

Joe Cotter Dies

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: An obituary for Joe Cotter, a long-time guest at Catholic Worker farms. Appreciates his hard work, compassion, love of beauty, poverty, and suffering. "Pray for us, Joe, that we may, as you did, 'take up the cross, deny ourselves daily, to follow Him, Jesus.'" (DDLW #842).

"The Victim Soul," which was first published in the October 1949 issue of the CW, is the story of Joe Cotter, who was with us from 1945 and who helped keep the work going in Easton, Pennsylvania, Newburgh, New York, Staten Island and, this last 2 years, here in Tivoli.

When I first met Joe, he was working on a pig farm in Secaucus, New Jersey. Anyone who has ever crossed the Jersey meadows by bus or train or car has had some acquaintance with the affront to eye, ear and nose and every other sense, exterior and interior, that such work can be. On his day off he gravitated to the Bowery, where there were always companions and forgetfulness of a kind. We kidnapped him one day, so to speak, and brought him to the farm in Easton. When he had recovered enough to think, he asked that we bring a companion of his, a certain John Ryder, to the farm. His first thought was for someone else. We looked John Ryder up and found a dying man, but one who had worked until the week before. He died in Easton, was laid out in our little barn chapel, and Joe joined us in saying the Office of the Dead around the coffin. Next day we bore the coffin in our station wagon to the cemetery on that hilltop road, and he lives there now.

Joe soon became very much a part of our household and worked steadily at everything that came up—electrical work, plumbing, cooking, and dishwashing. Most of the time he was in pain with arthritis. He told me one Christmas Eve a few years later that he was going through the Stations of the Cross and had only reached the 4th station. How he longed to get through all fourteen of them!

But he was not a melancholy man. He had a sense of humor, and a broad smile and bright eye, though I don't think I ever heard him laugh out loud. He was a great lover of beauty and a man of compassion. Once, when some kids on the place built a fire in a great hollow dead tree and destroyed it, he remarked regretfully that he had been accustomed to go out and sit inside that hollow tree in the rain, look out over the fields around him and watch a swampy pond, where he could see all kinds of wildlife. On another occasion he saw a bird standing on its tall legs and crying out pitifully.

Thinking it was caught in some kind of trap, he waded out into the mud of the swamp, sinking knee-deep to rescue the bird which when pulled up was found to be caught fast by a snapping turtle. That is all I remember of the tale but the picture of Joe and his love for that wild uncultivated spot comes to my mind.

He liked to build little shrines all over the place, using the excess supply of small Barclay Street statues that people were always giving us. Ade Bethune had taken some of the those statues on one of her visits and turned a blonde, blue-eyed, pastel garbed Madonna into a bright, black haired Jewish girl. If a trifle garish at first, it soon weathered to beauty.

God bless Joe for all he did for us, for all he meant to us. We who talk so much about poverty possess so much, interiorly and exteriorly, that I am afraid on our death beds we will mourn the fact that we have scarcely made a beginning in the knowledge of what poverty and destitution mean.

Joe, when he died, left literally nothing but a change of clothes, washed to a ragged thinness. Pray for us, Joe, that we may, as you did, “take up the cross, deny ourselves daily, to follow Him, Jesus.”

D.D.