

On Pilgrimage - November 1960

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Summary: Notes visitors and correspondence. Responds to letters of criticism of their returning interest to the city (see Doc # 776). Says they are propagandists for principles, trying by gestures to work out truths of faith, a spiritual weapon. Visits Tamar in Vermont and describes how the children help. Lauds self-sufficiency on the land. (DDLW #775).

Diary of the month. On Sunday, October 9th Fr. Foley of Brooklyn came to Peter Maurin Farm with a group of Puerto Ricans, and two sisters in a bus and they had a picnic lunch, conferences and supper with us in the diningroom-library. Stuart Sandberg and Walter Kerell and I went over the make up of the paper for October which went to press the next day. Ralph Madsen and Ed Forand are also going to study make up. From which it will be seen that there are a number of new members of our Catholic Worker family during the last six months. There is also Jean Walsh, Mary Lathrop and Jacques Baker. Our erring editor Bob Steed is wandering talking around England and we do not hear from him. After a few postals cards he gave up writing altogether. We advise him to keep a diary, even of only a few lines. He will never be a foreign correspondent at this rate. Or a writer, (The day before we went to press, we received a letter, see page 3.)

This diary of my own will be as much about the Peter Maurin Farm and the beach as about Spring street and my travels. Which this month meant three days away, two with Tamar and the children and a day of recollection at Mary Réparatrice convent on 29th street.

Another Sunday on the farm, Helen Dolan and five Puerto Ricans visited. Also Caroline Gordon and Louise Morse from Princeton and Leon Paul from Brooklyn to talk about Edith Stein the Carmelite philosopher, and martyr. It was a mild fall afternoon and we sat out under the old pear tree by the chapel. Irene Mary Naughton, one of our former editors is staying with Helen at present and is going to be in charge of a group training to go to the lay mission centers in Central and South America.

We hear from Judith and we are so impressed by her faithfulness in writing that we must put her back on the list of editors as our student editor. She is getting her Masters at the University of Virginia, where her father heads the law department.

“My work is going well,” she writes. “I’m very busy at it. My class report on the Bolshevik theory of self determination went well. It is a fascinating subject. I’m about to read a biography of Rosa Luxemburg. Despite her belief in violent revolution and her strict Marxism she was apparently an extremely gentle and loving woman. One man said more like Gandhi than Lenin. Maybe I could do a short piece on her for the CW. The second week in November I shall probably go to a special conference of students on the sit-ins at Highlander. I’ll try to send up a report on the meeting and on Highlander’s present place in its struggle with the state. There are about a dozen things I’d like to write on! As usual my interests are all over the place.”

Yes, we would like an article on Rosa Luxemburg. We greatly admired her too. If one believed in war, revolutionary war to change the world would be acceptable: to do away with poverty, to work towards ownership and responsibility of the workers for the means of production, what the pope called the deproletariatization of the workers, building up a society where the principle of subsidiarity would be in effect (the anarchist society where all men are responsible and instead of striving for power seek to follow Christ in washing the feet of each other.)

I have been asked by JUBILEE to write an article on Christian anarchism and I may get around to it yet. But when I tried to answer the questions of a priest who is chaplain of a mental hospital he wrote back very cruelly that he could see what state my mind was in! But journalists and agitators have a particular job. Let the students and researchers, the economists and theorists try to elaborate on these ideas.

Translating the idea

It is not easy, having acted upon principle, to explain it in ways acceptable and understood by others. An instance is our recent sending back the interest on the money given us for St. Joseph’s house on Chrystie street.

During the course of the month we received a few letters, not very many, of criticism of our act. One letter from a generous benefactor who had given us a large sum when her father died, pointed out that if her parent had not invested his money wisely she and her mother would not have had anything left to live on; also that we probably received many donations which came from dividends, interest, etc.

I only try to answer as best I can. But sometimes one confuses others the more by trying to answer objections. When we wrote our letter to the city, and published it in the paper, we also printed some excerpts from the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on interest and money lending. We used some of Peter Maurin’s easy essays on the subject, and an article by Arthur Sheehan on credit unions, which however, ask for a small interest on their loans. How can this be reconciled with the “gesture” we made of returning to the city the large check which represented the interest for year and a half on the money paid us for our property on Chrystie street. First of all, we asked with Chesterton, whose money

is this interest which the city was paying us? Where did it come from? Money does not breed money, it is sterile.

Of course we are involved, the same as everyone else, in living off interest. We are all caught up in this same money economy. Just as “God writes straight with crooked lines,” so we too waver, struggle on our devious path—always aiming at God, even though we are conditioned by habits and ancestry, etc. We have free will, which is our greatest gift. We are free to choose and as we see more clearly, our choice is more direct and easier to make. But we all see through a glass darkly. It would be heaven to see Truth face to face.

We are publishing a paper in which ideas are discussed and clarified, and illustrated by act. So we are not just a newspaper. We are a revolution, a movement, Peter Maurin used to say. We are propagandists of the faith. We are the Church. We are members of the Mystical Body. We all must try to function healthily. We do not have the same function, but we all have a vocation, a calling. Ours is a “prophetic” one as many priests have said to us. Pope John recently, July 30, cited the courage of John the Baptist as an example for today. Prophets made great gestures, did things to call attention to what they were talking about. That was what we did, we made a gesture, when we sent back the money to the city. It was calling attention to a great unsolved problem which we are all involved in. Church, State, corporation, institution, individual.

There is no simple solution. Let the priests and the economists get to work on it. It is a moral and an ethical problem. We can work on the lowest level, the credit union in the parish, the union, on the missions, etc. Through the credit union families have been taught to resist the skilful seductions of the advertising men and by doing without many things, to attain to ownership, homes, workshops, tools, small factories and so on. These things have happened in Nova Scotia, in missions throughout the world and this is one way to combat what the bishops call the all-encroaching state. It is the beginnings of the decentralist society.

So primarily, our sending back the money was a gesture. It was the first time we had to do with so large a sum of money. We were being reimbursed by the city, and generously, as far as money went, for the house and our improvements on it. Twelve years ago we paid \$30,000 for the house, money which our many friends throughout the country sent to us. When I was sentenced as a slum landlord (I am under suspended sentence now) and forced to make all kinds of changes to an old house which had no violations on it when we bought it six years before, we again with the aid of our friends and readers, put \$24,000 into the house. (Such items as steel self-closing doors cost \$150 apiece.) With wooden floors in the halls, wooden stair railings and wooden stairs, the place remained as much of a fire trap as before, in reality. Our two fire escapes were the real necessities and one of them they forced us to take down! But one cannot argue with bureaucrats.

When two years later they took over the property by the right of eminent domain because a subway extension was going through they reimbursed us of course.

The lawyers who handled the deal for all the property owners on the block were very generous with us and only took 5% for their work. When after a year and a half we were paid, it was very generously. One can argue that the value of the property went up, that the city had the 18 months use of our money, that money purchases less now and so on. The fact remains the city was doing what it could to pay off each and every tenant in the two tenement houses from which they were being evicted, giving bonuses, trying to find other lodgings though these were usually unacceptable being in other neighborhoods or boroughs.

We agree that slums need to be eliminated but that an entire neighborhood which is like a village made up of many nationalities should be scattered, displaced,—this is wanton cruelty, and one of the causes of the juvenile delinquency of our cities. Also, it is terribly bad and ruthless management on the part of the city fathers.

Is Robert Moses responsible? He is the planner. But he deals recklessly with inanimate brick and cement at the expense of flesh and blood. He is walking ruthlessly over broken-hearted families to make a great outward show of a destroyed and rebuilt city. He has been doing what blockbusters and obliteration bombing did in European and British cities. Right now an entire neighborhood just south of Tompkins Square where some of our poor friends live is being demolished and the widows and fatherless are crying to heaven. The city fathers try to recompense them, try to give them bonuses to get out quickly. But what good does the money do them when there is no place to go? They do not want to go to another neighborhood or even to another block. Actually, as piled-up furniture on the streets testifies, many cling to their poor homes until the last moment, and probably forfeit the two or three hundred dollars they are offered, rather than be exiled. That money means as much to them, as the two or three thousand did to us.

Of course the great problem is to build quickly and economically

instead of finding a place for whole buildings of families while the work is going on. They talk about doing things economically, yet money is poured out like water in all directions and scandals are always being unearthed of cheating and graft in high places. This extends down to the smallest citizen too, who is trying to get in on the big deal and get his, from the building inspector who expects to be tipped to the little veteran around the corner who is speculating in real estate by buying and improving and renting and then selling back his property to the city at exorbitant prices. “It doesn’t matter if it is going to be torn down in a year or so,” he assured us. “Rent out all the apartments and stores and then you ask more from the city.” Big deal! Everyone is trying to get in on the Moses big deal.

So to put it on the natural but often most emotional plane of simple patriotism, love of country or city, this feeling too prompted us to send back the interest. We do not want to participate in this big deal. “Why are there wars and contentions among you? Because each one seeketh his own.”

We considered this a gesture too towards peace, a spiritual weapon which is translated into action. We cannot talk about these ideas without trying to put them into practice though we do it clumsily and are often misunderstood.

We are not trying to be superior, holier than thou. Of course we are involved in paying taxes, in living on money which comes from our industrial capitalist way of life. But we can try, by voluntary poverty and labor, to earn our living, and not to be any more involved than we can help. We, all of us partake in a way in the sin of Saphira and Ananias, by holding back our time, our love, our material resources even, after making great protestations of “absolutism.” May God and you, our readers, forgive, us. We are in spite of all we try to do, unprofitable servants.

To the Land

To turn to a lighter subject, long though this ON PILGRIMAGE already is. I had a delightful two-day visit with my daughter in Vermont, after speaking to representatives of twenty New England Catholic Colleges, near Worcester. David, my son-in-law is working as hotel clerk in nearby Bellows Falls and while visiting him there, I had the pleasure of meeting Karl Meyer’s father who is Democratic Congressman from Vermont. Karl is head of our Chicago Work. David gets home only in the middle of the week on days off which means the children have a heavy responsibility as regards the farm. It is wonderful to see Eric and Nickie up at six thirty milking the cow, putting the calves out to pasture, feeding the pig and the chickens and then with peanut butter and honey sandwiches and milk for breakfast (sometimes they can be induced to have an egg) dash off the 3/4 mile down the road to the school bus. They are gone, six of the children, from seven thirty to four each day, and that leaves Martha, five, and Hilaire, three, to do chores at home. They are willing workers. When we need more wood for the Franklin stove in the living room, they keep bringing it in until the floor is covered with it. The sorcerer’s apprentice again. But they save Tamar many a step and are busy bees all day long. The baby Catherine Ann, is an angel and is at that easy stage still where she does not even roll over so you can put her safely on the table or bed or floor and she just enjoys the change of view. Solemn at birth, she is now wreathed in smiles, a habit developed by responding to an adoring three year old brother with reddish curls and bright blue eyes. She herself is a brunette. Martha at five is very bossy with them both. Her older sisters say she looks like Marilyn Monroe. In other words she is a beauty.

One of our readers, Frances Mazet of Rehoboth, Massachusetts, gave Tamar two rams which grew up very aggressive. They sold one and use the wool of the other and she has had an abundance of wool which she has spun and dyed with butternut and onion skin dyes. The children got into that job, you can be sure, and went around covered with brown stain. The butternut is a permanent brown dye which makes the wool shine as though it were mercerized. The onion skin is a golden yellow.

Tamar is weaving drapes in a monk's belt pattern and it is very beautiful on the loom. She has pamphlets on home made dyes from the government, and from Canada and South Carolina, but she says there is no natural red dye that she knows of. Blue is complicated and dangerous as one uses indigo and sulphuric acid but it is most beautiful. The easiest colors are yellow and brown.

On November 21 I am going to speak in Boston for the Botolph Guild on Peter Maurin's program of cult, culture and cultivation, and bring with me samples of some of the arts cultivated by people around **The Catholic Worker**, by both workers and scholars, and I will bring a blanket and towel of Tamer's. She uses everything else she makes, towels, table cloths, blankets, drapes, curtains, and so on.

In spite of farm chores, the boys are busy hunting and the bow and arrow season is just finished. Nickie's birthday comes in December so near to Christmas that he always gets left when it comes to serious presents. He wants a bow and arrow, he said, the kind one can shoot a deer with, He is serious too, as a hunter. He uses a rifle and has brought home squirrel this fall. Eric is best at the farm, and Nickie at hunting, but Eric is just as enthusiastic a hunter and they both use guns since David had one and a neighbor loaned them another. One meal we had that both Martha and Hilaire called "twirl," meaning, of course, squirrel, and it was very good. The one squirrel fed four of us, and besides we had carrots, potatoes, eggs and milk all from the farm and of course, pumpkin pie.

Hunting and fishing are serious sports in a place like Vermont where there are pockets of unemployment, as the saying is. I asked Eric once what one of the neighbors did for a living, since he had nine children just as the Henessy's did, and was unemployed at the time. Eric said, "Hunting, fishing, and robbing bee trees!"

But certainly the young ones will know where their food comes from and how to get it, what with a good garden, apple trees, trout streams, and plenty of game in the woods, How else can one live and raise a family with the small salaries paid in country towns?