

Day After Day - May 1941

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1941, 1, 4.

Summary: Expounds on the value of manual labor and the opening of new Catholic Worker houses. Argues that it is right that the Catholic Worker campaign against the underlying social injustices which cause hunger, poverty, homelessness, and war. Asks for respect when views differ. (DDLW #372).

Death on Bowery

This morning it was hot. The Church felt cool and a little damp. Everyone on the breadline looked calm and peaceful in the sun, so comfortable after a long, cold, wet March. I got back to breakfast and Bill Evans said: "There's a man sitting dead over on the Bowery. The cops beat the soles of his feet until I should think they'd broken every bone in them, but he was dead . . . I could have told them that at first sight. I passed him on my way to Mass (I'm stopping at the Sunshine Hotel) and he sat propped up there against the side of the building with his head back. He looked peaceful. The cops were changing shifts, so first there were two, then four, and they beat his feet. Took off his shoes. They were laughing and talking."

The lack of respect for the profound and awful fact of death is here marked in this incident as it was marked at the birth of the baby William last winter. A man had died. One of many. Homeless? Probably his own fault. Probably a rum hound. Etc. But nevertheless a creature of body and soul, made in the image and likeness of God. A temple of the Holy Spirit. And as such, worthy of reverence as he sat there, up against the side of a building, head lifted to the sky, the face gentle.

"Every morning a morgue wagon goes around picking up the stiff," one of the men at the table said. "here are always men hanging around the morgue to get their clothes."

A cheerful breakfast conversation on a sunny day.

Manual Labor

Sometimes there are many letters to do. Sometimes there is time for manual labor, which can be termed penance, or exercise, whichever way you want to look at it. Around the CW it is always a pleasure, there are so many who want to join in.

We should write more about manual labor. It's another one of the foundation stones of the work, of the social edifice we are trying to build. Manual labor, voluntary poverty, works of mercy, these are means of reaching the workers and learning from them, and teaching them. Besides inducing cooperation, besides overcoming barriers and establishing the spirit of brotherhood (besides just getting things done), manual labor enables us to use our body as well as our hands, our minds. Our bodies are made to be used, just as they are made to be respected as temples of the soul. God took on our human flesh and became man. He shared our human nature. He rose from the dead and His disciples saw the wounds in His hands, His feet and His side. They saw His body, that it was indeed a body still. He was not a disembodied spirit. We believe in the resurrection of the body, free from fatigue, from pain and disease and distortion and deformities, a glorified body, a body transfigured by love. All these are reasons for respecting the body, and using it well, not neglecting it by disuse.

Out in Front

This morning there was no time for manual labor, but many letters to do. Margie Crowe and I took chairs out in the front of the house and went through a big pile of letters. In spite of constant interruptions, Margie was able to take about thirty letters. A tall old man with heavy side burns went by, all bedecked with safety pins, shoe laces, scissors, mirrors, brushes—a veritable hardware store. He was so laden that it was hard to see the crutch on which he was forced to trudge along. We had to buy shoe laces and a pocket knife for Teresa and a bottle brush for William; and then as it was mid-morning we invited him to sit down with us and have a cup of coffee and some cake. We further added to his load by giving him a handful of medals to distribute and a pocketful of catholic workers.

The Pipes

A Scotch friend who comes to dine with us every day passed by and aired her grievances. She could not play her bagpipes, she said, because she was forbidden by Mayor LaGuardia. She used to be able to earn two or three dollars on the streets, playing her bagpipes, but now it was against the law. She knew she had promised, she said, to come and play holy music on Good Friday for us. But she was afraid of carrying them through the streets, afraid that they would be taken

from her. When she died, she said, she wanted her two sets of bagpipes and her drums with her in her coffin so she could be playing them as she went to heaven.

The Three Hours

Father McMullin, Paulist, came on Good Friday and preached the Three Hours to our men out in the back courtyard. It was a warm day and there was room for many more in the yard than in the store. We were deeply grateful for the beautiful and inspiring discourses he gave us. He explained with simplicity and joy the seven last words of our Lord on the Cross, and the men listened with absorption to his story of the love of God.

(It is not to be casual that we mention this important event in this column. It is a little journalistic trick to put important bits of news and indoctrination in this column because it is simple and easy to read. People get into the habit of reading columns nowadays. The mind gets tired with the sad news of the day, with serious discussions and scholarly argument).

New Houses

There are many new Houses of Hospitality opening up all over the country, we are pleased to say. One in Washington, D.C., South Bend, Indiana; Sacramento, California; Cleveland, Ohio (for women); Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (all under our auspices); and two others in Illinois and West Virginia, under diocesan or Legion of Mary auspices. We have lost count of ours at this moment, but there are at least thirty-five. Praise God that this impulse of hospitality is spreading. The thing we all have to remember is that these Houses, too, are means to an end and not ends in themselves. We hate breadlines with shamefaced hatred, and if you start feeding people, breadlines just spring up, you scarcely know how. But God has provided on this earth, enough for all, of food, clothing and shelter, and man has a natural right to these necessities. Other men have deprived him of work, of the means to live. In many cases, too, one's own sins result in a disordered life. To go back still further, economic disorders often are the cause of drunkenness and vice. St. Thomas said that a certain amount of goods is necessary for a man to lead a good life. St. Peter said we must work for a new earth wherein justice dwelleth. And we are working for a new earth so that man can attain to God his last end, and that indeed is *the end* of our work, our ultimate purpose.

People Object

People write in, and send us help too, and protest against our participating in labor disputes, in discussions on war and peace. But we cannot stop at Houses of Hospitality, at breadlines. We must fight the causes of these breadlines, these overcrowded hospices. We will protest against war with our last breath, and will oppose “an armed peace which is no better than war itself.” We will continue to oppose conscription until the law is repealed.

And it is good to remember, when we seem to have irreconcilable differences of opinions with our friends around the country, that St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Catherine of Sienna, both Dominicans, both canonized saints, espoused the cause of rival Popes at the time of the great Schism. So let there be no personal animosity, even if we cannot understand each other’s points of view. In the name of our common humanity let us respect and love one another.

As Peter Maurin once said, “You give me a piece of your mind and I will give you a piece of my mind, and if the piece of my mind fits with the piece of your mind, according to your mind, you will have another piece on your mind.”

“The earth belongs to all; not to the rich. But those who possess their share are fewer than those who do not. Therefore, you are paying a debt, not bestowing a gift.”

—St. Ambrose