

Bill Gauchat: The Way of Peace

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1975, 3.

Summary: Talks of means and ends by juxtaposing news of the end of the Vietnam war with an obituary for Bill Gauchat. A close follower of Peter Maurin, Bill Gauchat and his family exemplified a life built around all the works of mercy. (DDLW #551).

My usual column, On Pilgrimage had already been written when the war in Vietnam came to an end—**and we stand defeated**. I am happy to hear news commentators, almost all of them, talking of means and ends. Jacques Maritain, philosopher, and Peter Maurin, poor peasant and teacher, both taught us since 1933 that we must work towards “the purification of our means” to achieve the aims reviewed in this May Day issue.

Bill Gauchat, who was Peter’s follower almost from the first exemplified these ideas in his life. He died April 16, after years of agony with cancer of the spine, and donated his body to science. He was cremated, his ashes buried in the little garden paradise which surrounds what their house of hospitality has become. Our Lady of the Wayside, a home for brain damaged, crippled and retarded infants and children. I have come back from the funeral Mass which was both sorrowful and joyful.

Most of us wept at the beauty of it.

Bill met Peter in Cleveland during the depression, during the earliest days of the Catholic Worker. Peter was deeply impressed with him, partly because he had graduated from the School of Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto. Bill had started the Blessed Martin House in Cleveland and had the help of many grade school and high school students. His wife Dorothy was one of the high school students who spent all her spare time at the house. Later she went to Ade Bethune at Newport, Rhode Island, as an apprentice, as many other young Catholic Worker girls had done, including my own daughter. Bill and Dorothy married and soon moved to the farm at Avon, Ohio, which had been given to the work by one of our benefactors. Here their six children were born. But their work in the CW movement went on.

Works of Peace

When we talk of means and ends, the most striking means in the world today are the means of war and the means of the Works of Mercy as Jesus taught his disciples. All the wars we have seen since 1933 when the Catholic Worker began—the Ethiopian War, the Spanish Civil War, the second World War, the Korean War, and now the Vietnam War—have not achieved any of the ends we as a people have wanted, or been told we were working for.

But the work Bill Gauchat spent his life for, the work of his wife and his children, now many of them married and with children of their own, still goes on. He has fed the hungry, clothed the naked. They continue feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the most helpless. In fact they performed all the works of mercy in one way or another. Their work is a miracle in our day. The Church always includes the spiritual works of mercy as well as the corporal, and when I think of them, I think of the summer schools Bill used to hold on that small farm, during Peter's lifetime, when an altar for Mass was set up in a field, and classes were held, and conferences and discussions went on. This was indeed "enlightening the ignorant, counselling the doubtful, comforting the afflicted," holding up achievable goals which all of us could work for.

Peter used to quote Lenin as saying, "There could be no revolution without a theory of revolution," a peaceful and healing revolution, preparing people to offer their lives for others in the ways described in the Sermon on the Mount.

Bill Gauchat's papers and diaries and conversations with Peter Maurin, and all the books Peter recommended and those about Peter, are contained in a library at Our Lady of the Wayside built by one of Bill's sons—a fitting memorial for this man who literally experienced that teaching of Jesus, "Unless the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, itself remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit." His last suffering years were a prolonged dying. It is good that during that dying he also had the joy of seeing some of its fruits.