources she has. She could stand some help for her works of mercy, for the gas she uses up over the months for instance.

Some of the poor she has met on the dumps. Some eke out a living when there is no farm work by collecting metal or other trash. Some build shelters of cardboard and tin and old wood salvaged.

She became acquainted with some of these families when she herself went to the dump to retrieve some uprooted trees to plant on her own property.

I was reminded of Abbe Pierre and his work when she told me of going to the garbage cans of the chain stores and retrieving damaged goods, soap powder which had gotten wet, canned goods dented or with labels stained. You can feed many hungry people by such means.

Solutions

The immediate solution will always be the works of mercy. We are commanded by Jesus himself in the 25th chapter of St. Matthew to perform them. But

there is more study to be done, a long range view to take, to understand how far-reaching works of mercy can be.

Vinoba Bhave asked the rich to give to the poor, and the poor to give to each other. Many villages in India now hold all things in common. His Bhoodhan movement has been going on since Gandhi's death. He walks all over India, is walking as I write, a prophet in our times. He has converted the leading Socialist of India. Nehru is trying to work out some of his program.

The absolutist begins a work. Others take it up and try to spread it.

Communes

In this country too the final solution will be the commune but how it will be brought about is in God's hands. He may permit a bloody revolution.

Some one on the radio was shouting about a six billion a year government subsidy for our industrialized farms. Some big cotton growers in Arkansas, Mississippi, California collected millions in price supports.

And there is criticism over welfare programs, the pittance for the poor! Defrauding the worker of his hire is a sin crying to heaven for vengeance.

Not Legislation

There are plenty of laws about housing but I know urban and moral slums, having lived in them. As Peter Maurin says laws are made for the wicked who do not obey them. The good do not need them.

Not Organized Labor

The AFL-CIO suggests a 35 hr. week, but says nothing about "moonlighting" which is overtime – holding two jobs. The old I.W.W. condemned such practices when men were unemployed. As Peter Maurin said, "organizers do not organize themselves" and he recommended personalist communitarianism.

Philosophical Anarchism

The Catholic Worker, in the face of these evils, recommends a study of Kropotkin's **Fields, Factories and Workshops**, of Martin Buber's **Paths in Utopia**.

Proudhon wrote in 1864 – "Anarchy is a form of government or constitution in which the principle of authority, police institutions, restrictive or repressive

measures, bureaucracy, Taxation, etc., are reduced to their simplest terms.”
“Less representation and more self-government.”

And Landauer, in 1909 wrote: “The real transformation of society can only come in love, in work, and in stillness.”

Rest Ranch

Dr. William Esser, of Lake Worth, Florida, formerly of Pittsburgh, is one of the readers of **The Catholic Worker**, and when he has generously sent offerings for our work he also always included an invitation for us to visit his Rest Ranch. Jack English’s ordination gave me the opportunity this winter to take advantage of his kind offer and for the past week I have enjoyed the blazing sun of Florida in one of the most perfect winters they have ever had here. The first part of my visit was a fast, and I can assure you it is much easier to fast in the sun and good air of Florida than in cold New York.

Surrounded by flowery trees, in a mango grove there, are a dozen or so small houses, with single and dormitory rooms. He usually has about twenty guests of every religion, though he is a Catholic and drives his Catholic guests to daily Mass.

Lying out in deck chairs in sun or shade, resting, reading, praying, – this is an ideal setting for a retreat, especially if one begins one’s visit with a fast. Priests and nuns have made fasts which extended into several weeks here and regained strength on the delicious fruits, vegetables, salads, nuts and dairy foods provided.

One priest we know fasted here for 28 days. Prayer and fasting go together traditionally in the Church, and both Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave have set us an example in the present day. It is for the health of body and soul, as the Missal in many a prayer through Lent assures us.

In the face of the present crisis in the world, we need to re-learn these lessons of penance, and Dr. Esser’s school is a happy place to do this. He himself is a devout man and his vocation is a special one.

This winter in his charity he has passed on to the Mexican migrants mattresses and beds, chairs and many other needed articles.

We are happy and grateful that he is a friend and reader of **The Catholic Worker**.