

# On Pilgrimage - May 1956

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*Summary: Responds to a newspaper article about herself and the Catholic Worker movement. Disagrees with elements of the articles, in particular the description of those who are served and the workers as “derelicts.” Urges an understanding of the poor that embraces Christ’s message. Discusses Orwell’s and Tolstoi’s views of the poor. Describes the rich life of those who participate in the Catholic Worker movement and contrasts elements of the Worker program to that found in city missions. (DDLW #706).*

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## Reactions to Publicity

In a way it is a matter for rejoicing when suddenly a great deal of attention, unsolicited, is given to the work, by newspapers, radio, television and news weeklies. It demonstrates the fact that the words of the Holy Father calling on all men to perform the works of mercy, to share their goods with the poor, find a response; that there is a great store of goodness and generosity in everyone. At the same time, there is something distressing too about publicity. As the philosopher said when he received a great deal of applause - - “what have I done wrong now?” The normal life of the Christian is one of suffering and failure, the folly of the cross, and in the acceptance of these there is growth and progress and fulfillment and unspeakable joy. The beatitudes, the blessings of the sermon on the mountain are all for the poor, the sufferer, the persecuted, the despised. And when we are getting so much favorable attention, we are not the blessed, according to the gospel! Oh, the paradox of Christianity!

But there are plenty of thorns in the roses and I’ll enumerate a few. Just as I always talk about Peter or Ammon, when I am illustrating ideas in relation to the work (and about others too), so the reporters chose to write about me. Since I also have written about myself, and used the personal approach as all women reporters are taught to do, I should not object. But one always does. One can do oneself justice, perhaps, and no one else can. Undoubtedly pride enters in here, but I hasten to disclaim this (some more pride!) and say that it is the work and the ideas of the work which are not presented correctly. Which is very true too.

If some aspects of my past life are brought out (the reformed sinner) I should not object or even reply as to whether what is said is true or not true. "We never get a lick amiss," my mother used to tell us when she had slapped the wrong child in some family fray. So if I am blamed for what I did not do, I have too often escaped blame for what I did do.

As for my daughter and her family being brought into it: if they objected I would not write about them as I do in the pages of *The Catholic Worker*. But they lead so retired a life, David with his job in a factory and his tremendous library of distributist books and Tamar with her children and her crafts (spinning, weaving, hooked rugs and basket making this last winter), that such publicity only brings them a sense of community with other families with similar ideas around the country. There is a community of correspondence set up and so the good life is furthered still more.

## College Students

Then as to the people themselves with whom I work and with whom I live. The recent *Daily News* article did speak of the hundreds of young people from colleges all over the country who have kept coming to us over the years for periods of three months to five or ten years. During the Easter vacation there was Al Lingus from Chicago (now in the seminary) who has spent summers with us. There is Frank Lakey, a member of the St. Louis group of Catholic Workers, now in a prep seminary. There is Frances Ferguson, 19, who came with a weekend case and a volume of Donne's poetry. "I didn't write for fear you would not let me come." And another young girl of 18 is coming soon. Mostly it has been young men because they are freer to pick up and leave city and family and job. "The News" wonders what they find with us. One way to explain it is to remind people of the Quaker work camps which are made up of young people working in centers in Europe, Mexico, South America, and here in this country, among the poor, doing them some service, living with them, eating as they do, learning from them while they try to give in exchange some of their youth and strength. People come to the CW in the same way, only not for a weekend, but for much longer periods. Some feel that they wish to dedicate their lives to the work, or some aspect of it; others are never sure, and stay on indefinitely, waiting for inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or just "for something to turn up," like Micawber. Anyway, they bring youth, beauty, stimulus and also their muscle and blood to the movement. Also they bring an element of war, the war between worker and scholar. The worker feels the "treason of the intellectual" and the scholar does not understand the reserve and the criticism of the worker. "But the workers must become scholars and the scholars workers." Peter Maurin used to say.

Another thing, we would not be having so many young people coming to the work, nor the steady cooperation of the workers if I were in any sense a "boss" as the News said. I'm the mother of a family, it is true, so I suppose there is some authoritarian aspect in my attitude. But everyone knows how the children

get around the mother. We don't believe in the use of force, people voluntarily give their cooperation to the work, and they do their job as they please, when they please. The one realm in which I do have the last say, is the **Catholic Worker** itself. I do choose what is to be published and what is to be left out. The mistakes we make, I am responsible for, and many an editorial slip I have made, many a mistake. We can just pick ourselves up and go on.

## Derelicts

The greatest misery of the newspaper articles however, for me and for others, is the categorizing of our fellow workers as derelicts. In our houses of hospitality we do not use the word bum or derelict. As little Sheila Murphy, eldest child of Louis Murphy who heads the Detroit work, said last I was there, "Bum is a bad word."

The Murphies live with the people they receive at the **St. Martha** House and the **St. Francis** House. I brought up my own daughter with those men and women who have been so categorized, and only yesterday Tamar was remarking on what a sense of security she had as a child in such a community as ours. (John Filliger, our farmer, used to take her for rides on the horses and the hay wagon and she followed him and the plough, even as her own children are doing now.)

We protest this attitude toward the poor, the poor in health, in mind and body, the poor in bodily and spiritual goods. We have lived long enough with them, (for we are now beginning our 24<sup>th</sup> year) to realize more and more that to love our brother is to love Christ in them, to see and find Christ in them. "They knew Him in the breaking of bread." All men are brothers. "Call no man Master for ye are all brothers," Jesus Christ said. In reviewing my books on two occasions it was suggested that mine was a perverse and morbid love of the gutter. On one occasion I was called a Necrophiliac! But if you look for Christ you look for Christ you will find Him; (seek and ye shall find) and we have found Him, and found Him quickly, in the poor.

Fr. Regamey in his famous book **POVERTY**, said that Christ left Himself to us in the Blessed Sacrament, in "when two or three are gathered together in My name" (community) and in the poor, "inasmuch as ye have done it unto these my least brethren, ye have done it unto Me. He has said these things Himself, and He is Truth.

There is great talk about the Bowery these days and what to do with the poor. Push them around until they get lost? There are suggestions of turning Ellis Island into a vast shelter for the men of the Bowery. Here is imprisonment indeed. Stay here, or else! I suppose that would mean another island, Riker's island, where there is a prison for 5000 men, most of them the poor.

This month I picked up two books, **Down and Out in Paris and London**, by Orwell, and Tolstoi's **What to Do?** The beginning of the latter is the discovery

that in Moscow the man who begs is put into prison. That discovery so shocked Leo Tolstoy that he began his book with a discussion of how a man can be imprisoned for asking help from his brother in the name of Christ. The Orwell book contains the terrible story of his starvation in Paris and in London, and the jobs he held in Paris in sub-basements of great hotels and restaurants which brought him enough to eat but which also brought him work under such inhuman conditions that it could be only considered a major cause for the dereliction of all the men the authorities are discussing who live along the Bowery and the Skid Rows of the country. Orwell discusses the lodging houses in London with their common kitchens and the homeliness of such community but there is also the unspeakable dirt and filth, and crowded conditions so that it was impossible ever to get a good night's sleep. The malnutrition after years of bread and tea, the lack of sleep, the exhaustion attendant on just wandering around from pillar to post - - all this graphically described by Orwell so that one would never forget it. All these men who are in the Welfare Department should pick up this book as required reading.

The conclusions Orwell comes to are my own. Provide many more, smaller, cleaner and more comfortable lodging houses where men can sleep in cubicles rather than in hordes or even with one or two others. A man needs to be alone when he sleeps, Orwell says. God bless him for his love and understanding of the poor, even though he never mentions the word love. Provide them with enough decent food so that they are not always hungry and thinking of food and drink. Forgive them seventy times seven. A man has a natural right to food, clothing and shelter. Of course they will fall again and again, as we all do in this life. The just man, that is the holy man, falls seven times daily, scripture says. But keep up this sort of treatment and you will see men working again, finding work to do, if only the work, the honest work of keeping such hostels going. Orwell also suggests rural hostels where the men could work to grow their own food.

Peter Maurin used to say that a man should not have to work more than four hours of manual labor a day, and that more hours should be spent in study, in discussion, in doing the things he wants to do. When there is a synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation there beauty and peace and truth spring up.

I have only to look around me as I write this article on the feast of St. Benedict Joseph Labre, to see the illustration of what I am writing about. Here at Peter Maurin farm we have a chapel, we have the Blessed Sacrament. Those who choose come to pray the rosary and compline at night. Half of them leave after the rosary. When we have Mass there, the attendance is usually eighteen of our twenty-two residents. If only a few came, there still would never be any questioning. In the realm of religion, none is asked what he believes, no one is asked to participate. But we have grace at meals of course. If you don't want to say grace, come in a little later, or hang around in the hall outside until it's over. Besides the city only the CW believes in such religious freedom. The missions have services.

There is a good library of every kind of book from St. John of the Cross to

Agatha Chrystie! There is enough discussion of books at meal time to constitute a course in the thinking of the day. The discussion of many issues such as war and peace, man and the state, the racial problems of the world, all can bring about intense discussion. There is some music, when Hans Benning, or Hans Furth or someone who sings is visiting. We have a recorder, too, and a good symphony library, and there is always the radio. (No television here.)

There is sculpture rather than painting. There is Chris' crucifix, Eve Smith's carving of our Lady and the children, Haig's Holy Family, Tina's St. Joseph and the Blessed Mother. There is Rita's first piece of stained glass, and Sister Prisca's of the crucifixion. She used to be with the CW group in Rochester and is now at Regina Laudis. There is Leonard making a loom and a potter's wheel, and Chris making a rear seat contraption out of the trunk of the Mercury convertible recently given us which reminds one of a pony cart and can hold five children. There is the spinning and weaving and knitting and baking and cooking. Not to speak of the collecting the children are always doing in the woods, fields and sea shore.

Yes, all of us derelicts have a rich and beautiful life, this life of voluntary poverty on the land. And as for us derelicts in the city, I assure you there is no mission smell, no smell of disinfectants and if there is the smell of the poor, it brought from the miserable lodging houses which are like those Orwell describes in his book. It is not native to our own House of Hospitality which is scrubbed freshly in the morning and well aired what with the bread line, the clothes line, the soup line and all the visitors coming in and out. It has dignity, that old house, and it is painted clean. The \$25,000 - - that gigantic sum which is the cause of our success story - - is going to install our sprinkler system and self closing doors, new stairs, etc. We have raised that sum before, five years ago, to be exact, when we purchased the place. And we have always tried to feed well, and keep a comfortable home. After all, we are a community, a family, and God so loved us that as the psalmist said, He considered us little less than the angels, not as derelicts.

Well, everyone in the house sighs and says, "If it is saving the house, and keeping the city from closing us down, let them call us what they choose." But just the same, Houses of Hospitality are dealing with men, temples of the Holy Ghost, men made to the image and likeness of God, men made for happiness, and in our houses of hospitality, we are finding it, together.