

On Pilgrimage - September 1957

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Notes visitors from South Africa and her jailing for civil disobedience. Graphic account of her grandchildren at play and "the causalities of life with children. Ah me!" (DDLW #727).

The year is half over and it has been a very crowded one. In January Deane Mower and I shared a cell for five days in the Woman's House of Detention. In February I attended the first Communist Party Convention in seven years. In April I spent two weeks in the Baptist community of Koinonia at Americus, Georgia. In May I baby sat for ten days while my daughter and son-in-law searched Vermont for a new home, and found it in Perkinsville, a 20 acre place of meadow and apple orchard, with an eleven room house and just two and a half miles from school where five of the children will go in the Fall. June was marked by so many visits from African students, hearing the Bishop of the Anglican Church of South Africa at meetings in New York speak of the necessity of civil disobedience to the laws enforcing segregation in the races in the Churches of South Africa, and the visit of a White Father in our midst on his way to Africa to a mission field, and of a young lay apostle on his way to the Sudan to teach – so that the month of June stands out as a month devoted to thought of the race problems in the world. July, of course, was marked by our own civil disobedience to the mock air raid drill, and our immediate imprisonment for thirty days, five of which were marked off-for good behavior.

Baby Sitting Again

And now I am again with my daughter who has just had her eighth child, down here on Staten Island. Her home is a mile away from Peter Maurin farm, so we are back and forth every day. I sleep in a little attic room facing north to the Jersey shore a mile away where factory after factory takes the place of the peach and apple orchards which used to be just across Arthur Kill (which is river in Dutch). Just outside the window there is the rustling of trees at night, and the sound of the whippoorwill. But always there is the hum of the factories on the mainland; never can there be a complete silence. The two boys sleep in the main room of the attic where we are surrounded by boxes packed for moving in September. David's little book room is half dismantled already. Down the steep attic stairs the girls, four of them, sleep in a row on mattresses on the porch, and there are more boxes and barrels. The older baby, Martha, two years old, sleeps in her own room, in her crib where she falls unconscious every night at eight, after trying to keep up with the other six all day, in word and act. She can scream, shout, protest, stamp, punch, snatch and generally misbehave with the worst of them.

Did I say “the other six”? Right now, while I write, Larry, Edde and Billy Zamarky, with Eric Hennessy, are turning the hose on all the little girls, Magdalene, Clare, Martha, Mary and Maggie, and the screams are uproarious. Magdalene’s mother finds them some dresses, but Martha cannot wait but runs around naked. Down the road our big girls, Becky, Sue, Beatrice have just been to the library and are settled down to reading. When all sixteen of the four families are running in a pack there is trouble indeed. They climb the highest trees, run after John in his tractor with grave danger from the cutting blades, disappear for long hours in the woods, miss meals and so on. While I am with them, or responsible for them, I keep reciting the prayer to their guardian angels.

The other day Nickie came in saying he had been bitten by a lizard. He had the tiny thing in a jar and added it to the collection of snapping turtle, starling, parakeet and gold fish. There have been chipmunks which Eric rescued from the mouth of a voracious cat, and the children have been bitten by them all. We found Mary playing one day last summer with a baby rat which also bit her. Bitten by cats, rats, dogs, crabs, stung by nettles and stinging jelly fish, festering thorns and cinders, broken glass and shells – these are the casualties of life with children. Ah me!

The Hennessy’s new baby, Hilaire Peter, is a week old now and I will be with them through the moving and until they are settled which will mean until the children start to school. The occasional On Pilgrimage notes dealing with the Hennessy’s search for the rural life, have resulted in many letters from other young families who are also trying to leave the city and find a home in the country. Vermont seems to be dotted with families from Brooklyn and New York, and we have gotten letters from many other parts of the country too.

Their little house is rented for the time being, and when it is sold it will pay off the debt they have contracted in getting the Vermont place. The problem of employment will come up of course but God will provide. As the Spanish saying is, “a baby is always born with a loaf of bread under its arms.”

D.D.