

The Death of Mother Weider

Dorothy Day

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Summary: An obituary of Theresa Weider who started the catholic worker in Rochester, New York. Describes her practice of the works of mercy and the encouragement she gave—one of the “little saints” St. Therese promised. (DDLW #638).

Whenever I am writing in my notebook, I start with what is happening at the moment and work back. We live so from day to day around the Catholic Worker, and what is happening at the present moment is so vital or crucial, that there is no need to “mortify the memory,” as the ascetical writers say. We just don’t have time to live on past memories or to dwell on past sins or successes. It is to be hoped, however, that we learn by them.

But this business of living so fully in the present moment, means sometimes that we write with absorbed interest of the present moment only and leave out of this column accounts of what happened during the past month that might be far more newsworthy—that indeed needed to be reported at once.

That happened last month when I wrote of the visit to my grandchildren. Of course they absorbed my attention, and so they absorbed much space in the paper. I was writing for mothers, I was writing of the homely rather than the heroic, and it is of the homely detail that our lives are mostly made up. We would like to live on the grand scale, we would like to participate in great events, we would like to put down noble and exalted sentiments that would life and enlarge the heart. Or rather we think we would like all that. A Ninth symphony may be a grand thing but we cannot always enjoy it. “The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing.” The birth of a baby is a soul stirring event (another arrived last week to increase the population of Peter Maurin farm—a dynamic center!—) but we still have to think of diapers.

In my engrossed interest in the present moment last month I did not report another event—the greatest event in the life of our dear friend Theresa Weider, of Rochester, New York, and that was her death! And this is the way we should put it, because, “life is changed, not taken away,” as we are assured in the preface for the Mass of the Dead in which we read over in our missals every time there is a black Mass in our parish church. When she was growing up as a girl, in a small New York town, when she was loving and marrying and having babies,

when she and her husband were struggling together to make ends meet, and to care for others as well as themselves, no doubt she thought countless other events were the greatest, but when the moment came for her to lay down her life, all that had gone before seemed like a preparation for that greatest of all happenings, facing her Creator. Her funeral was a tremendous one in the history of Rochester. It is seldom that a simple woman, a mother and housewife, had one like it. Not in the numbers that were there, and the thousands that crowded to her wake over a period of three days so that the house, the outdoor shrine and the porches became banks of flowers, but because at the Requiem which was a solemn high Mass, there were crowds of priests not only in the sanctuary but in the body of the Church. She was loved by clergy and laity alike.

Mother Weider, as everyone called her, was our first friend in Rochester, and we have known her since the beginning of our work. She was Peter Maurin's friend as well as mine, and was the first to invite him to speak in upper New York state, and helped to nurse him at her home during the last year of his life, during the move we made from Easton to Newburgh. And she was the friend too of mothers and children, at our farms, as well as in her own city and her own parish. Many were the packages sent with good warm new underwear and socks; and food, staples and soaps. Her heart encompassed the world, especially since one of her sons was killed in the Battle of the Bulge and is buried overseas.. His grave is on the other side of the world, but there is a shrine of the Holy Family in the side garden of her home in Brighton, on the outskirts of Rochester, to his memory. She was always giving, and good material things, too, not just advice and spiritual counsel, though she could give that too!

She was one of the founders of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester, and her bounty did much to keep the house going over the years. Many were the sick and despairing she took into her own home, and her example led others (like Millie Hastings) to do the same, and she nursed them back to health—mental cases, drunks, the sinful as well as the sick. She did not judge, and she never gave any one up. She reminded one of the Mercy of God in her generosity. Once I remember I asked her about a man who was exhausting my patience and whom I thought I wanted to throw out. His constant drinking wore down one's nerves. "We do him more harm than good," I tried to justify myself. "We should tell him to go." "Oh no, he belongs here," she assured me. (It was during one of the retreats on the farm.) "Never give him up," she said, with complete conviction. And because I knew that she never would, I could not either. How grateful I am to her for strengthening my inconstant heart. She never showed discouragement or depression. She had much physical suffering, but accepted it with joy as a fruitful penance for her sins as well as for those of others (though it was as hard for us to find any sins in her as it was for her to judge others). Sufferings to her were a coin to purchase spiritual treasures, bits of the wood of the cross to build up the fire of love in her heart. Nobody hesitated to call on her, and because she sowed time, she never seemed to be rushed, she seemed to have all the time in the world. She had her own family, her children and her heart and hands were for them all.

During the war when others were afraid to distribute the Catholic Worker with its condemnation of war, and conscription and the sale of war bonds and war stamps, she took it bravely to different parishes and distributed it at the doors of the Churches. She had a good library in her home which she kept circulating among her friends. All the books Peter recommended found a place on its shelves. In the sunny little alcove looking out on garden it was good to read and sniff the good strudel she was fond of making.

And in her works of mercy, her husband seconded her, not only with the means, which he earned by the sweat of his brow in his plumbing business, but very personally too. I know that he too performed such works of mercy as bathing the poor and sick whom his wife took into their home. There was much there of beauty and warmth and light. The comfort we have when we lose such friends is that heaven becomes peopled for us with these associates who have been so near and dear to us in our work. May she be in peace and joy unutterable, another of the “little” saints whom St. Therese promised to us, in the world obscure and poor but to us who knew her one who will spend her heaven, like the Little Flower, doing good upon earth.