

On Pilgrimage - June 1946

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, June 1946, 1, 2, 8.

Summary: Underscores the importance of Baptismal vows as the foundation of the lay apostolate, including lay retreat houses. Describes an ideal structure for lay communities. Also decries the warehousing of mental patients in "vast concentration camps of human misery." Begs for more men's clothes. (DDLW #426).

We have had much rain during the month of May, so during the Rogation days we asked for fine weather as well as good crops. And we prayed for the world, for Russia, for famine victims the world over, that God would come to their assistance. Rogation days before Ascension Day are the time for great askings. Fr. Lallemand says that we pay a compliment to God when we ask *great* things of Him.

It is just after dinner and all have gone back to their various chores, Harold digging post holes for the new pasture, Joe making a new rabbit yard for our ever-increasing family of rabbits for stew, Hans painting, Duncan helping with the screens, John Daly up the hill with Vic digging away at the new well on Vic's three acres, and my son-in-law extending his chicken yard to accommodate the new families of chicks that have just hatched out.

The girls are in the kitchen and laundry and garden, and today Clarina is planting endive and Swiss chard. We appreciate the salads on fast days, such as today when we have spaghetti; we are still getting all kinds of wild greens, lamb's quarters, wild mustard, dock and today, nettles, which were a little coarse but very tasty. I have been gathering herbs, too, to use as medicines—shepherd's purse, jill on the ground, mallow and mullein, which latter herb smoked is good for asthma, they say, and catnip, which is a good sedative tea.

We have been celebrating everyone's name day and baptismal day lately and have decided to forget birthdays forever. Newman said that were it not for the life of grace, the birth of a child into the world would be a most tragic event. We can easily understand that, considering the state of the world today. I have heard many a liberal and radical say that no one had a right to bring children into the world today. And of course many social workers, practically all who are not Catholic, think it the duty of the poor to practice birth prevention.

First we celebrated Irene Mary Naughton's Baptismal day. She renewed her vows after one of the conferences of the Easter week retreat.

"The vow promised in Baptism is the greatest and most indispensable of all vows," says St. Augustine. "The principal source of all disorder among Christians comes from forgetfulness and indifference about the vows of their Baptism; hence the best remedy for these disorders is the sincere renewal of these vows." (Council of Sens.)

Peter Maurin's baptismal day was celebrated with a little play in the evening. The feasting was meager (it was Friday), but the celebration was joyous. John Daly, Stanley, Leo, Duncan, Harold and Vic acted out three of Peter's essays, When a Greek Met a Greek, When a Jew Met a Jew, and When an Irishman Met an Irishman, both a thousand years ago and today. The ancient Jews wore some of the Angora goat's beautifully combed hair for whiskers, and the Greeks were clothed in sheets as they philosophized. After the pageant, we read aloud some of Peter's essays.

Lay Retreat Houses

There is a very fine article in *Blackfriars* this month about lay retreat houses, and if the article had not disappeared in the suitcase of one of our Canadian visitors who wished to translate it, I should be quoting from it now. It mentioned our Houses of Hospitality, but there was no mention made of our retreat house and our plans for future retreat houses. We are hoping to be able to go out, two by two, and open up other houses in other sections of the country later when our staff increases to such an extent that we can branch out. I should like much to have a place on the seashore somewhere (does anyone have a house to give us?), especially as I read the story of St. Justin this morning, and how he paced along the seashore meditating, and was visited by an angel who conversed with him about God.

The article in *Blackfriars* stresses the need of small lay groups, living together, and reciting some part of the Office, and giving hospitality to those who wish to make retreats, study and pray. And as I read the article, I thought of the prayer and the preparation which had gone into this retreat house at Maryfarm, and the sufferings involved in getting the work under way. Looking through my notebook the other day, I find this bit of planning back in May, 1944.

"Ideas for life at Maryfarm: The lower stone farmhouse has an attic which will do for a dormitory and a work room. There are two large rooms on the second floor and a kitchen and lean-to room on the first floor besides a back basement dug into the hillside.

"When we begin to have retreats the pattern of life can be thus: prime for morning prayer, reading the prayers of the Mass, the offertory, consecration and communion (what Father Matteo calls a St. John's Mass) on all those days when

there is no priest. It is too far for all to walk to town. The proper of the feast should be read too. There should be much silence also. For our own spiritual growth and *for example*—to discourage time-wasting and idle conversation and *hanging around*. We can only live together in community when we emphasize silence. If girls come to help as they have in the past, they are to take charge of the kitchen in rotation. Meditation at twelve. Peter, or visiting priests, and laymen and women to give an instruction every day whether about books, ideas, or in crafts, spinning, weaving, carpentering, sewing and knitting, etc. Work can be done during lectures too. More work after supper. Much emphasis on work always. Compare our lives to that in industry, or of those who serve for a wage and have to think in terms of a time clock, and piece work. Are we really working hard—for God, for our neighbors, and incidentally for ourselves? Or is everyone seeking his own, his own ease, his own will? We certainly each one of us need secretly to examine his conscience on this point. Compline for evening prayer and lights out at ten. Projects, building shrines to our Lord on top of the hill, and to Our Lady at the entrance. Beautifying the entrance, and the house and barns and gardens. Taking constant care of the chapel and planning more room for guests and crafts. Helping neighbors where we can, picnics for feast days, inside and out, according to the weather. Visiting prisons and hospitals.”

And now exactly two years have passed and it is wonderful to see that these plans have worked out to a great extent, and in some cases far better than we dreamed. Instead of having priests with us only for retreats, we have been blessed with a chaplain for a year and a half, and a chaplain who has helped with building, plumbing and electrical work. It is true he wanders off on a preaching trip every now and then, but the last time God sent us another who was great on beautifying the place too. Two shrines were put up during his five week’s stay, one to St. Joseph at the picnic grounds at the end of the Stations of the Cross, and the other a huge crucifix on the brow of the hill. The house and barns were painted during his stay and the stone wall at the side of the road whitewashed.

The big attic room in the stone house is done, a new slate roof put on and dormer windows, three of them back and front, and there is room for four double-decker beds and in the center of the room there is the loom and spinning wheels. The loom is a recent acquisition, and is just set up, a beautiful thing from Canada. There was spinning and carding done last winter, but no weaving as yet. We are starting on two small hooked rugs this week. There is always a good deal of sewing going on, of course.

We are proud too of our laundry which Cecilia Hugo set up for us. She was the first helper who came to help effect the transformation which has taken place; she has already given us two or three months of her time and I hope will give us more time this summer. Her ideas as to the use of space and the arrangement of room have been invaluable.

As I write there is a smell of roses, syringa, grape blossoms (Margaret Bigham first called my attention to those), clover and locust flowers in the air. The birds sing all day, the cattle graze on the hillside, the goats leap with joy and there is

the crow of a rooster in the distance. And being a pilgrim I have to tear myself away from all this and go into town.

Mott Street

I always travel by bus because with the open windows there is the smell of the fields for a few hours more. Of course the smell of the Jersey meadows, the fertilizer factories, the dumps assail your nostrils too, the last half-hour of the trip. But sometimes if the wind is right there comes the salt smell of the sea which you often have in New York, and then a warm love of the city rises in you, that huge sprawling city that is really made up, in its poorer sections, of so many little villages, and in which I feel so much at home.

Canal Street is a constantly humming stream, and it used to confine the Chinese village to the south, but now it straddles the stream, and Mott Street, where we are, is almost half Chinese and half Italian. There are a few factories, the offices of the Chinese Daily News, a laundry, a lumber yard, a Chinese hall where a strange band practices, and a play ground with a painted pond on the brick wall on one side and a jungle on the other. These paintings and the fruit and vegetables on the pushcarts are the only splotch of color on this drab, narrow, dirty street full always of parked cars, children, boys playing games, men playing cards, and mothers sitting by baby carriages. Sometimes the inside of The Catholic Worker office looks as drab as the street, but these past months, thanks to Gerry Griffin, Joe Connell and others, the place has become colorful with the walls freshly painted, and even the floor. There was the comforting smell of food when I arrived in town and it was good to sit down to a meal, even though as we ate and enjoyed the food we had to think of the great difficulty of getting it for our bread lines each day, several hundred, morning and evening.

Families

Every day our work creeps out, spreads, even geographically. We used to have just the rear house, of twenty rooms, and there were all single people making up this little community of the Catholic Worker. Now there are several families with us, and children to be considered and their needs.

Houses of Hospitality in the city, and Houses of Hospitality on the land. These are the great needs. Gathering up people from the highways and byways and compelling them to come in to hear the Word. We were told to do it by our Lord Himself, and now the recent Popes cry out for the *lay apostolate*. When people talk of our work turning into a religious community, I am impatient at this lack of understanding. This is work for *lay people to initiate and to manage*. The priests are there to give retreats, to instruct, to preach, to dispense the

Sacraments. They could use every minute of their time for that and still have not enough time. The harvest is great and the laborers are few.

The other day, the feast of St. Angela of Merici, we read her complaints about the family. We hope that when people come to our retreats they will go home and say, "Why can't we live this way all the time, have morning and evening prayer and spiritual reading, and a constant turning to our Lord and His saints in our thoughts and ponderings. We are, after all, domestics in the house of God, part of the fellowship of saints."

Even the littlest ones take to prayer. The other night at supper, my little grandchild Rebecca, aged one year and two months, looked seriously around the table as we said grace, and then folded her hands too and tried to make a sign on her baby chest, to join with us.

Visiting Mary

Just as we have to see Christ in his most degraded guise, on the Bowerys and skid rows of the country, so we must see the Blessed Mother everywhere too, I read this once, and it is a terrible thing, a hard thing. How hard it is to see her in inmates of a mental hospital for instance, in the "disturbed ward" which is generally the worst ward, and one least visited. Going to see our Mary a few times last month, I thought of this. I have a strong feeling that she will get better, though she is in a terrible state right now. The very fact that she has for years wished to help these cases and work along these lines makes me feel that God is allowing her to experience the worst in order that she may know what she is dealing with later on. Certainly our friendship with Mary has taught us all a great deal. We have learned, all of us who go to see her and who have lived with her this past year, that there is nothing to be afraid of in this contact with mental patients. What with visiting her and another of our friends, Chris, at Byberry in Philadelphia, I have been thinking a great deal about these dead storage warehouses as one of our readers has termed them.

I remembered our horror as children in reading Jane Eyre, of the first wife who was mad and confined in an upper room of the house. Since coming in contact with people who have for the time being lost their minds, I have come to the conclusion that given a large house, it is far better for a family to have that locked room for a loved one where a patient can be cared for at home, than putting them out of sight and out of mind. We do not love enough, that is the trouble.

On one occasion, visiting Mary at Bellevue, she was in partial restraint, her arms tied in front of her in a half straight-jacket. At Ward's Island, on one occasion, she was wholly confined in a straight-jacket and could move neither hand nor foot, tied flat to her bed in a huge canvas contraption that looked like some instrument of torture. From her conversation, I gathered that she had

been going about “kissing the lepers” and the other patients did not like to be so regarded and a disturbance resulted. Given a kind attendant, a small room where she could be separated from the others, instead of the eight-bed ward, and this cruelty would not have been perpetrated. In visiting Mary I have seen her in four wards, two of them disturbed wards.

A chaplain told me that it was no use his going to see patients on such wards. I can only feel that more faith and hope are needed. Where there is life there is hope. Which is a trite thing to say, but how can we ever give up either in the case of the sinner or the sick? There is too little visiting the prisoner, too little visiting the sick in mental hospitals. Generally it is regarded as of no use.

I again advise all those who have friends or relatives in such hospitals to read “The Snake Pit” and they will think twice as to whether it is necessary for them to tuck away old senile relatives, incontinent, wandering, forgetful old people, or simple-minded young ones, in these horrible, vast, concentration camps of human misery. They are making them bigger and better all the time from the standpoint of buildings, but less and less is being done for the individual. Efficiency is the watchword, just as in business, but such centralization of human beings is neither efficient nor efficacious. There are more and more mental cases in our present social order, and less and less being done for them aside from confining them in vast storehouses where they rot away forgotten.

During the month I spoke in Philadelphia before a Catholic Doctors’ Guild, and one of the doctors who is a surgeon at Byberry said that a great majority of the cases at Byberry did not need to be there. I drove around the miles of grounds, after visiting Chris, with the chaplain, and out of all the vast buildings, and they are ever building more, there are only two buildings on the women’s side and two on the men’s each holding about two hundred patients who are considered dangerous. There are more than six thousand patients there, much more, I believe, but I am not sure of my figures. At Ward’s Island there are six thousand also.

Items

Everything goes into this Pilgrimage column, which is more or less of a letter to our readers, supplementing the serious material in the articles. Here is one of the odds and ends of the month. We have come across, in a recently issued catalogue of rare books, listed as a collector’s item, our little Eric Gill pamphlet, *The Stations of The Cross*, which one of our priest friends issued to distribute to his whole parish in Wilkes-Barre, and which we sent out free to many of our correspondents. Its listed price in the rare books catalog is \$1.00. We have none left at Mott Street, though David Hennessy may have some at the farm, being the Gill enthusiast he is. He also has some Eric Gill books for sale which he has traced and run down, either from England or here in New York. The

“Autobiography” and “It All Goes Together” are still in print and he has those and also some out-of-print books.

Another curious item: picking up a most reputable Catholic monthly magazine, I find an article by a former president of the Catholic Sociological Society which quotes, with no quotation marks, quite a few paragraphs from my edition of last January, “Called to Be Saints.” I had quoted Audin in that article but these quotation marks were also left out. And by leaving out a few sentences, it didn’t quite make sense. If anyone wishes a copy of the leaflet as is, “Called to Be Saints,” just send for it to the Catholic Worker Penny Press on the farm at Easton, Pa.

Clothes

The men in the office at Mott Street beg me to ask our readers for more clothes for men, underwear, sweaters, shirts, pants, shoes—anything at all. We do not need clothes for women, as most of our work is for men. However, there was a batch of women’s dresses that came in last month, for which I am duly grateful, as they just fit me. They are summer dresses, flowered silks, and they are long enough and wide enough, and beautifully made, and I wish to thank whoever was so thoughtful. They were brought into the office one evening, and how glad I was that I saw them. I have used two of the dresses already for speaking engagements, before the seminarians at McMahon Hall at Washington and before the Doctors’ Guild in Philadelphia. *Deo Gratias* for our kind friend. We are all clothed like lilies of the field around here and in the most distinguished clothes. Sigrid Undset, who has returned to Norway, brought us many things, and many priests have sent clothes. Please, dear friends, remember us again, and send clothing for our men, these ragged ones, in whom it is hard indeed to see Christ, but there He is, we do most firmly and steadfastly believe. Oh God, increase our faith, and take away our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh.