

On Pilgrimage - July-August 194

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Summary: Contrasts the hustle and bustle around Maryfarm—retreats and visitors—with the quiet life of her daughter Tamar’s farm in West Virginia. While peaceful and meditative, rural life often means loneliness, hard work, and poverty. (DDLW #264).

June and July I have spent on the farm at Newburgh where the retreats have been going on apace. There was the study week in June, with Fr. Victor White and Fr. Pierre Conway, Dominicans, and then retreats with Fr. Taggart, Vincentian; Fr. Fiorentino, Msgr. Betowski, and Fr. Veale, Josephite. One of the retreats was a family retreat, though we had not expected it to be, but the long weekend of the fourth of July was irresistible and there were four families, one with five, two with two and one with one child.

Hans had just finished laying the floor of the barn in time, and putting up the stairs and screening it in. Michael Kovalak helped, as he always does, in a crisis, and Bob Campbell showed up in time to make the screens for the windows and the doors. The great difficulty of the weekend lay in the fact that a nest of swallows were shut in by the screen door, and it had to be left open so that the mother could fly in and out with food. By the end of the weekend, both mother and father bird were flying around teaching their young ones to fly. So now the screen door can be closed again.

Although the only family retreat was planned for Labor Day weekend, and we are receiving reservations for that all the time, still another family of six has asked to come for the mid August retreat, and now there is a mixup as to whether we can have it on August 15th or whether it must be changed to the 22nd. There will be a p.s. on this story giving the final last minute date.

This has been a month of much housekeeping, extra responsibilities sent to us for care, extra people arriving we did not expect, including two extra retreats not scheduled. Among the guests were Clara Faviano, Edith Pietraniello, Anne Ricupero and Frances Palmiotti with their own children and some others besides, making fourteen in all. They were Celia Ricupero, Chickie Sclafani, Jimmy Deodato, Anthony Deodato, Cosmo Ricupero, Anthony and Mary Ann Pietraniello, Nicholas and Morris Palmiotti and Frank Faviano, all from Mott Street, and they liked the Newburgh farm so much that they thought it would be wonderful

if some of the neighbors would chip together and buy an old inn which is for sale down the road. We wish they would. We could practice mutual hospitality, each taking the others' overflow, not to speak of enjoying the wonderful Italian cooking. The girls made spaghetti while they were on their Friday to Monday visit, and I was an appreciative guest since in addition to taking over the new barn dormitory, they used the canning kitchen and cooked their own meals. They arrived the same weekend as Msgr. Betowski and his retreat group, but Msgr. Betowski is well used to the Catholic Worker and its friends, and joined them one evening after conference, for coffee and conversation.

Another event I must not forget to mention this month is the arrival of a baby girl, Amelia Ann in the family of George and Rose Giordano, who live upstairs from us. Jack and Mary Thornton also have a baby girl, Mary Anne, born in the month of the feast of St. Anne, July 18. They are on their own farm at Herman, Pa., and near enough to the Center for Christ the King so that Mary can help by bread baking, so Father Hessler says.

"Your column will not be a pilgrimage this month," one of the men on the farm says, "since you have not been off the place for two months almost." I had begun to feel not only that life was like a "night spent in an uncomfortable inn," as St. Teresa has it (and the weather has been so very hot, that the group of us who sleep up under the roof have felt that our inn is indeed not what it should be in the way of comfort) but I had also begun to feel like an inn keeper. And then suddenly, on a moment's notice, I went to West Virginia for a five day visit to my daughter and her family.

Walter Vischer and I drove down in the Chevrolet '32, and we started off at dawn on a rainy humid morning. Going through Montgomery and Port Jervis and over through the mining section, running south of towns such as Tamaqua and Pottsville, we hit the superhighway and travelled along it at a smooth clip of thirty-five miles an hour (the car would not make more) until we reached Fort Littleton where we emerged, thirty miles or so from Tamar and Dave's. We had no lights on the car, and went through four tunnels with fear and trembling. The first two seemed barely lit and we stayed in back of another car. We were off the highway by three o'clock and in another hour or so, travelling due south, we reached the Rock Gap district south of Berkeley Springs where Tamar and Dave have their seventy acre farm. Our only troubles had been two flat tires. Tamar was out berrying and during the few days I was there, we picked blackberries and dew berries and ate berry short cake, and did up berries. The orchard had some early apples and the babies, Rebecca and Susannah, brought in pails of them which we made into apple jelly which with goat's milk cheese goes most delightfully on whole wheat bread. When we were not doing up jams and jellies, we were down in the brook which is deep enough to swim in, and shallow enough, with a good sand bank for the children to play on, so it was a vacation indeed. I do not know of a happier way to spend an afternoon than sitting in a shallow brook with babies paddling happily around. There were little crawfish on the bottom, little minnows darting between your fingers as you try to catch them,

boat flies on the surface and beautiful blue dragonflies flying just above the water. There were neither mosquitoes nor flies nor gnats. The sun warmed waters of the brook made up for all the “pail baths” we had been taking through the heat. We washed the children’s clothes before we went back to the house, and we picked Indian pipes and pennyroyal as we went back through the field.

Within a radius of a mile, there are four or five farms for rent either for five or ten dollars a month. The houses are livable in, and if one owned them (the price range is from two to three thousand) repairs could be done little by little. The ground is good bottom land. There are streams for fishing, and there is hunting. There are pines and black walnut and locust on the gentle hills and there is pulp wood to be cut for selling and plenty of wood for the fires in Winter. Taxes are low, and there are no gas or electric bills. But, and here is the rub, the nearest town, of 1,500 inhabitants, is twelve miles away with its Church and schools and hospital. The larger towns of Hagerstown, Martinsburg and Winchester, are each about thirty miles away. But it’s surprising how much company one has, how neighborly people are. And the joy for the children in such surroundings! But there is a price to pay for all this beauty and that price is a willingness to accept the poverty of the people on the land. Old houses, oil lamps, wood heat, water to be carried in pails, the tattle tale grey of clothes so washed, and the quiet, the solitude of life with neither radio, newspaper or telephone, and where the daily mail becomes the event of the day.

People are more afraid of such a life than they are of the atom bomb! And so Peter talked of agronomic universities, farming communes, so that people could go in groups, and in groups hold each other up. Man is not made to live alone, he is a social being, so where there is a crowd they flock together. Peter used to say, “they are not communitarians, they are gregarious.”

Let us hope that Maryfarm at Newburgh will give a taste for the simplicity of life on the land, and the courage to face it, and that other Maryfarms throughout the country will be performing the same function. A place to make retreats, to learn to meditate, to think in the heart, “to be quiet and see that I am God,” a place to learn to work and a place to go from, as Apostles, and make a life for the family.

P.S.: Okay for August 15th.